



Fallout



Equestria

Murky Number Seven

By Iain “Fuzzy” Stewart

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Preface

Murky Number Seven was started because I couldn't finish large projects, and I wanted to prove myself wrong.

All I'd ever done was start something, get a little way, and then ultimately give up. MN7 was intended to change that. Thus, in a hotel room in London's Leicester Square, I began planning to finally finish something.

From that moment until releasing the final chapter six years after, there were times when I almost stopped, and felt like it was over. Yet every time I faltered, the readers and, most of all, my friends would keep me willing to push on. In many ways, perhaps unintentionally, the themes of this story reflect that.

Now, seven years since, you hold the result that in your hands. Whether for the first time, or to re-visit Murky's journey, I thank you dearly for picking up this book.

Sitting back in that hotel room, I couldn't have imagined what was ahead. To those listed below who were part of this story's creation, whether old friends or those I met along the way, you have my lifelong gratitude for helping me when I needed it. I couldn't have finished this without you all around me.

With thanks:

Snipehamster and Napalm Goat; this story was made quantifiably better with your help and advice over the years as editors for MN7. I am proud to be able to call you friends. Calisto; your believing in me over the last 14 years is something I can never express in short words my thanks for.

MisterMech; this story would have found far fewer people without your art.

Mira, Sanc, Blackdutchie and Narrator; you four gave me the courage to start this.

Iain "Fuzzy" Stewart

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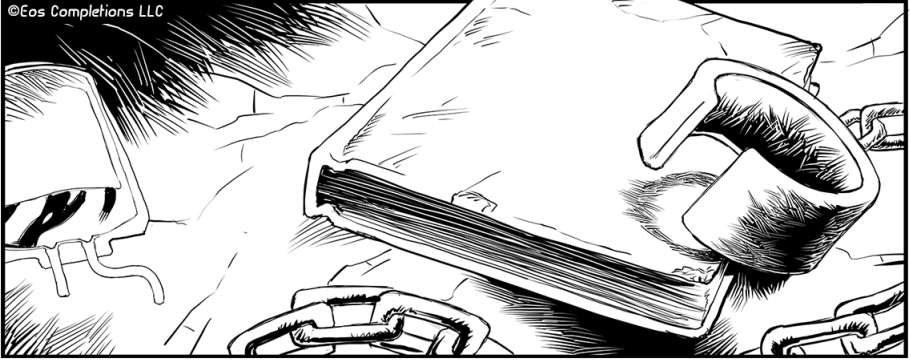
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Introduction

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The Equestrian Wasteland.

It takes everything, but gives only two things. Freedom and Dreams.

Freedom, to choose your path for yourself. Whether you will revel in the lawless expanse of the wastes and strike out for yourself at the expense of others. Whether you will remain an unknown survivor, to exist and accept the harsh reality to ensure your continued existence. Or whether you will attempt to rise up, to be a hero and attempt to fight the wasteland itself.

Dreams, to believe in the world that you wish to accept or deny. The darkened past, the cold present, or the future that only you can see for yourself, be it an unchanging mire or a land filled with the boundless hope buried deep in those few good souls left in the wastes.

Everypony in the wasteland is given those two elements, to choose what to make of them for themselves. Everypony, that is, except for the forgotten masses.

The slaves.

Born into a life with no choice; taken from them not by the wastes but by other ponies. They toil, destined for nothing more than to be a cold statistic for the future to someday look back upon.

They have no freedom. They hold no dreams.

This is the story of the slave who dared to dream.



ACT ONE

THE VIRTUE OF FREEDOM

Flying Without Wings

“Slaving in Filly almost makes you wish for a Winter Rad Up...”

“What was it like to be born a slave?”

I suppose I should explain something about the nature of being born into slavery, it’s somewhat different from the more common way of simply being captured and forced into labour. You never learn the concept of choice in the first place. Your life is little more than receiving orders and following demands. Many would like to believe the myth that growing up that sort of harsh environment makes you become a big and tough pony with the willpower to someday overthrow your masters.

Unfortunately, the truth is that it more often stunts your growth, resulting in a physically small and weak pony with no education and little true aspiration. How can a pony who has never known the freedom of the outside world ever know what to want from it? Sure, there might have been strong earth ponies, powerful unicorns, or rare and agile pegasi somewhere that once did as the stories say.

But not me.

I grew up a runt. The smallest of seven foals born to an unknown father and a weary mother sick with taint poisoning in a camp near Shattered Hoof. Suffice to say, given the way mares were treated in the slave camps, my father was likely one of the harsh figures giving us instructions and beating those who fell behind their quota. At first it was cart hauling, but as the years passed and it became clear I wasn’t going to get any bigger or stronger to meet my master’s expectations, I was instead sold off. My mother had begged and pleaded with them. She had offered anything, including herself, to make them reconsider and keep me there with her. Although the memory is now far gone, I still remember the slavers laughing her off. They told her that they could already have anything they wanted from her. We were slaves. We had no bargaining chips.

I was sold for a measly hundred caps to a rock farmer off the eastern edge of Whitetail

Woods. Torn from the hold of my mother, I was immediately dragged into service upon the blank and lifeless duty of shifting rocks in some inane quest for gemstones. With a change in scenery came a change in hardship. While hauling carts and performing physical labour had broken me physically and hurt my body's development, I was now a lone runt in a slave labour farm full of other delinquents just waiting for a new body at the bottom of the pecking order. They hurt me, bullied me, and stole away my food and minuscule possessions. I had to learn to sneak out and try to steal some back at night... and I wasn't always successful. I still have the scars of the lash upon my back.

Truly, I wish I could say that this foalhood had taught me to be independent, brave, and determined like the ponies in the legends. But the truth is, it didn't. Like I said, as a born slave, you do not understand what choice is. You don't know how to think for yourself unless pushed to the absolute boundaries of physical needs, like food or water. If a slaver asked you to jump, you asked into which radioactive crater.

No free will, no courage to make my own choices, and few dreams of anything more than perhaps a painless death at the end of it all.

If any more proof is needed, just take a look at my flank to see the contract that sealed the deal. My cutie mark bears a looped set of chained manacles, their metal bands open and ready to slam shut about my legs should I ever fall out of line. It appeared the day on which I felt utterly hopeless, serving as a continual reminder of my enslavement.

From the day I received the most hated cutie mark a pony could have, I was locked into the bad hand I'd been dealt. I suffered the work set in front of me from a half-dozen other masters as they passed the unlucky runt around for paltry sums of caps. I was bullied, beaten, starved, and ignored to the point that I even began to forget myself. Each year, everything became a little more blurry as my life became nothing but an endless cycle of work, toil, and deprivation. I didn't even need to go into the wastes to find the worst it had to offer.

Or so I thought. For one day, my master in Manehattan received an offer he couldn't refuse. A promising deal arrived from another master far across the wastes who was seeking any slaves he could get his hooves on, and he was shelling out large sums of caps to do so. Once again, I was taken into a convoy of other hopeless ponies and marched to the next place of labour. But this place was unlike the others, for my next destination was Fillydelphia. Serving under Master Red Eye.

Upon my arrival, I discovered a hellcity of nightmare brutality made real. A living, breathing maze of red hot metal, blistering heat, and thick, choking smog. It all surrounded one of the eerie balefire craters, a great depression filled with deathly magical radiation. The scale was beyond anything I had expected, the workloads beyond what anypony could ever hope to withstand, all under an authority that seemed devoted to a fanatical call for 'Unity.' Red Eye often spoke at length to us across the speaker systems of how we were aiding in the unity that would save Equestria. To slaves like me, all this 'Unity' truly held was the threat of being dragged away to partake in it. Those poor ponies who went wherever that was never did return.

To make matters worse for the slaves, that same authority had no hesitations in weeding out the weak and using them as examples to better encourage us to work hard.

Unfortunately, as I said, I am particularly weak.

It was too much for me on my own. After a series of horrors, I snapped. The workload broke me and drove me to make a mad dash out of my prison, desperate to escape the forces

trying to control us. I don't remember much about what happened on that haunting night. Just vague memories of running, screaming, and being hunted down. I don't even remember what I was really looking for. All I knew was that they found me. The heartbreak and pain so great that I scarcely ever remembered what actually happened, like I'd forced it from my mind to stop the hurt it had caused.

The last I remembered was being thrown in with another overseer. I didn't even know why, and I could barely remember when. As the days wore on into weeks, I'd almost begun to think they'd forgotten about me.

Only, they hadn't. They had simply been waiting for an opportunity.

They came to me, and telling me I'd been sentenced die as an example for others when they next held an 'event.' This 'event', I quickly realised, was going to be the arena of death. The Pit.

The Pit was to happen the very next morning.

So, they left me sitting scared in my pen in Fillydelphia, alone and battered, waiting to die in the morning. That was it. My life. Just a short, tragic story. A life about to end without one chance to live it for myself.

Yet, at what seemed like the end, that one small chance I'd been denied so far was suddenly waiting for me.

One chance to try and be more than just another number.

"Yo, runt! Looking forward to the show?"

Voices. They rang through my mind even as I fruitlessly attempted to sleep in my pen. I couldn't avoid them no matter where I hid. The disadvantage of being born to a mother sick with taint poisoning was the threat of minor mutation upon birth. In my case, that meant slightly differently sized ears that were a little too sensitive. Sure, it's a great advantage for eavesdropping, but try having a slave master scream in your face. It's like shoving a gun barrel in your ear and pulling the trigger. Not content with a stunted growth, no education, and eternal servitude until the day I die, the Goddesses saw fit to give me a mutation, too. It's part of the reason I always tried to hide from other slaves.

The Fillydelphia FunFarm's petting zoo performed much the same task it once had two hundred years ago: keeping living things inside for the betterment of others. I pulled my meagre clothing closer to my torso and curled even tighter into the corner of the pigsty. The red haze of Fillydelphia drifted in through the one small entrance designed, presumably, for young pigs.

'What were young pigs even called?' I wondered—one more unknown fact tossed onto the pile that had, over life, accumulated in my mind.

"You scared? Frightened to die? Gonna scream? We want to hear you scream tomorrow! Or squeal like a piglet! Yeah, do that!"

Well, that answered that. There were three of them just outside, long-term slaves of Fillydelphia. Each had been dragged in through those gates kicking and screaming as they were welcomed to the pitiful existence that would become the rest of their lives. I regarded them as lucky. They hadn't been born into it; they had known freedom for a time. They celebrated their small advantage by immediately treating me as some sort of lower class the moment I had been hurled into the same caged area as the unruly trio. I had been at the

bottom of the pecking order many times, but this time, it was a true threat. They stole my food, taunted everything I did, and, when angry at the slavers, often used me as a convenient punching bag to let off some steam. Before long, I had taken to hiding in the pigsty of the enclosure, the small entrance too low and narrow to be accessible by anypony bigger than my own small size.

It was cowardice, but I didn't care. I hadn't been taught to have any pride or bravery. All I had to do was stay alive until my masters next needed my presence to do work, even if that work was to walk to the arena to... to...

"You're gonna die, runt! Beaten! Stabbed! Shot! Melted! Bleeding out! Choked!"

...to that, yeah. I hugged myself harder, half wishing that if I clenched tightly enough I could simply disappear into the corner. The sty was stifling hot in the warm air of the city, making it impossible to tuck my head into my own hooves without getting uncomfortable wafts of warm breath every time I exhaled. Sleep was not going to happen, not tonight. Between the taunts, the heat, and my own crippling fear, dreams were the last place I wanted to be.

So instead, I remained still and cowered, clutching my few possessions to my underside and softly crying to myself again. It is somewhat embarrassing to admit, but I cried a lot in life. It was one of the only two ways I could find to release all the pent up emotion I had inside. Many times I had simply toiled away while sobbing openly or fled back to my enclosure so I could hide and let it all out. As anyone could imagine, it had not done any favours for my position as the resident victim for every slave looking to exploit those who were considered weak.

The other way was my one permitted vice in life—the item I clutched to my stomach as though it would somehow save my life.

My journal.

Under the crimson nightmare and heavy industry of Fillydelphia that had become my home and place of work under Master Red Eye, it had taken on a greater meaning than ever before. I could not read or write; slaves didn't get taught such things in the wastes, and my mother hadn't had the time or knowledge to teach me herself. No, instead I drew.

It was the only way I could express myself—to put charcoal or graphite sticks to yellowed paper and let my emotions and feelings dictate what I made. An outpouring of my own personal thoughts on what was troubling me, or what things I secretly wanted. But after entering Fillydelphia, it also held a second purpose. It was my one little anchor against the madness that threatened to drive me to make it all end in the one way we always could. A means with which I might drive back the closing walls of insanity—of abusive slaves, painful workloads, and terrifying masters. When I drew, it let me focus on something else for that brief amount of time. I never looked back at my own drawings much, instead preferring to do more.

The voices continued, beginning to expand on the detail of exactly how some badass stallion or vicious mare would end my life tomorrow. Part of me wanted to shout at them, beg them to go away, and leave me alone. But it hadn't worked the first time I had pleaded them to let me be. In fact, it had only made things worse.

Instead, I sat up, shaking off the stray rotten straw from my malnourished body with a weakened stagger, and pulled out my journal. Biting the charcoal stick I had stolen from the small stocks we often pulled for work, I began to let myself fall into the trance. Trying to ignore the dirty taste of the stick, I spread out the paper from my journal before me.

Charcoal met paper with a long, sweeping arc that grew into a mesh of lines in the vague shape of something... somepony.

"Hey, runt! You crying in there? Come out and let us cheer you up! We'll give you something to eat... after we're done digesting it!"

Raucous laughter followed. Ignore it. Ignore it all. Concentrate on the lines, the shapes, and the curves. Half the time I didn't even know what I was drawing.

"Live life to the full, runt! 'Cause it isn't like you'll have it for long! Oh wait, you don't have any life anyways!"

Ignore it... ignore it. I tried to let my mind focus entirely on drawing. The sound of charcoal on paper and the meditative bliss the process brought. Let my subconscious do the work.

"How does it feel knowing you're going to DIE!?"

I was weeping still, even as I tossed the charcoal into the corner with a pitiful whine and clutched the drawing close. I blanked out the laughter and the voices. Their taunts washed over me as I slowly held up my art to look at the finished piece.

It held a small pony lying dead in a pit, bleeding from horrendous wounds while the leering face of his killer glared down from above.

Trembling sobs gave way to full-fledged crying as I shut the journal sharply with a hoof and cowered once more in the corner, as the voices came back all too vividly.

I woke to a sharp rapping on the outer casing of the pigsty, sending jolts of shock through me. The sound echoed all the louder through my ears and the confined space. Instinctual responses fired in my brain as I quickly scrambled to my hooves, grabbed my journal, and squeezed out of the hole into the harsh outside world. I hadn't slept well. Gunfire from someplace nearby had disturbed my sleep multiple times. Probably some stupid pony making a run for it. It wasn't the first time, either. On my first night, I had witnessed a father torn in half by a huge rifle fired by one of Master Red Eye's griffons. He had been trying to stop them taking his foal away. A bright red glare forced my eyes shut as I stumbled wearily to my hooves and gazed about me. The world came back into view.

My world.

Fillydelphia. The ever-reliable industrial heart of Old Equestria, now the reluctant industrial machine of the wasteland. Around that lethal balefire crater, its factories, forges, and mills rose like shredded, but intact, beacons of potential. Under Master Red Eye's reign, the slaves here had reactivated many of them or carried out repairs with scavenged scrap brought from the many Stables that pocketed the nearby landscape. After years of renovation, the effect was less of a repaired ruin in some areas and more of a very unmaintained building, if you didn't look too closely to see the weathering from two hundred years in the wasteland's weather. Despite the revulsion of my presence here, I found it all genuinely quite impressive.

I knew those factories well. They were where I'd been broken in by tugging overborne carts of twisted scrap and newly manufactured ammunition. Where I had been driven through horrific work environments and made to labour in poisonous fumes that made me gag and choke for days afterwards. I dreaded the condition my lungs must have been in after my short few weeks in this living nightmare.

"Murky Number Seven! Explain to me right fucking now why you are not already on your way to your place of work!"

I blinked as my eyes adjusted, turning and immediately lowering my head to the ground in subservience to the unicorn slaver before me, just as I had been conditioned to do. The stallion didn't care for it. A savage and stinging blow to my cheek laid me out as one of his front hooves connected with my face. I sat on the ground, two feet away, nursing a loose tooth and an aching jaw. I felt the unconscious instinct to cry as I cradled my head, but in the dry, warm smog of Fillydelphia, my eyes were spent and could not muster the effort after last night. But a place of work? What place of work? Didn't this slaver know I was scheduled to die in a few hours?

"I..." my voice was weak and hoarse, owing to little water and copious heat from the forges, "I am to attend the Pit later on this... this morning, Master. I'm sorry. I thought you'd kno—"

His hoof connected with my skull a second time, putting me right back on my rump again. Pain flared through my face as I felt my body giving in to the hulking slaver's strikes. Terror shot through me at the threat of further beating. I glanced up at him with one eye from beneath my hoof as I felt blood trickling from the edge of my lip. I must have bitten my own tongue.

"I don't give Celestia's right flank if you're heading off to die in that Pit. What makes you think that it gets you off work until the time comes?" he stated bluntly, arching his neck and pressing his face against mine. "Red Eye brought you here to work; now get your tiny rump in gear and *get to work!*"

The unwashed stench of his breath made me gag. But he was right, what choice did I have to not obey a command, even if I was trying to fight the unbridled terror wrenching my gut at the thought of soon being sent to my death. He was my Master; I was the slave. Without a word, I nodded profusely and got to my hooves as I glanced upwards at him.

My current Master (below Red Eye, of course) was a dull blue stallion with a filthy cyan mane. He had introduced himself at first as having the name Whiplash. Well, it certainly fitted him, owed to the long coil by his side. He had a talent with it, something many slaves in the FunFarm Petting Zoo pens would attest to, myself included.

Looking into those yellowed eyes gave me all the incentive I needed to quickly turn and gallop off across the petting zoo. Slaves were often not kept under shackle and chain in Fillydelphia, nor in locked pens for the simple reason of... well, where could we run to? Master Red Eye's part of Fillydelphia was surrounded by a colossal wall intended to keep us in more than keep anypony out. As such, slaves were often trusted to run to where they needed to be. If they were not spotted in the right places at the right time then, well, it depended on how lucky you were if the slaver who caught you was in a good mood or not.

As I crossed away from my pigsty home, I got a glance at that wall in the distance and reflected on its defences pointing outwards. Who in their right mind would be so stupid as to attack Fillydelphia? If the wall wasn't bad enough, there was the chemical moat that had made me sick on my way in, the energised fences powered by some magical spark generator hidden behind the wall, and the towering guard posts lined with members of Master Red Eye's army. Oh, and the not-so-ignorable hideous pony-head shaped hot air balloons that eternally gazed down upon us from on high with a pink pony's freakishly large eyes. The same pony who was strewn on every FunFarm sign, ride entrance, building, and advertisement. That same ridiculous grin and poofy, curled pink hair that was out of place

with everything else in Fillydelphia.

After just a few weeks in the FunFarm, I really, *really* hated that pony.

I exited the farm, glad that my tormentors had been sent to their own places of labour before I had been woken. After last night, the last thing I wanted was to face them again before I was sent to the Pit. Inwardly, I hoped their workplace was someplace dangerous, and that I might never see them again even if I were allowed to live for more than a few more hours. Perhaps the Parasprite Pits, or off to investigate a Stable death trap. I had never volunteered for such things; the big griffon who greeted my shipment coming in had told us we could earn our freedom through them. However, I was too afraid to risk death seeking something I wasn't supposed to have anyways.

Passing the entrance to the FunFarm, I paused briefly. Beside the entrance there sat a rusted, yet still operating, mockup of the pink pony. She stood on three legs, the fourth a separate piece of metal attached to a small motor. The arm waved, traversing back and forth.

Two hundred years, just waving. It hadn't ever stopped and nopony ever bothered to make it. Now it remained as nothing more than an old courtesy, one that never ceased waving out onto the road toward, ironically enough, the nearby Wall of Fillydelphia. Its face had always creeped me out. Instead of the normally huge mad grin, it simply held a sort of content and well meaning smile.

Contained next to it, however, was the reason I normally stopped here every time I left the FunFarm. To her right, there sat a large mirror, pointed at anypony who would be standing in queue to enter the amusement park. I couldn't imagine what it could possibly be used for other than making queues seem longer.

I moved in front of it. My form was thinner than normal. It was a shaped mirror. How novel. I reached out to wipe dust from the surface for a clearer look.

My hoof felt no curve. The mirror was not shaped. It was perfectly normal.

That scrawny, wasted figure... was myself after almost a month in Fillydelphia. Great Celestia, I had never been anything but smaller than normal and possessing thinner limbs, but this was horrifying. I could see my ribs if I lifted up my clothing!

I quickly tightened my patched jerkin about me again after doing so.

Giving myself a once-over revealed nothing more than the ruin that was my body now. Dirty and dark blonde lanky mane? Check. Filthy, dull green coat with patches of hair beginning to clump? Check. Rad-sores on my left foreleg and my muzzle? Check. Slightly longer right ear? Thin haired tail? Cutie mark bearing those gnashing manacles? Check, check, and check. Just your humble and pitifully weak earth pony here, minus the things earth ponies are often known for. Not shown? The painful wrenching of my stomach crying out for sustenance, and the fuzzy-headed fevers that spoke of building radiation poisoning in my blood from the foul air and workplaces.

Even without the Pit, I began to rate my chances at survival for another month very low anyway.

I raised a hoof to my face, dabbing my damp eyes at the soul-crushing sight of my own body being so irreparably hurt. I wanted nothing more than to collapse off my weary hooves and curl up on the ground, but long-conditioned instincts propelled me to continue. I had work to do, even if I didn't want to do it anymore.

Turning from the mirror, I set a pace toward the armour manufacturing facilities. Road signs were useless to me, my inability to read rendering them defunct. Briefly, I wondered if they still even meant the right things these days as I stared at the tall, rectangular sheet of

metal on stands just outside the FunFarm. It was bent away from the crater, clearly having been jostled by the missile when it struck Fillydelphia, and had never truly been fixed. The words on it were undecipherable to me, nothing but a mixture of dots and lines that held secrets I would never understand. Words were not my thing. Shape and form was more my area of understanding, to sketch and shade in those quiet moments between shifts. However, there were three words that I knew, three words that I often wondered about.

Murky Number Seven.

My name. Like some sort of sick joke to poke fun at somepony when he's already down. The not-so-lucky one. That said, the exact circumstances surrounding my name were a little unknown to me, although you could logically piece together some of it. I was not an only child. My mother had been the possession of a few Masters in her time, and had the attentions of various slavers too. I had been the seventh foal she gave birth to. I had no confirmation that this was the exact reasoning, nor did I like to think of it as the true one, for it pointed at my caring mother as someone devoid of imagination and life to the point she would number her own children. As such, I wondered if I had just picked it up from a Master while too young to know differently. As for 'Murky'... well, you only needed to look at the colour of my mane and coat for that one. A particularly loathsome slave I had once worked alongside in Manehattan told me that it was because my mother hadn't truly cared for me at birth, because I was an unintentional child, hence the sick joke of a name.

I knew her better. That wasn't true. I'd felt the proof of her love to know that.

Briefly, I paused in the road. It struck me suddenly that tomorrow, my own mother wouldn't even know I was dead.

I galloped the rest of the way to the factory in tears, as I sought only the familiar lonely toil of a slave's life to help me forget that terrible, aching thought.

The armour factory loomed over the motionless and ruined hovels surrounding it, the same hovels where I presumed workers had once stayed to be close to their site of work. The run to the site had long exhausted the emotional hurt I had brought on myself. Instinct and conditioning forced it to the back of my mind as I stepped past the thick metal gates, feeling my lungs already burning from the exertion of arriving at all.

As I galloped past old workers quarters, I briefly wondered what it was like back then, before the megaspells, when ponies had the choice of what they wanted in life, with nopony telling them what their day was to include. I pictured a young mare, turning away from her cutie mark's proclamation of being a sculptor to instead sculpt only as a hobby, while pursuing what she wanted, to run a little shop. How did anyone choose what they truly wanted? When given everything, how did one know which route to take? What crusade would anypony undertake to find the thing that they truly *wanted*?

Sometimes, I wondered if being instructed was not perhaps so bad compared to that insurmountable choice. Yet, looking into the red-hot forge ahead of me, the scorching warmth already washing over me at this distance, I wondered just who would choose to work in a place like this.

The factory office had been converted into the resident slave master's hub of activity. As I approached, surrounded by scalded and dire-faced ponies slaving away on the metal presses and molten vats, I could see her up above. Wicked Slit, a unicorn mare bearing just as

wicked a blade that hovered alongside her. When not around her, some of the slaves made occasional jokes as to her name. The one slave who rebelled and told it to her face had lasted three unthinkable days regretting it, and since then most had fallen silent on the matter. Right now, her hooves rested on the railing, her horn magically enhancing the volume of her voice over the din as the blade floated casually to and fro beside her.

"You lot! No! *You lot!* Get up off the damned floor! You *wanting* to be dumped in the vats? Because it's all you're good for if you just lie around!"

I turned, seeing three ponies, two male earth ponies and a female unicorn, all collapsed on the floor. They had scorch marks on their hooves, no doubt from grabbing scalding hot metal by accident. That meant they'd been working in the refuse yard. Some of that stuff stayed hot for hours without showing it. I'd once stepped on one myself. All were clearly suffering from a lack of water and too much heat. As I watched, under the factory master's barked orders, a couple of slavers began hauling them off. The slaves were too weak to even fight back. For their sake, I hoped the master was not intending to hold up to her sick promise. Only then did I notice her eyes watching me, foolishly standing alone with no work to do.

"You! Get up here now! You're late!"

Bobbing my head to show understanding, I quickly headed for the skeletal metal stairs rising above the shop floor of the armour facilities. As I climbed, the view let me fully grasp the weight of Master Red Eye's intentions. There were hundreds of ponies in this place alone, and this was only one factory. Sparks flew from heated metal as it was machined into place and cut upon conveyors. The sound of whirring cogs and the scream of tortured metal as it was warped and forced into new angles assaulted my eardrums. I had once asked for earplugs. Wicked Slit had asked if I'd prefer them cut off instead.

Steam rose and enveloped walkways that were thick with guards bearing long rifles and gas masks. Oh, how I envied those masks, or any relief from the poisonous air.

A few even wore battle saddles. I envied them, too. Call it a silly wish, but I'd always wanted one of those things even if I had no use for it. Something about the mechanisms and artful measure of weights and machinery lit a wishful appreciation in the artistic side of my mind. Perhaps one of those lighter ones that I could wear and hang things on would fit best. Briefly, as I trotted through the master's open doorway, I wondered if I might be able to get one in my last few seconds of life inside the Pit. That'd be nice.

The darker (and larger) part of my brain immediately reminded me that it wouldn't be so nice if it meant getting beaten to death for the amusement of a sick crowd.

Choking back a reaction, I clattered over the lethally haphazard catwalks toward Wicked Slit's door.

Inside, the office was marred with old furniture around a rotted wooden desk bearing one of the indecipherable terminals. I hated those things whirring away with hidden secrets, like something put on Equestria just to spite my illiteracy. Wicked Slit sat behind it, holding a cigarette magically in front of her mouth as she typed up, presumably, a report on the three slaves that needed replacing. Around her sat various scraps of her life: cigarette stubs and packs, a couple of half empty bottles of Sparkle Cola, and her prized possession, a wickedly curved knife that permanently stood upright with the blade embedded in the wood. Her desk was covered in the pockmarks made by the tip from each day. Not as many as were left on her slaves, the popular saying went. Once, she had slit my back just enough to make the wagon harness rub it all day. Wicked Slit had a fiendish imagination with that blade.

Right now she didn't even look at me as she spoke in a surprisingly polite voice, belying her ruthless attitude.

"Do you know, Murky Number Seven, how many slaves we lose on a daily basis?"

I shook my head. Frankly it wasn't something I cared to think about; all I knew was that it was no small number. (*About to be one less*, my mind oh-so-joyfully reminded me.) Every few days a slave in my enclosure just... wouldn't wake up. Toxic air was a major killer; smog in the lungs and infections forming within every small wound were lethal, too.

She didn't look up.

"I didn't hear you," she intoned. The words carried an underlying threat. Of course, she wasn't looking at me to see my shake of the head.

"I... I don't know, Master," I replied, stammering. My voice sounded so small beside hers.

"I'm a mare, Murk." She still didn't even turn from her work on the terminal.

"I... I mean, I don't know, um... Ma'am?" I tried instead. Funny, most female slavers preferred master as well. I presumed she had some trouble with her stallion peers to gain the same level of respect in an environment given to masculine ego and shows of strength. If anything, it made her seem all the more lethal as I risked a glance and saw the puckered scars across her face, including a crack running up her horn. Casting magic must have been agonising for her. It spoke volumes of her willpower.

She sat up, looking directly at me. I had forgotten something... to say it at the end too, perhaps?

"I mean, I don't know, is it Ma'am, Ma'am?" I muttered, trying not to look her in the eye. Or perhaps she was one of those more militant types from Master Red Eye's army? They liked it at the beginning as well. I tried once with that one too.

"Ma'am... Ma'am, Ma'am?"

Her left eye twitched dangerously as she shoved the heavy terminal away with her magic and leaned over the desk at me. Suddenly, I had some very nasty imaginative thoughts about that knife and varying parts of my body.

"Do you think you're being funny, Murk? Or clever?" she intoned dangerously, the knife pulling itself out of the wood without a sound. That thing was hellishly sharp.

I shook my head. I didn't want to risk anything else. Why had I gotten so chatty anyways? Perhaps the knowledge that I was about to have my throat torn out and left to painfully bleed to death had made me careless. My imagination became a very imminent reality as the knife flew over and rested against my throat.

My squeak of terror stifled itself as I dared not move my throat in the slightest, but I felt the sweat of fear running down the back of my neck as its oddly cold surface rested on my skin, ready to pull to the side if she decided to just get rid of me for back-talking her.

"The truth is, Murk," she began again, "Too many. And do you know why?" She didn't give me a chance to reply. "Lack of effort. Red Eye expects every one of you to do their utmost best. You have listened to his broadcasts?"

I could hardly avoid them. Every night they echoed around my pen, blasting speeches of a greater future, of our sacrifice being for the good of our descendants and the survival of Equestria into better days. I had often heard slaves arguing, some claiming that perhaps he was right, and if they just put their backs into it they might somehow save themselves too. Others... well, others defied him. Quietly of course, but they would happily curse his name into the ground all while grovelling for forgiveness if any of those fanatical griffons heard them. Me? I didn't really think either way. One way or another, my purpose was to serve. If

it was Master Red Eye that commanded me to do this, I'd do it. What else was there for me to do?

"Red Eye expects much of you slaves and of us slavers, Murk. And examples like those three down there are not good enough. It's enough to make me want to just start shooting every slave I see for insulting our great leader."

Great. She was a fanatic, too. Oh my wonderful life...

"Which brings me, of course, to you, Murk..."

I gulped.

"Given you were ten minutes late, do you know how much you have delayed Red Eye's plans? Care to take a guess?" She grinned sweetly, finally looking at me. Sweet Celestia, she was actually so angry she was *smiling*. Shouting I could deal with. I'd been shouted at all my life. Painful on the ears as it was, at least you knew someone who shouted wasn't about to do something unpredictable. Well, it wasn't my place to argue back, time to take a guess.

"Ten minutes, Ma'am?" I hazarded. After all, why wouldn't it be?

Apparently, that wasn't what she wanted to hear. Her hoof slammed on the desk, sending splinters of the rotten wood spraying everywhere. She leaned over it toward me, her knife moving away. Instinct kicked in; I bowed my head down and knelt my front legs.

"**Ten minutes!?**" Her voice echoed with magical power. I squeaked in pain as the noise assaulted my ears. "Try an **hour**, Murk!"

Huh? As I lay there, hooves covering my ears, I struggled to grasp just where this magical number had come from.

"One hour! You being late by ten minutes cost one trip with the scrap wagons to the ammunition factory where the smaller scrap would be needed! Now because they lack that extra cart, they will have to run an additional cycle of the pressing machine. This, as you can imagine, takes additional resources that they will now need to order in from the resource silos. I have, in front of me, a particularly poorly spelled message of swearing, sent from the slave master in the old Ironshod factories wondering just what I am doing wrong here. Tell me, Murk, if you are beginning to grasp the weight of you not pulling yours around here," she bellowed, teeth clenching between each sentence, "**Well?**"

"I... yes," I began, my words feeling like a whisper against a wasteland storm. "I understand my mistake. I am sorry for—"

"Don't be sorry," she speared right into my sentence. "Be better! That cart needs to be taken now, along with a dozen others. Everything has to act like a well-oiled machine in this city if we are to achieve our great leader's dream! I want to see at least seven more deliveries by the end of the next hour. Or so help me, I will personally ensure you will not want to return here tomorrow."

"I won't be anyways, Ma'am," I spoke up, finding at least some solace in that I would be escaping her after the next few hours. Her eyebrows rose with disdainful fury at the interruption, "I'm to attend the Pit later this morning."

I couldn't resist it. She'd made my life a nightmare for the past week working under her supervision. I still bore a burn on my neck where she had put out her cigarette on me; her method of trying to show me that the molten metal sparks wouldn't hurt as much as defying her. The bullying last night had worn on my mind. The knowledge of death being so close anyway drew a certain carelessness to my words. Instinct led me to merely mutter them under my breath rather than blurt them out loudly.

"So... so I presume you will have to find a fourth slave as well after I'm gone, Ma'am."

“Ex-CUSE me, Murk?” Her voice drew enough of a picture of what would happen if I had said that any louder. “Care to repeat that?”

I prayed to the Goddesses that she had only thought I had just not spoken loud enough. She must have seen my lips moving, of course. Instinct was currently bucking my brain hard for saying that to the mare whom had been threatening my windpipe with a blade a few seconds ago.

“I said, um... Ma’am,” my voice was shakier than before, the imminent threat of that wicked curved knife all too clear as it slowly and methodically began to stab the desk in perfect beats. “That... I should probably... um...”

She had advanced towards me, trotting right up to glare me in the face. Oh Goddesses, not the face again, it still hurt from Whiplash.

“Go on...” she intoned, dangerously.

“That I should... hop to it?” I tried to smile, to grin my way past it.

She did not seem impressed, backing me up right against the doorway before turning away from me. “Then why are you still here, Murk?”

That was my cue. Any slave would recognise a lifeline when they were thrown one. However, as I got up to my hooves and made to turn to the door, warning bells rang in my mind. Wicked Slit didn’t throw lifelines. *She severed them.* I tried to dive for the door as I caught her movement from the corner of my eye. Too slow. Her full buck catapulted me through the doorway with a cry of shock and pain as my ribs, half bruised already, screamed in agony. I lay against the catwalk’s dangerously open edge (seriously, who designed these things?) clutching my chest as I looked up to see the door telekinetically slam in my face.

With a sigh, I let my head hit the metal plating once more in relief as I tried to convince my aching body to get up.

All potential outcomes considered, I thought that had gone pretty well.

Perhaps it says something about slavery that, in my last day upon Equestria, I used that time being whipped while pulling a cart laden down with sets of heavily armoured barding between a factory floor and the Ironshod Firearms depot on the far side of Fillydelphia.

Either that or I had some *really weird* tastes.

It was approaching late in the day by the time that the slaver had finally, mercifully, detached me from the rusted and chaffing harness and sent me on my way ‘home’ to the FunFarm... happily reminding me that I was going to make his bets very easy later on.

The moment the harness was released my legs gave out. What little strength I had to carry half the trips of most ponies had worn me out completely to the point that if I had ever entertained thoughts of actually fighting, I might have wanted to complain about how this was unfair.

‘Unfair? Welcome to Fillydelphia, Murky.’ I chided myself.

I staggered from the colossal factory through one of the delivery doors. Along the edge of the storage flats were rows of non-functional and long rusted pegasus sky-wagons for hauling cargo from Filly all the way to... well, wherever in Equestria it was needed. I pictured strong, free pegasi swooping to and fro with huge weights upon their wagons, carrying them as though they weighed nothing more than a feather, and to be met happily as they made deliveries of, well, absolutely everything. It was hard to imagine, for it required

pegasi to be anything other than universally loathed by the wasteland I had seen. “Scummy sky dwellers” was the popular name to my last Master as he drunkenly ranted about how they keep it all for themselves and how he couldn’t wait for them to come down to the wastes so he could give them a piece of his mind.

The wastes, at least in my experience, hated pegasi. I certainly hadn’t heard of any living down here in my lifetime. Probably for the best, given how they might be treated.

Pulling my jerkin a little tighter, I cast a glance about me. Various slaves were trudging their way back towards the FunFarm, clearly seeking a chance to rest their hooves before the slavers worked out where to send them next. A typical day in Filly; perhaps an hour of sleep, a little slop of oatmeal watered down (only *usually* with water), and almost every other hour dedicated to the work or travel between said work. I could always recognise a slave that has been here more than a few months. They looked a sorry sight, even by my standards.

They were known as the ‘veterans’ of Fillydelphia. Boils and scabs of infected and savage wounds from Master Red Eye’s workers, machines, and even other slaves coated them. Most had tried to tie off wounds with scraps of fabric while others just bled openly as they limped and shuffled across the broken landscape of the city.

Even to a born slave, the sight was horrifying.

My eyes traversed further, meeting the wary glances of various guards on the tall catwalks that arched between the ruins. This one, like many, acted as a barracks for slavers and soldiers, sheltered from the elements. One of the masked figures re-angled to point his battle saddle at me and made a jerking motion with his head. ‘Move along.’ I didn’t dare hesitate for him to ask again.

I fell in step with the rest of the trotting slaves, just another little cog in the machine, albeit one about to be cast out. The crush became tighter as they filed through the manufacture site gates, making me bump flanks with other ponies on both sides. The smell was almost enough to make me dry heave on the spot as I witnessed their dirt and blood rub off on my own jerkin and flanks, smearing over my cutie mark. I shuddered, trying to block it out by closing my eyes and trotting on. It’s not like I could get any dirtier anyway... right?

It was a mistake. My hoof caught a rock as I felt my balance stolen from me, and I fell headlong under the mass of slaves who were beginning to pick up speed. A gunshot sounded as they were given incentive to hurry and let the next group through. Panic shot through me as I felt myself dragged down under their hooves (along with a few other unfortunates) and trapped underneath a stampeding rush of filthy slaves. I screamed, I begged them to stop, to let me up. None heard me as hooves cracked against my sides and face. Pain threatened to overwhelm me from the ceaseless crush, and it was hard to breathe from all the dust kicked up. Claustrophobia fought with pain for my attention as both swarmed through my mind. I tried to pull myself through it all and away before anypony—

A hoof landed on my leg.

With a fierce intensity, pain flared from the joint as it was wrenched far past the limits of its movements. I am sure that my cry of pain was audible above the entire crowd as I felt hooves grasp around me and pull me out from under the mass of slaves, dragging my dead limb with me.

Dumped on one of the rocky piles on either side of the road, I lay back and took a deep breath, feeling the air rush to my lungs away from the dust before coughing heavily as my lungs rebelled from their infections. A noise beside me pricked up my ears, and I pulled

back in fear.

"Whoa there. You alright?" A mare's voice. I spun to look, yelping in pain as my leg reminded me that it still wanted my attention, too.

A young unicorn was half-crouched beside me, hoof extended. She had a gentle, creamy yellow coat and a long, two-tone mane of light orange and hazy red streaks. Her mane was, like every slave's, filthy and bedraggled. I got the sense that she might have had her tail as long as her mane, but the end was frayed, likely cut down. Indeed, her entire look would have been vibrant had she not been dulled and battered by slavery. She wore an alien look, one I didn't properly understand until memory reminded me that it was a face of concern. The last time I'd seen that was on my mother.

Internally, I forced myself to not break down again in front of my temporary saviour and willed myself to speak.

"I... I guess so." I hesitantly stammered, voice low. Social skills were not among my chief abilities. I could hardly believe myself. 'I guess so?' While I was sitting here with a possibly broken front right leg, a loose tooth from two blows to the face earlier, bruised ribs from Wicked Slit, lash scars on my back, sick, infected, probably dying of radiation, and about to assuredly die in under an hour? Yeah, really 'okay,' Murky.

She didn't seem to believe me, either, leaning forward to gently help me to my hooves before some guards spotted us. Closing my eyes, I gritted my teeth as I tried to move the injured leg. With a grunt of pain, I bent the joint as normal. It wasn't broken. Badly sprained, but the joint was still intact. I let out a sigh of relief before staggering and promptly falling over once again with a soft 'thud.' I got the impression that I should probably lie down just a little bit longer.

"You're lucky you weren't killed under there," the mare continued to speak, nursing my leg briefly before sitting back, her gaze passing over me. From the look on her face, it was clear that, even though she was trapped in here too, she considered me a particularly weak-looking pony, "Now come on, we need to get going, I can't be late or—"

"Yeah, I know the feeling," I muttered with my eyes averted; talking too much wasn't my place. I half-expected a slaver to come around and beat me for talking at all. Testing my weight on a limb, I stood. As I did, my saddlebags revealed themselves to have been torn in the stampede. My sketchbook journal tumbled out onto the ground before the mare. Blinking, she looked down, nosing it open with her... well, nose. She was probably too tired to use magic right now. I made a move to retrieve it, only pausing as I noticed she was actually looking, not laughing or trying to steal it. Instead I just waited, feeling oddly full of apprehension as she flicked through a couple of pages while I trotted to and fro, trying to work the movement back into my foreleg joint.

I didn't even yelp in pain as to not disturb her oddly peaceful-looking investigation. Not more than twice anyways. Certainly no more than four. Perhaps six if squeaks counted.

"This is... pretty interesting stuff," she commented, eyes not leaving a picture I'd drawn of the Fillydelphia gates. My first sight of this city. She flicked some more before smirking and stifling a laugh, "Seems you have a liking for mares, though."

She looked up to me and grinned. I blushed and fell back a little, rubbing my head with a hoof as I tried to think of an excuse. Truth is, well... perhaps I did sometimes find my subconscious drawing out a particularly nice-looking mare I might have seen, worked beside, or just one I wished I could meet. I'd always intended to add clothes. Honest.

I stepped in, albeit painfully, closing the journal with a hoof. That stuff was still private,

no matter what strange spell of peace she seemed to exude to make me not grab it from her the moment it fell. I just blushed as she giggled slightly at the act, seemingly not offended before standing to her hooves herself.

"I... I'm sorry," I began, trying to keep my voice steady above embarrassment, "I should go..."

She just nodded, apparently understanding before knocking a tangled knot of hair behind her ear with a hoof.

"Alright then, off you go before we get caught," the mare bit her lip and her eyes fell on the sketchbook again resting at my side, "I really do envy that: the ability to draw whatever you want, whenever you want. It's like an escape, isn't it?"

What? An escape? What on Equestria was she talking about? Drawing was just... automatic. I couldn't choose what to draw...

...could I?

The mare was turning to go. She trotted away towards the opposite entrance of the FunFarm, clearly a resident of another enclosure, possibly the Bumper Plow-Pit. I wanted to say something to try and make up some excuse for some of the pictures or to ask what she meant by drawing what I wanted. But she was already too far away, and I dreaded shouting with slavers around us with their ever-watchful eyes. They were all too eager to come down hard on any dissent, or broken rules.

A little voice in my mind began to ask why I hadn't been afraid of her.

And why I had a sudden urge to draw her, not like the pictures she had seen, but as what I saw. A strangely at-ease slave.

The thought struck my mind. Just one last sketch before I headed off to the Pit. What were they going to do? Sentence me to death? Justification in mind, I quickly (figuratively speaking) made for the petting zoo and my hidey hole in the pigsty. Caught by the odd feeling, I looked back once or twice at the mare heading off.

I could swear she was doing the same.

That was better.

Lines became curves...

Curves became shapes...

Shapes came to life...

Across the floor of the pigsty, I had scattered picture after picture. From the moment I pulled myself through the small gap, hounded by the taunts and pursuits of my 'fellow' slaves, I had retrieved the charcoal and set to work.

I didn't think. I didn't consider. I just drew. As ever, allowing my subconscious to take over, to draw what came to my mind first. Soon my journal had a good few new entries. I had struck past last night's picture as fast as I could to add more and see what they would bring.

One page... ten minutes work... Wicked Slit's knife with her eyes gazing from behind.

Another page... five minutes work... myself and the cart with darkened lines to add the weight.

Another page... three minutes work... the Pit. Sketchy and terrible.

Page after page, filled with imagery of my time here. Even in my drawings I couldn't

escape it. I had wanted a picture of her, before I forgot her face. But it just wouldn't come out, like a machine in Filly's foundries working to the same pattern I found my sketching fell into patterns I could not control. Once, a rare slave that actually conversed with me had asked why I never chose what I drew. How could I? Choice was not mine to have by birth.

But now I wondered, at the end now with nothing else to live for, no work to be done any more, what if I... chose... to draw something nice?

That wondrous hope in the mare's voice as she said that drawing could, in itself, be an escape rung in my mind.

I took another page, leafed the parchment over and gripped the dirty charcoal loosely in my mouth. Perhaps if I drew some random lines then made what I wanted from it? Maybe that would work? Trembling, each sweep of the charcoal didn't seem to add anything. How could this ever work? I didn't have the mindset or the belief to ever think for myself. All I was doing was a... a...

Suddenly, a surprise to me, I saw something in it.

I saw potential.

With gusto, my charcoal flew on to the paper. An instinct I barely remembered having kicked in. Artistic form. The shape of the world around me. Specific memories in my head. They brought images to bear. Images like curling up next to my mother, stealing from my master back on the rock farm, running away to hide in Fillydelphia, mouthing off under my breath at Slit, and sitting aside somepony rifling through my journal without any fear or apprehension. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I drew for myself.

I jolted back from the paper, breathing hard, as I dared to let my eyes descend upon what I beheld before me.

It was me.

Just me. Just that small pony staring back at me from the bottom left of the page, not even filling the space I could have, like he was waiting on somepony else to fill the gaps beside him with something else. He... he was smiling. My hoof went to my mouth. When had I last smiled? I honestly couldn't remember. But here it was, my sketch's lips curled upwards in a joyful, playful laugh that I wish I could have heard for real.

"Hey! Runt! You ready? They're calling for you! Time to die!"

I ignored it... this was more important. I threw the page over and grabbed the charcoal again. Lines into curves... curves into shapes... shapes into—

"Life is over, runt! We can see them coming to chain you all up and drag you there!"

Charcoal flew, I drew faster than I ever had before. I was in control of this! Not them! I could control what I drew! The form came to be... the mare! She was looking curious, staring off the page at me as though trying to work out why I had drawn her.

I could choose! I could create anything!

"Murky Number Seven you are ordered to the Pit! Come out, be chained, and let's get going so we can all win some caps on you!"

The voice of the enclosure master! Oh Goddesses, no! I had just learned how to do this, yet I could feel my legs trying to pull myself on conditioned instinct to obey. I tried to reach the paper once again. One more! I could do one more and just be late out. The charcoal snapped at the tip from how hard I was pressing. The drawing went messy, but it didn't matter. Stains of tears were appearing on it. Choking back the feelings stirring within, even at such a simple, silly thing, I found this moment interrupted. There was a harsh rap of a hoof on the pigsty.

"You there! Slave! Is Murky Number Seven in here?"

"You bet! He's cowering like a—"

There was a crunching sound followed by the sound of somepony hitting the ground hard.

"I didn't ask you for your opinion! Guards, tear this damn thing apart and get him out here!"

Oh, Luna help me. I felt the sty shake and buckle under their savage hoof blows on either side. The drawing was only just taking shape, I knew what it was! It was... it was...

The roof snapped off. Smog and dust seethed in from the outside world as a silhouetted gas mask glared in and spotted me frantically scribbling. I squealed as I felt a second slaver grab my jerkin in his teeth and effortlessly lift me, whining in pain as my bruised ribs protested at the sharp movement. I pulled down with all my meagre weight. One... more... line...

The pulling intensified as a second guard joined,

"No! Please..." I begged them as I felt the charcoal fall into my mouth, "I have to see her! Once more!"

With a great tug, I was yanked through the splintered wall of the pigsty and thrown on the ground, weeping in a heap. I spat out the foul charcoal and reached out for my journal as two guards magically hog tied me with chains before dragging me away. The journal had fallen open on its side, visible to me as I was pulled off, writhing and screaming through tears to be reunited with it. The picture I had so desperately tried to finish stared directly back at me, tugging at my heart and stirring emotions long dead.

My mother. Once again being forced to watch me being taken from her.

I was going to die.

I lay against the wall of the Pit's slave confinement area, feeling the cold concrete seeping its chilly touch through my torn jerkin. It was dark, with the only light being that coming in from the Pit itself. A thick gate sat at the front of the area... the only thing that separated me from death now. Not that I could think too much about the gate. I was much too busy screwing my wet eyes closed and cowering in the back corner with my hooves struggling to cover my suffering ears.

The crowd were like a sonic blast of pain. Their screams and bloodthirsty bellows echoed down into the enclosed gateway. Their hoof stomps in freaky unison felt like a slap around the head each time.

I was going to die.

I... I didn't want to die.

The massive noise subsided, ebbing from an assault on my senses to being 'merely' uncomfortable, as I heard the announcer start talking up the crowd. It was that big griffon, whatever her name was. Her words whipped them up into a frenzy. I could picture them salivating, eagerly sharing the stories of the little buck whom they would all get to watch being torn horribly apart. Opening my eyes, I looked around, shivering.

At the front stood Numbers One and Two. Fillydelphia Pit matches apparently involved two teams of six ponies. You fought one on one. The winner remained to fight in the next battle. The black gate was my 'team.' Numbers One and Two seemed to know one another,

red mare and dull yellow stallion respectively. They looked tough, but then, *everypony* looked tough compared to me. Even that little unicorn mare who was Number Three looked like she could buck me senseless with that metal... thing on her foreleg. Number Four was nothing special. Some blue stallion.

I was Number Five. The one to die after those four got killed off. It would happen. I had seen Pit fighter ponies before in Fillydelphia. They were hard as nails, and known for their ruthless attitudes. Most were fighting for their lives and their freedom, but many of them had found a sick career in it, and revelled in the howling of the crowd as they took apart their opponents as—

I gulped.

—as painfully as possible.

I was going to die *painfully*.

Once again I found the corner, squeezing myself into it as tightly as I could and praying that the other ponies on this team wouldn't hear my sobs. Unfortunately, luck was never quite on my side as I sensed a hulking movement from beside me. Number Six.

"Put on a braver face, there. Don't let them have the pleasure."

He had a significantly deep, heavy, and mature stallion's voice, one that trembled with the threat of painful volume if he ever wanted to raise it.

I hadn't expected what he said, though. Through terrified, tear-filled eyes, I looked up at Number Six.

Looming in the darkness at the back of the black gate pen, Number Six filled the entire portion he took residence in. He was kneeling down on all fours and was *still* taller than me. A huge, muscular earth pony with a dark red coat and crimson mane looked down at me. I could barely even tell where the thick muscle-ridden back separated from his neck! Any slaver was a foal compared to this stallion.

An ugly scar-coated face stared back at me, one eye completely bloodshot and one ear missing entirely. Dyed tribal markings coated his body in black swirls designed to look like, well, anything painful. I saw barbed wire rings on his forelegs, angular designs around his bloodshot eye, and gang symbols upon his sides. Almost a third of his body was covered in them. Puckered scars intertwined with the markings. When he moved even slightly, the huge mass of muscle contained in his body became all the more obvious. But those eyes, they were wild, and filled with the promise of absolute violence. They scared me to the point of backing away from him.

He was absolutely terrifying.

His face followed me as I crossed the darkened area, trying to get away from him. I glanced behind me, One and Two were staring out at the expanse of the Pit, Four seemed to be explaining something to Three, but nopony was paying us any attention. I squeaked in terror. I didn't like being left alone with this massive, half-feral earth pony. He just sat there, staring at me trotting away from him. With a deep sigh, he looked toward the gate.

"I'm sorry."

Startled from my fear, I was rather officially confused now. I tilted my head towards him even while backing my rump right up against the wall, and didn't dare raise my voice above that of a hushed whisper.

"What?"

"I'm sorry you've ended up here with me," he continued, shifting to his hooves.

By the sweet Goddesses he was huge! Add to that, none of it seemed to be anything but

corded muscle.

Suddenly I felt pretty glad he wasn't in the other team.

"You're... sorry?"

"Aye. I'm sorry, because I cannot protect you." his voice hit a low note, an odd ring of sadness surrounding the bestial imagery he evoked in his accent and appearance, "You don't deserve this. Not like some of the rest of us do."

I really didn't know what to make of that.

Yet, I wasn't even given the opportunity to do so.

"Round one!" came the booming voice of the griffon announcer.

I turned and looked out of the gate as it began to rise.

"Let the games begin..." I heard the huge stallion mutter as he trotted up beside me, eyes narrowed. Suddenly, although I knew I wouldn't be around to see it, I felt pity for whatever poor mare or stallion ended up going hoof to hoof with him.

I still felt more pity for myself.

I was going to die.

My composure was not improving.

I stood behind Three and Four as I watched whom I now knew to be called 'Blood' go out first into the arena and swiftly be torn down. I had to physically stuff a hoof in my mouth to stop myself from howling in fear as I shrank back, knelt down, and tried to blot out the cries of the crowd as their patience was finally rewarded. Beside me, Number Six stared down at me with those wasteland-worn eyes before looking up, as though judging the opposition. I could hear him whispering something to himself, but with so much ambient noise, even I couldn't make it out.

Oh Goddesses, that would be me in there...

Number Two stepped forward as the gate opened. The announcer cried his name as I saw him clearly go looking for revenge on the one who had killed his companion. His name, I thought, was Daffodil.

Closer to the gate now, I got a better look outside. The Pit itself was an old ice rink sheathed in a giant cage and drained till only the concrete remained. It was filled with pressure plates and blood stains both old and new, many of which drained away from Blood herself. Some of it was splattered across her opponent, Sin... Sin something. I had missed his name from covering my ears against the painful roar of the crowd.

Once again, I witnessed death. Daffodil's opponent stood no chance. He'd tried standing on a pressure plate, only to release a bucketload of mines from above. Daffodil, despite his strong frame, swiftly dodged the deafening shockwave before delivering a hideously brutal death. One after another, I all too clearly heard the snaps.

He broke his opponents bones.

I felt my legs go weak. Great heaves in my throat became choking sobs as my eyes flooded with tears and terror overtook me. I ran to the back of the slave area where the door was, where we had been brought in. I had to get out! I didn't want to die! As I approached it, the two guards assigned to supervise us, along with the third slaver who had slapped these numbers on our flanks, were waiting. With a laughing shove, the trio hurled me right back into the black gate area once again.

I curled up. More sickeningly wet cracks came from the arena, each in turn with a roar from the crowd.

I didn't want to die...

I didn't *want to die*...

"Round three! From the black gate, we still have Daffodil—"

I tried to tune that griffin out. Each round brought this one step closer to me. Blood was down. Daffodil wouldn't last five more fights and the two ponies in front of me were... well, they weren't Number Six. I didn't rate them enduring this to keep me out of it.

That behemoth of a pony still stood as silently as ever, just staring into the arena from beside me. Briefly, I tried to repress my terrified thoughts, trying to concentrate on the artistic side of his dyed coat and its designs.

"Okay..." I muttered, trying to breathe. "There's barbed wire... sharp edges..."

His tattoos were not helping.

Shivering and trying to fight my imagination showing such thoughts of a drawn out end to me. I instead took a look at the other two ponies.

Number Four wasn't anything special, just another slave from Fillydelphia. I wondered what he had done to deserve this.

Number Three, though. It wasn't often I saw ponies with whom I could stand eye to eye. Well, I could have done, were she not facing away from me, watching as Daffodil finished pounding the corpse of his opponent. Briefly my eyes glanced to that thing on her right foreleg. Some sort of bulky device. Recognition flickered in my mind. Hadn't Master Red Eye worn one of them?

Momentarily, curiosity overcame fear as I gazed all the more. I couldn't see her cutie mark. The number sticker covered one side. Shifting quietly to the other, I noticed what it was.

Another of those devices, right there on her flank. What did that signify? Skill with them? Given that I had no idea what they were, I realised any guessing was a bit pointless. Whatever it was, it couldn't be deadly. The slavers wouldn't have left it on her otherwise. No chances that I wasn't going in.

A moment of recognition hit me as I realised I was craning my head to stare at her flank to see said cutie mark. Out the corner of my eyes, I saw Number Six glancing down at me with a raised eyebrow. With a start, I shrank back, averting my eyes. Why did everypony assume that about me? I wasn't looking *there*. I didn't stare at mares like that.

I just drew them. That was different.

It felt stupid to be embarrassed about that. Now of all times. But it provided a moment of distraction.

Number Six just seemed to chuckle quietly, making a sound like rocks scraping together. Yet, he cut it short and fell into indomitable silence. He stared back into the arena with renewed interest and narrowed his eyes. I followed his gaze into the concrete pit.

To witness the one who would be my killer.

A zebra.

The zebra.

Even I had heard of her. The most terrifying pit fighter in Fillydelphia. Exotic, lethal, and

utterly without mercy, they said. No pony could hope to bring her down. A veteran of four events and a current crowd favourite known to coldly murder any pony that dared stand in her way. Truth be told, I hadn't seen her before myself. I didn't know anything about her fighting style or capabilities. I didn't need to. Any zebra lethal enough to gain that reputation had to be dangerous.

I couldn't help it, I cowered, using Number Three to block my view as I huddled closer to the floor and shivered. This just wasn't fair...

Even on the floor, I could still see past Three's legs through the grill of the gate. The zebra... what was her name? Ze... Zen? I couldn't hear anything over the ambience of the crowd shrieking at events before them.

Hunched up, I felt the stifling heat and still, stuffy air all the more. I felt uncomfortable and helpless, trapped within this hellish place. An ambience to suit the carnage currently being wrecked in the Pit.

I saw the combatants fight. I screwed my eyes shut as I saw Daffodil send the zebra to the ground. I winced as she returned the favour. Even above the crowd, I could hear the savage hoof strikes on one another.

I couldn't do this. I wasn't built for this!

Daffodil was brutal and resourceful, and the zebra, lithe and deadly. I saw a mine kicked into the air and whimpered to myself as the savage detonation assaulted my senses.

This wasn't fair!

It certainly wasn't for Daffodil. Even as I watched, the zebra gained the upper hand. Speed beat power. Murderous precision triumphed over savagery. With one hideous crunch, I heard his neck break.

My mind raced, even as the stands exploded in delight at the killing. One more of 'ours' down, and it was my turn. I hadn't lived a good life. Just a slave, a dirty and downtrodden slave with no freedom and no dreams of his own. As I watched Number Three bravely walk forward to her own death, I finally and completely broke down as the gate creaked shut.

Emotion welled up, fear mixed with bitterness that I had never even been given a chance! Life seemed fit to just screw me over at every opportunity! All shame was thrown away as I did what I did best. Cried. I cried more than I ever had, even more than the day my mother was taken from me, because now *everything* was about to be taken from me.

I didn't want that! I didn't want to go through the pain! I... I was afraid of what they would do to me. The weight of that simple realisation was impossible to grasp. I emotionally spilled over.

Number's Four and Six stared at me as I pressed against the gate whimpering, quaking violently, and trying not to look as I heard Number Three being brutalised and beaten to death even worse than Daff was.

Why was it my life that had to go this way?

Why me!?

I didn't want to die!

A spark as bright as a flare erupted from the Pit, catching my half-closed eyes like a beacon and throwing up dust from the Pit's concrete into my face. A hissing roar sound of magic being ignited droned from the arena. Hyperventilating still, I shifted and fell backwards, covering my eyes with my hooves before slowly glancing through them, struggling to see directly into the light.

An aura of unicorn power streamed from the centre, enveloping the zebra entirely. Every

barrel that hung above the pressure plates clanged open in unison. The green chemical flew from them, barely even touching the ground before being caught up in a swirling net of immense telekinetic magic. My jaw hung open, and my eyes were unblinking as I witnessed the foul liquid spray beautifully in all directions, coating the cage and blocking all vision into it. I had seen unicorn magic plenty of times, but never like this! Leaning on the cage door, I stared into the Pit with wonder.

I hadn't even blinked as it landed either side of me. Luck, it seemed, allowed me to sit undisturbed before this miracle.

Number Three... she was... she... she...

She was flying without wings.

I saw the scene that would be seared into my memory until the day that I died.

Amongst the drifting dust of the telekinesis spell, her horn bursting with overglow, Number Three ascended to the air above, taking with her the zebra that had so badly wounded her. A nimbus of magic surrounded them both as she flew directly upwards and away from all the blood... all the death and pain... away from slavery and to her glorious escape. Such courage in the sight of Red Eye himself! I could hear the bloodthirsty crowd bellowing in protest and shock; the griffons opened fire in vain, their bullets missing her at every turn like fate and destiny themselves guided that little mare unharmed. An angel blessed by the Goddesses, a lightbringer whose ray of hope speared through the darkness and lit a fire in my heart.

I felt myself fall back stupidly, my mouth hanging open as I witnessed the spectacle unfurl, my face cast in its light. I must have been silhouetted against the gate, a small figure in the presence of a legend.

Defying gravity so boldly, she disappeared into the searing dust and out of my vision but for a steadily fading glow. To cast off the shackles of slavery and escape. The thought struck my mind as ridiculous, but here it was! The myths were true! A great unicorn of powerful magic escaping from her masters to live a free life!

As I watched that wondrous scene flow away in the dust through the rapidly fading chemical goo barrier, I felt myself smile. I had never felt joy like that before. It felt invigorating. It felt... good.

I just wanted to keep on smiling forever.

I wanted to go with her.

My mind struggled to grasp the concept, to identify it and take hold of the urge. Even as I heard the rush of the slavers into the gate area to secure us and the bellowing of the griffons to trap the breakout before it left the FunFarm, I had the first true inkling of something. A wish of my own.

I dared to dream.

I wanted to feel that again. Feel how I had when I had drawn. Feel how I had when I saw this. To feel my mouth smile. To feel excitement and passion.

I wanted to feel this sensation forever.

I wanted out of these chains, for good.

“You! Slave! On the ground now!”

The slavers burst in from behind us. Two guards and the third who'd slapped that sticker

on my flank moved to keep us down. I barely heard them. I simply sat with my eyes trained on the roof of the cage. The goo had run its course, and the dust had begun to settle. All that remained above was a small opening, a previously padlocked hatch in the ceiling of the cage hung open, swaying in the aftermath.

I could still hear gunfire, explosions, and all sorts of noises as the crowd stampeded out of the arena. A slaver's hoof dragging me away from the gate by my jerkin was the first thing to waken me from my dreams.

"I said to get on the damn ground, slave," the slaver's voice betrayed his nerves.

With a twist of his body, I was hurled to the ground. I heard shackles being drawn by the slaver's unicorn companion as they moved toward me. Only as they pulled me around and let me see out the doors at the back of the gate area did I realise why they were so shaken.

The slaves were not taking this idly.

Behind the door leading to the gate I heard the sounds of rebellion. Slaves were crying out, rioting amongst the ferocious events unfolding. They had been shown that Red Eye could be defied. One slaver was watching the door, telling me that perhaps the slaves outside were not being beaten down as easily as the slavers would have liked.

It seemed Number Six thought the same way.

The biggest pony I had laid eyes on in my life seemed to me to be a slow and deliberate stallion. I had imagined that an attack from him would be like a boulder rolling slowly across the ground. Deliberate and implacable. Oh, how wrong I as.

He moved like a boulder alright, but one tumbling madly down a cliffside. The slaver didn't even stand a chance when the colossal weight of Number Six barrelled into him, one giant hoof ploughing the slaver's head into the concrete wall with enough force to make a sickening crunch.

The slaver currently straddling me looked up, eyes wide, as he witnessed his comrades murdered in an instant before him. The third slaver turned from finishing his shackles on Number Four, as well, both matching the cold stare of Number Six.

"You..." the slaver's voice quivered, "...you stay right there! S-Stay..."

"Funny. I was going to tell you the same thing," muttered Number Six before launching himself at the two. I curled up as I felt his size thunder over me. A series of panicked screams and dull thumps echoed as the pair were set upon by the giant. I risked opening my eyes.

I saw Number Six moving like a blur, thick limbs lashing out wildly. He bucked one slaver against the wall so hard that their skull rebounded with a crack. He spun himself around, diving and grappling with his second opponent, even as the slaver attempted to draw a baton with his mouth. With a grunt and a heave, the slaver was hurled roughly into the gate, clean over my head, and landed in a heap with his colleague. The pair clutched themselves, groaning in pain.

Even as they attempted to stand, the first nursing his rapidly bleeding head, Number Six was on them. His forehead collided with the first target, the sound like two rock's colliding. The slaver dropped, unconscious. Number Six reached out, dragging the second one over and began beating their head off the wall. A sudden, damp-sounding crack signalled his end, and his agonised cries promptly ceased.

Almost as an afterthought, wiping the sweat from his brow, Number Six raised a hoof and stamped it sharply on the unconscious buck's neck with enough force to... to...

I felt sick.

I had seen ponies beaten all their lives, but this was different. Slavers beat to intimidate. This pony had simply been killing them. In the carnage, the stallion had taken three slavers apart in less than a minute with nothing other than sheer power and ferocity. Brute force at its most simple, without even a thought.

No, that wasn't right. Even as I watched him now, his eyes flicked to and fro. He *was* thinking. He was older than I'd guessed, his face bearing the look of one who had been through all this before. There was something calculated about his expression, as he watched and listened. He was observant and clearly experienced. Suddenly, why he had been paying such close attention to the arena and its combatants earlier made sense to me.

Part of me wondered how he would have fared against that zebra. Agility and precision against deliberate fury and power, until I remembered I would have been dead before I knew the outcome. I wasn't sure which scared me more, although looking at those mismatched and bloodshot eyes turning to glare at me, I reached a decision pretty quickly.

"D-Don't kill me, too!" I shrieked at him, backing away toward the gate, eventually pressing my back against it to stay away from the huge earth pony. "I'll stay quiet! Please..."

He simply trod over to me, staring down. By the Goddesses, his face was streaked with the blood of the slavers he had killed, the lines dripping off his muzzle oddly following the contours of his dyed coat markings. His face sunk to look me in the eyes. I found I couldn't even blink as I met his gaze. That one bloodshot eye of his seemed to twitch, before he drew himself back, grabbed my jerkin in his mouth, and swung me to my hooves.

"C'mon, pipsqueak." He grunted the words quickly, heading for the door. "Tag along and maybe you'll get out of this alive."

Surprise rang in my mind.

I guessed I didn't really have a choice.

The back area of the Pit was in absolute chaos. Even just outside the door out of the gate area, I witnessed slavers lashing and threatening slaves with whips, guns, and battle saddles. The slaves were not going quietly; even as I crept out of the door in Number Six's shadow, I saw one slaver pulled down by four weakened labourers. They'd floored him with a magically hurled sledgehammer. Gunshots rang out every few seconds, causing scattered yells to break out, and waves of fleeing slaves to rush down the hallways.

Number Six didn't appear fazed. He glanced around, before picking a direction and galloping off. I struggled to keep up with his long and determined stride. Diving to one side or the other, my gallop was nervous and unbalanced. What was I doing!? The slaver had told me to stay put! The little slave in my head screamed at me to stop, that my masters would not appreciate this.

Weapons strewn on the ground, liberated from a small armoury, were being snatched up by anypony that could reach them. Slaves unable to grab one in time were arming themselves with tools and the occasional bits of furniture. I saw them trying to break into what I knew was the armoury where all the Pit's more lethal weapons, like firearms and magical auto axes, were kept. My senses were assaulted by screams, explosions, and the heavy scents of gunpowder and sweat. I slipped in a few puddles that I was sure were *not* water, and tried not to think too hard about what it really had been.

Ahead, a slave and an overseer of the Pit came tumbling out of a doorway amongst a fiery

glow. Even as they savagely wrestled on the ground, I saw scraps of paper and smoke billowing out from the blazing room behind them. I held my breath and pushed through the haze, before tripping over a corpse hidden amongst the dark cloud. It was such a sudden shock that I still felt my legs trying to run even, as the world rotated by ninety degrees.

My lower jaw slapped against the ground with a painful rattle, jamming my teeth together. That loose tooth from this morning reminded me of its presence with an uncomfortable little shimmy in its socket. Wincing and bringing a hoof to my mouth, I glanced around before immediately feeling the urge to just stop.

I saw slavers regaining control here. 'Normality' was being restored as more and more slaves were beaten, shackled, or simply shot. Before my eyes I saw many of them murdered even though they had already surrendered. Perhaps it was best if I just lay down, let them shackle me, and not take any chances.

But no, something wouldn't let me. Something fragile but powerful compelled me to keep moving, like a distant, desperate, wanting voice from within that I'd never noticed before. The feeling in my heart was still too strong, the bonds were heavy on my conditioned mind, but I had now been shown it was possible to stand up from all this. I turned and galloped after Number Six once again, seeing that he had ploughed ahead without waiting at all. Several slavers had tried to get in his way; their mangled forms now lay in his wake.

He was up ahead, diving down a side corridor. For a second I wondered why, before I heard the clatter of griffon talons on the floor around the next bend. Silently thanking my ears, for once in my life, I dove into the double doors of the corridor after Number Six. To my great surprise he was right beside them, slamming them shut the moment I was through.

I fell against the wall, my sides aching and, well, everything else aching, too. A sick and beaten little pony like me couldn't run too well.

Behind us, the griffons ran past, their talons making an all-too-obvious clatter. Given a chance to breathe, I looked up (and up some more...) at Number Six.

"Why... why are you helping me?" My voice was weak, panting, and hoarse.

"Why not?" A deadpan reply. "You're not one of them. Y'don't have the killer instinct in your eyes. I know a place where you'll be safe... well, safer, than you probably are in whatever pit they have you. Tag along if you want, kid."

He narrowed his eyes, leaning down closer.

"But I won't slow down. If you fall behind, you're getting left. I have to—"

He stopped, his eyes glancing away down the hall before returning to me. Somehow, I got the impression he was only covering for having said more than he wanted. All the same, I nodded. Perhaps what he had was a little rebel outpost in the train tunnels of Fillydelphia! A way to get in and find other ponies to escape with, all of us together!

Only, there was one monumental obstacle to overcome. Going with him meant defying my master, if I wanted to escape to wherever this stallion wanted me to go.

Thoughts clashed in my head as I watched the stallion creep forward, warily glancing around him with that same pragmatic look as before.

I was a slave! What was I doing with all these thoughts in my head of escape, freedom, and dreams? Even my cutie mark was a set of manacles. I wasn't supposed to be away from this!

But try as I might, that imagery of the little unicorn mare showing such defiance and

escaping to the sky just would not go away. The freedom she'd had in the air! To be able to fly...

Taking a deep breath, I turned, pulling my jerkin a little tighter around me, before trotting after Number Six. If I wanted out then I guessed I would have to follow him and show that I was willing. And show *myself* that I could break these chains.

Briefly, I wondered if a cutie mark could change. That would be nice. Perhaps a sketchbook on my flank... or a bird flying free...

We began moving again, passing staff offices of the ice rink and pausing only to check doorways. In truth, the back area wasn't particularly big. However, ruined walls and collapsed ceilings made much of it more like a dilapidated labyrinth. Truth be told, I was not feeling particularly safe. Even if I managed to get rid of the terror that my companion struck in me every time I saw him, there was a greater concern in my mind. It was the fear of Whiplash, my master, appearing and dragging me back to receive punishment for my defiance.

"This is the way."

I blinked on reflex at his voice and didn't reply. Somehow, I had an imaginative vision of Number Six turning and breaking me in two for disrupting his own escape. Whatever drove him, it was intense. I wondered what his name was, only now thinking to even bother checking his cutie mark.

Whatever it meant, it wasn't 'cute.'

His massive body bore the mark of a battle-scarred and rusted shield splattered with blood on either side. It made sense, I thought. He certainly was battle-scarred himself. His dyed coat bearing those sharp tribal symbols were matched only by the twisted wounds he carried. My mind wondered on the shield's significance before settling on the obvious. He was certainly as tough as one to survive all that.

I saw blood spattered across his sides, some of it his own. Running down his body, it mixed with the crimson stains upon his cutie mark, making the battered and bloodied shield seem darkly fitting. I found myself wanting to draw that mark upon his sides and felt a pang of loss at my journal being left behind at the FunFarm. It was probably being used as bedding by some other slave by now.

Even with that unicorn saving my life, I doubted I would see that picture of my mother ever again, now.

Once again, I felt little tears forming in my eyes. Sometimes I really wished I didn't cry so much in front of others, but it was like an unstoppable and instinctive reaction.

I almost walked directly into Number Six without thinking. He had stopped, staring at the doors in front of us.

One was a standard office door, the other a fire escape to the outside. A temporary leap of hope came to my mind as I imagined us sneaking out and escaping under cover of the madness I could still hear outside. Yet, reality came crashing home. To the side of the doorway lay the clunky form of one of those damned terminals beside it, a locked symbol displaying on its half cracked screen.

The colourful swearing of my companion under his breath as he checked didn't seem to imply he knew what to do with them either.

"Locked. Why are they *always* locked? Ridiculous pieces of intellectual—"

While reeling off a few words I had never even heard, we backtracked. We passed offices and locker rooms, but could find no other way out. Most had been welded over. Minutes

passed, and I could hear shouts nearby starting to pick up. They were searching the building.

Number Six snarled as we wandered into a dead end amongst a meeting room.

"This isn't getting us anywhere."

Eventually, my companion vented his frustration by bucking the wall with one leg beside him, the strike offering up a sharp crack as the plaster broke under his hoof.

I heard a squeak at the sudden sound... damn it, why do I always have to—

That hadn't been me.

My hurting ears had heard something from behind a closed office door. Motioning to Number Six (I really needed to ask his name...), I pointed with a hoof toward the office. With a narrowing of his brow, he turned and bucked the door open.

Or rather... clean off its hinges.

"Out! Now!" he roared, diving into the room as I heard a scream of surprise and shock.

Dragged by his tail, a worker for Red Eye was pulled out of his hiding spot and dumped into a chair.

"Right! And why might you be hiding? You know something?" he said, voice heavy but low and full of savage intent. He clearly just wanted this over with. I got the sense he didn't enjoy waiting around in the middle of what was soon to become a war zone if the riots escalated.

"No! No, I don't know nothin'!" The worker, I presumed some sort of admin assistant, screamed in the stallion's face.

"So, you know the password to the terminal then," continued Number Six, speaking factually in a low tone with a lethal-looking grimace.

"I... what? How did you..."

"You just told me." He winked at the smaller pony. It was not a comforting expression.

"Oh..." the buck looked around, then back to the big slave holding him, "...shit."

"Got that right."

Number Six immediately turned him around and bodily dragged him back the way we came.

Awkwardly ignoring the pony's pleas to me to get the huge stallion to stop, I followed them all the way back to the terminal. I felt just as surprised as Number Six's captive, I hadn't spotted that simple ploy, either. Clearly, he wasn't stupid. All the same, I couldn't help but be afraid. He had that look in his eyes that I had seen before, when he'd pounced the slavers back in the black gate.

This wasn't a slaver he was holding, though. For all I knew, he might just be a promoted slave.

"I ain't giving you the password!" he bewailed, "Stern would gut me!"

"I'll gut you if you don't do it now," countered Six, "or perhaps I'll just start skelping your head off the wall until you do."

Number Six paused, and then lowered his eyes, bringing himself onto the slaver's level.

"And even if you do pass out... I am very patient."

"Stern would kill me!"

There was a loud, echoing clang as the buck's head slammed into the metal wall near the terminal, leaving a painful looking dent.

"The password!" roared Six into his ear. I winced, holding my own ears and backing off as far as I could. I didn't like how this was going.

"Fuck you, slave! Red Eye has things he could do to me you never could! I'm too... too scared of him to worry about you!"

A second indent. Blood sprayed from his nose and he wailed in pain.

"Shit...shit..." he seemed to pass out until Six batted him across the face with a hoof. I didn't like this at all. This wasn't persuasion or defence, this was outright torture.

Despite what he said to me, I did not feel reassured by this stallion one little bit. There was something unrestricted about him. Like he chose to ignore all barriers of morality. If it hadn't been for his words earlier, I would have probably just ran.

However, he was making progress. The worker's survival instinct had seemed to kick in, now begging for his life.

"*DARING!*" I heard the worker wail, "*It's Daring!*"

"Now, wasn't that simple?" uttered Six, his gravelly voice not showing a hint of emotion while he turned and unlocked both the terminal and then the door. It clicked as the bolt retracted. With a satisfied snort, he turned to the worker.

I saw murder in his eyes. He didn't want anypony left alive to inform the slavers of who had broken out.

"No! No, I told you!"

The worker clambered, crying in pain as he tried to drag himself away as Number Six snarled and dove for him.

I managed to close my eyes in time as his hooves flew for the worker's neck. But even holding my ears didn't deaden the cries for mercy that were cut short by an agonised squeal.

Inside had been chaos.

Outside... was war.

Crowds of slaves poured from the stadium's doors in desperate surges. I saw slaves being crushed under the writhing mass of dirty bodies surging in all directions as two different crowds collided; they fell screaming as they were trampled to death. Amongst it all, slavers galloped to and fro, pointing guns and screaming to round workers up. Many slaves made a break for it before being shot down, their cries standing out above the overall ambience of panic and disorder. Even here, a few feet from the side entrance, I was almost bowled over by terrified ponies trying to escape the lashes or attempting to reach their own enclosures.

How could anypony move through this? It was simply madness. We stood apart from it all beside the large garbage containers kept at the back of the stadium.

But above the crowds, in the FunFarm still, even more was happening. The FunFarm rollercoaster had somehow become active. The carts hurled around the tracks at breakneck speed. I witnessed guards opening fire on it. Was there a pony on that thing? And why were they firing at it with a—

"GET DOWN!"

I felt Number Six grab me roughly by the jerkin and hurl me behind the garbage bins before diving in beside me. The rocket intended to destroy the rollercoaster had missed, and instead arced on an unclear trajectory, before curling down and shooting out of the sky to slam amidst a crowd just in front of us. The concussive wave was a half-second of total noise before a ringing deafness consumed everything. My body shaken, I felt earth and wet mud splattering down around me even while holding my head to the ground. Shivering so badly

I felt I might just fall over, I peered up and opened my eyes before closing them right away. That hadn't been wet mud.

I felt the enormous stallion move. He was heading away already. Forcing my eyes open, I began to limp after him, my sprained joint aching on every step. With a start, I noticed my jerkin had been half pulled from my body by the stallion's rough handling. I staggered as hastily I reset it around me properly before following as best I could. I couldn't avoid looking to the side, seeing the horrific aftermath of the missile strike on the crowd—a small crater surrounded by mutilated bodies and slaves torn up by shrapnel. No doubt they would simply be left to die, for nopony was coming to their aid. Instead, everyone ran in panic, fearing another missile any second.

Guilty feelings reminded me that I was hardly stopping either. Terror clenched my gut like a vice as I struggled to see the stallion ahead. He stood a head above anypony else in the area, but with my size, fighting through a crowd was next to impossible. I had to keep moving; any second another missile might land or a slaver might open fire on the crowd. I had seen a couple doing just that earlier.

Above, a wing of griffons soared over toward the rollercoaster, and I heard an immense crash from the building that housed Red Eye's operations in Fillydelphia, the FunFarm's giant barn. Smoke billowed from one side as I saw Red Eye's forces moving to congregate on it. Had the coaster cars crashed into it?

My attentions were brought back to the ground, drawn to a group of ponies rushing across the edge of the crowd. I saw three of them fall, their flailing hooves causing a dozen more of the panicked slaves to trip and fall over the wounded. There wasn't any order; some even tried to back to the stadium. I dove, ducked, and weaved my way as best I could through the frantic obstacle course of flailing hooves and bodies. All it would take is one stray hoof, and I'd be helpless on the floor.

"Slaves! Halt or you will be fired upon! Halt where you are now!"

My instinct kicked in. I faltered, hooves trying to stop, but the crowd swept me on. The air was filled with screams, shrieks, and angry cries of bitter ponies trying to push their own way through. A young stallion nearby clutched a lifeless mare, wailing and crying over her, the young pony trampled to death. I saw two slaves begin fighting over who bumped who on purpose, hooves flying as they collapsed to the ground together. All around me, terrified ponies ignored the commands across the PA system. I wondered if they had even heard it. Perhaps only I could.

"Guards! Open fire!"

Battle saddles unleashed a torrent of firepower from the walkways above. Miniguns roared, huge anti-material rifles boomed, and magical weapons lent their own unique and disturbing zaps to the volley. Griffon handheld weapons joined the cacophony of weapon sounds as they picked out individual targets from above.

Only now did I realise what had been happening. The slave crowd I had ended up in was headed for the main gate. It may have been accidental, I would bet most didn't know where they were going in the mad rush, but I saw what Red Eye's forces had figured was going on. To their eyes, the slaves were making a break for it, and they intended to punish it with enough blood to quell any rebellion.

Briefly, it occurred to me that the majority of these slaves were not the ones whom had actually rebelled beneath the ice rink.

The front ranks of the riot were torn asunder. Ponies fell in droves with the fusillade of

gunfire ripping into them. I could not see it directly, being too far back, but I heard the horrible sound of bullets tearing through flesh and the unsettling flares of ponies being atomised or melted by magical energy weapons.

Yells turning to shrieks, the crowd swung to a halt and tried to double back. Those turning met the rest coming behind them in a collision that broke bones and bloodied muzzles. The sound was shocking, bodies slamming into one another over and over, slaves terrified of what we had run from and others terrified of what was stopping them.

Trapped between gunfire, ploughing collisions, and panic, I didn't know what to do. My instincts said, 'Go to your enclosure,' but my heart said 'Keep going! Escape!'

I didn't know which to follow.

Fear, emotion, and adrenaline coursed through me. I had never felt like this before. Emotion was not something I often knew outside of crying. But now with so much of it at once, I was overwhelmed. Eyes streaming in confusion and panic, I hesitated and froze.

I fell in the crowd and was thrown to and fro by it. I was knocked to the side by a large mare fighting her way back through the masses, and then squeezed between two others as they both fell. Somepony screamed in my ear. A stallion slammed into us all and tripped. I couldn't see anything but grimy, rushing bodies. I was trapped amongst sweat and noise, unable to get away. I tumbled and dove, trying to avoid being crushed. I didn't know what to do!

"Squirt!"

My eyes blinked open, wiping my tears before shrieking and scrambling to the side to avoid a pony crashing to the floor near me, stone dead from a bullet to the forehead. Ahead, off to the side of the crowd, was Number Six.

He wasn't waiting, but he had shouted to me as he ran off down a side street that led deeper into Fillydelphia. Many other ponies were also pushed to escape that way off the main road. I could see gunshots trying to take them down as they ran off the side of the main gate road. Clearly Red Eye wanted to herd us together.

There were two choices.

One followed the stallion into whatever place he was headed for. But to get to him, I would have to charge through an area pock marked with bullets and sizzling with magical energy. A few ponies had made it through without harm... but not all.

The other was to stay here. Already, I could feel the crowd quieting and beginning to falter under the brutal tactics of the slavers. I would, perhaps, be safe enough until led back to my enclosure.

To dare, or to falter.

I looked out over the gunshots raking the area.

I took a breath.

And then Master Red Eye's voice boomed from the speakers.

"Great workers of Fillydelphia! Cease this pointless violence!"

I faltered...

"You have made such great strides with each passing day. Did I not reward such effort with the promise of a day of rest by the break of dawn today? Yes, and hear me, know that I am not given to breaking my promises to your generous efforts. This day shall remain yours. But this trivial panic will serve none. Not you. Not me. Not the Unity that we all dream of attaining. But most of all, not the children that we strive to take to a better place with the great effort that we, together, have made. I ask of you all, would

the future ascension of a safe and secure Equestria be the result of panic and disorder? Was chaos itself not the hell that we, long ago, escaped from? Remember your potential, fellow Equestrians, remember your sacrifices and remember the generosity that we all must show."

I couldn't move. His voice. My Master. The one who paid for me. The one who owned me.

"And it is thus that I must ask you to return, to go peacefully to your places of rest for now. My attendants will inform everypony of when we may return to the day of rest and joy that has been promised. We have all given so much together. I swear to you, it will not be long. Now go, return with order befitting a better Equestria and let no more blood be shed this day."

The decision was made.

My Master had asked.

Even as I felt my heart screaming at me to remember what the Pit had shown me, I obeyed.

His words were backed up by reinforcements arriving. Entire squads of slavers were being called in from all over the city to surround and break up the crowds. Efficient as they were harsh, they began sending groups of slaves in directed funnels towards enclosures. I presumed that they would be sorted later on. For now, Master Red Eye only wanted them safe and docile.

The offer of no punishment if one ceased now was a strong one to terrified slaves.

My mind screamed at me that this was wrong, and yet... I ignored it. I had to return to my enclosure.

My shift would be starting soon.

In the background of the slavers ending the riots, I saw Number Six look back, before disappearing down the street. He had survived.

I stood still as slavers ran down the lines, directing us one way and another. I don't know how long I stood there, looking at my hooves with tears still dripping from my eyes. I simply awaited my turn.

"You there! Get to the damned FunFarm!"

"Mare! No not you! That one! Get back to your normal enclosure!"

"Head down to the other side of Filly, follow the griffons!"

"You!"

The last was me. The slaver loomed over me (who didn't?) with a whip magically floating beside him. I couldn't help but keep my eyes trained on the serrated and bloodied edge of the whip itself. With obedience, I lowered my head.

"You go back to the FunFarm, slave!" he shouted over the murmurs and whimpers around us from a mass of slaves simply standing and feeling sorry for themselves. Corpses still littered the ground around us from the rows of slaves that had been gunned down earlier. I began to see the reasoning. It had been a simply practical solution to kill some in order to prevent an ongoing riot that would kill so many more in the long term.

Kill some to shock more into listening, then offer them a ceasefire. It was as efficient as it was heartless.

It wasn't my place to question. I was only ever the cog in the machine. In my thoughts, I didn't realise how much of a rush the slaver was in until I saw the whip raise.

"I said, back to your pen, you dirty little cu—"

The FunBarn exploded.

The building which I had seen the rollercoaster crash into erupted into flame. Its roof blew upwards. The heavy wood that made up the barn splintered like twigs. Something colossal rose from it, sending shards of wood and brick flying in all directions from a glowing sphere of magical power.

It rose slowly, gradually gaining height among the swirling smoke cascading around it. Unlike in the Pit, this didn't give me a feeling of hope and inspiration. Instead, it terrified me to the core.

I didn't wait to see what it exactly was, but I could only imagine it was due to the mare's escape. Whatever she had done, her presence had awoken some enormous powers in Fillydelphia that were struggling to keep hold of her. Silently, inside, I imagined (hoped?) that none of it would be enough.

Gasping, my heart thumping hard, I heard myself shriek at the sight. Shutting out the sounds, I darted to the side while the slaver was distracted, dragging my eyes away from the massive monstrosity on top of the FunFarm. Dodging through startled ponies, I made for the petting zoo. I could just hide in a corner until all this blew over!

Debris rained down from on high, thrown upon us by the conflict above. Ponies began running again, slavers among them. Only this time the panic was in all directions as they sought not to flee Fillydelphia or to get back to their areas but to simply evade the scrap crashing down from above. Huge lengths of jagged wood splintered and speared into the ground, along with hunks of metal claspings from the FunBarn's roof.

From the stadium to here, my mind was only beginning to catch up with the consistent onrush of activity all around me. Others scattered, but I dove into an old, decrepit stuffed toy stall by the side of the FunFarm roads to take shelter.

Once inside, I simply shut my eyes, held my ears, and waited. Whatever forces were being unleashed out there, they were far too big for me.

I was afraid, so very afraid.

A second, even greater, detonation set off a minor earthquake across the FunFarm. Hooves clattered past my hiding spot, but I stayed put. I simply hid and prayed that none of it would affect me, even as a dust cloud washed over the stall and blew the roof clean off.

All the while, my mind fought with itself between the terrified slave who wanted the predictable routine to come back, and the newly found hope that burned for something more.

But old habits die hard.

Hope lost. I realised that I had faltered back there. When given the choice between becoming a free stallion and obeying my master, I had chosen to obey.

Under the chaos erupting around me, I wrestled with that fact. I thought of it all, from the optimism I had felt, to the terrified obedience I had just displayed. From the sight of that little mare, to the horrors happening feet away from me.

Lost and confused, I realised I simply I didn't know what was happening any more.

Not out there.

And not to me.

Silence.

Finally, there was silence.

I didn't know how long I had hid. Perhaps it had been a few minutes. Maybe an hour. The stuffy sky and the red haze of Fillydelphia did not offer much perspective on the time of day. But when I finally crawled out, choking on dust and aching with exertion... it was quiet.

The FunFarm and the road outside it was littered in the aftermath. Stalls had been overturned and fences torn down by those seeking to escape the crush. A fire barrel had been knocked over, and its coals still burned on the ground. Even as I watched, an exhausted guard tossed sand over them.

The crowds had dispersed for the most part. I still saw some slaves clustering in ditches beside the roads or under what shelter they could. Some were grouping up to nurse wounds, but most were just huddling together for support. Occasional corpses still littered the FunFarm's pathways and the street outside. About a hundred metres away, I saw slaves being tasked with clearing the mass of bodies from the road.

No slavers were nearby. The majority were, no doubt, busy with the recovery efforts and wrangling up a few stragglers. Plus, Master Red Eye himself had said that this was still a day of rest for us. He rarely lied about that. I wouldn't be surprised if he had ordered the slavers to ease off for a bit.

Yet, even as I turned in a full circle, I saw no sign of Whiplash. I saw no griffons shooting at me. No giant stallion urging me to break the rules and follow him. No... no unicorn mare inspiring me to shake off my chains...

As I stood in the silent aftermath, I felt incalculably lonely.

The peace wasn't to last long. My day had one last horror to inflict. One final challenge to overcome.

As I made my way back to the petting zoo, intent on searching for my journal, I saw *them*.

"Oh look who it is! Little runt didn't die after all!"

I did as I always did. I put my head down, tried to ignore them, and headed for the pigsty.

Only the pigsty was no longer there.

I heard them trot up behind me before turning to meet them. I could sense this wasn't going to end well at all. I had no place to hide anymore, and there were no overseers around to stop them. I felt my sprained leg prematurely ache at the, no doubt, large amount of running to be involved soon.

The trio were filthy. Covered in grime, wounds, and dust from the massive crush earlier. I could only guess they wanted to take their anger out on somepony, and I had just wandered in right on time. There were two stallions and a mare. All were earth ponies; not exactly burly, but giants in comparison to me. I could swear they were related or something, for each of them had the same dirt-brown coat with only their manes to tell them apart. Black, dirty yellow, and crude green for the mare. Each wore the ruined scraps of rags they called clothing. I was sure that they were simply for the intimidation factor of ripped fabric about their bodies.

Their cutie marks were, in turn, a plank of wood with a nail through it, three small rocks

(he threw similar sizes at me... a lot), and the mare's was a lasso. She had once proven that talent by binding me in rope and hanging me from the fence until Whiplash found me, after (of course) her brothers-in-harm had used me as their piñata.

Apparently that had been my fault, somehow.

They were despicable ponies, but they had never been truly deadly. At best just an aggravation, and at worst, a torturous presence that brought more hurt into an already miserable life.

That seemed to be changing.

"So... we was thinkin'." The mare spat on the ground. "You was meant to die in that Pit, right?"

"And you didn't, somehow." The black maned buck quickly finished for her, while slowly circling around me. They had dangerous looks in their eyes, and I began to feel the fear creep down my back. Their voices were different. Now they were rebellious and full of menace, not the whiny posturing of before. I backed away, trying to keep all three in my sight.

"I... I was let out... because of what happened," I muttered, my head low. I didn't want to look them in the face. "And... and I got told to return here. I just want to go to sleep. I won't disturb y— Argh!"

While I had been speaking, the first stallion rushed me from behind and shoved me harshly.

Yelping, I was barrelled over into the mud, right in front of where the pigsty used to be. I hit the ground hard, letting out a little whine as my injuries flared all the more from the fresh impact. Behind me, the three gathered together, grinning wickedly.

"So we was then thinkin'," she continued, apparently the de facto leader for today, "if you died now? Nopony would ever notice or care, right? Could just blame it on the riots earlier before that big sphere thing blew up atop the FunFarm! Might start clawing some respect back among the others in here."

Oh Goddesses, they weren't wanting to just beat me.

They wanted to go up the pecking order. They wanted to be seen as the dangerous ones.

They wanted blood.

I swivelled on the ground, twisting to look at them. Why couldn't I just be left in peace to slave away? Why never just left alone? All I wanted was to be left alone!

The fear from before returned, only now this wasn't the arena of my nightmares. This was reality. Three ponies wanted to kill me and were going to do so.

This just wasn't fair! I had chosen to avoid dying to stay with Master Red Eye, and now they wanted to kill me! This just... wasn't...

"FAIR!" I screamed, my thoughts exploding into reality. The surprise on their faces made them pause in their approach. Any other pony, that stallion maybe, might have seen an opportunity to attack, to hit them first. But I wasn't like that.

I ran.

They didn't take long to recover at all, for even as I slipped and staggered out of the mud toward the exit of the petting zoo, I heard the clatter of their hooves behind me. This felt familiar, and I fell into the instincts of a runt who had grown up avoiding the 'bigger siblings' of the world. The slaves at the rock farm had chased me through the field because my lack of work had earned them all punishment. From that I had learned that I couldn't outrun other ponies because of their longer strides.

Instead, I tried weaving, diving over bits of fence, and ducking under stall doors to stay ahead of them as the chase broke out into the FunFarm. Other slaves and the occasional busy slaver glanced at it, seeing three larger ponies chasing after a little runt that was scampering about with tears in his eyes. My size let me dive into areas they couldn't. I saw an area between a Funhouse ("Where you can keep smiling forever!") and a merchandise stand ahead of me. I'd spotted it long before for just this purpose! A thin alleyway!

If I could get through, perhaps I could escape! I could go find Number Six again, take up his offer, and escape these ponies forever!

"Can't run forever, runt! Gonna break you!"

A stallion's voice rang out shockingly close behind, turning my head I saw him approach, running low and catching up horrifyingly fast. Crying out in fear, I ran into the space of the alley... and got stuck.

Even my malnourished body was just a little too thick. I got jammed by my hips; my head and front legs held in the air as the back half of my body scrambled fiercely on the ground to try and push myself through. I could sense them galloping closer, hear their screams of triumph. I couldn't budge!

"Got you now, little runt!"

"All jammed up for us!"

I panicked. My hind legs could barely reach the ground. I felt myself pushed an inch forward. I had a few seconds at most! I couldn't even look back to see them, the gap was so thin. Claustrophobic feelings rang in my head as I shook and felt myself jam all the more tightly in place.

"Got you!"

"No!"

I felt hooves grab my rump, strength more than my own began to pull me back out of the gap. Incoherently shouting, I didn't even know what I was saying as I lashed out in fear at the assailant from behind. With a sharp crack, I felt my back right hoof connect with something, the impact shoving me forward into the gap far enough to pop into a wider section of the alleyway.

Twisting around, I saw the black haired stallion lying on the ground, nursing a bleeding muzzle, before looking up at me with wild fury in his eyes. His companions had split off, clearly running around.

I couldn't waste any time.

Beyond the alleyway there was a small fence. The few seconds it took me to find a box (Celestia send my small height to the damned moon!) gave them an opportunity to catch up, only just missing me as I dove out of the FunFarm into—

Actually, I didn't even know where I was going. I'd never actually come through here.

As it turned out, it wasn't a particularly easy fall on the other side.

It wasn't a particularly short one either.

I screamed and fell off the ten foot gap where the ground of the FunFarm dropped off into its sloped back areas. Rolling and scraping down a rocky embankment, I floundered toward a muddy refuse pit filled with piles of old scrapped rides from the park.

Crashing into the ground at a high speed, I felt my entire ribcage buckle from the impact. I lay still. Struggling to breathe, my lungs wheezing, I felt the burns on my body from the mudslide down the slope sear in pain.

Annoyingly, that pink pony's mantra to 'look before you make that hop, skip, and jump!'

from the recorded play park speakers back within the park seemed like all too good advice right now. Oh, how I detested that happy-go-lucky voice...

I staggered to my hooves, glancing around, before falling again in the same spot. The ground here was slippery and hard to get a grip on. Even to a pony with perfectly fit muscles and good balance, of which I had neither, it might have been difficult.

"Gotcha! Ya little slippery bugger!"

Hearing the second stallion's distinctive accent, I turned to witness them sliding down the same embankment with greater care than my haphazard fall.

I didn't even have time to move before he charged directly into me, sending me sliding back across the mud into a pile of scrap. The unbalanced heap came roaring down around me, distracting the bullies as they slid their way across the mud, dodging random appliances and hunks of metal from rollercoasters. It all clattered off the main pile with a sound like an ironmonger's forge being demolished. I felt a slab of metal slap me across the back of the head, knocking me face down in front of them.

"Well, well, well..." the mare was out of breath as she reached down and plucked a broken, sharp-looking pipe from the scrap with her mouth. "Geff we get to haf fun nao."

I just lifted my weary hooves in front of me. I could run and fight no more. The exertion and mental exhaustion of today had taken its toll. My body simply could not bring itself to move with any urgency.

"Please..." I begged with them. "Please, don't! I... whatever you want..."

"Ever since Blood and Daff took over the pens, we've been itching, runt. Now they're gone, and we're gonna move in. Start clawing back some rep!" The black haired stallion snorted, stamping his hoof, clearly intent on using just them. "And after that little buck you gave me, I've half a mind to return the favour tenfold."

I gulped. These ponies weren't just bullies, they were gangers. Stripped of their freedom to do as they wished, their claws had been neutered, so to speak.

"Time to die, runt. It's been a fun few months."

I closed my eyes, not even crying anymore. Perhaps I just knew that my time was up, after all.

Yet, the scuffle of hooves rushing in to beat me into the dirt was not what I heard. Instead, a rush of air overhead grew to a great, bestial roar of fire and wind. From the background it rose up, a sound approaching fast, growing rapidly until it erupted into a howl that echoed off buildings.

The gangers screamed, but not in anger. They did so in fear.

I dared to open my eyes before shutting them quickly again. The entire area was cast in a sickly green! Above us, roaring through the sky, was something flying, its massive size glowing so brightly that it was like a miniature, radioactive sun in the air!

I had seen one of these things before.

It was a Balefire Phoenix.

Only this one was *massive*! It soared above us, the mere sight terrifying the gangers into staggering backwards. With a sound like a roaring furnace, it descended, and passed right over our heads. The heat emanating from it made me squeal in discomfort, and I saw my attackers simply flee to escape the heat.

Only the mud caking me allowed me to bear the conflagration that now arched toward a building top in Filly. One surrounded by multiple pink pony face balloons.

Earlier had not been the end of today's events. Something was going on up there, and I

could guess who it related to.

Even as I lay there and watched, no doubt along with every other slave and slaver in Fillydelphia, I was in awe as the massive beast stood atop the building. I couldn't see what it was facing, but somehow my heart just... knew.

It was her.

I was nought but an onlooker. Gaping, I watched the phoenix curve from balloon to balloon, igniting them with scorching green balefire. I couldn't help a little satisfied grin as I saw at least a few of that pink pony's leering faces go down in flames, never to immortally stare at me again.

It had come from nowhere. But not for me. I was just the witness, just as I had been to the mare's escape and the colossal beast atop the FunFarm. I could not know the context, or connection between them, but I knew was that it was something else.

Something meant to wake me up from my nightmare.

I lay down there for hours.

The phoenix had long gone. The commotion on the building, whatever it was, now finished. I knew in my heart that the mare was now gone, escaped to the outside. With allies like that huge radioactive beast, how could she not?

But now, I just sat in the mud. What else could I do? I couldn't go back to the petting zoo until I knew I would be protected from those gang ponies. And I couldn't strike out alone. The guards were ready to shoot on sight.

So instead, I just wandered the refuse slowly, limping and trying to make sense of the day. My mind was at war once again. Part of me wanted to avoid all this and just go back to the life my cutie mark told me I should have. A life of slavery.

But the other half, mostly from the heart, could not forget that mysterious mare who had defied Red Eye in such a brazen fashion. To escape to lead your own life... how could I not want that, too?

But what would I even *do* with freedom?

I couldn't make sense of the emotion. From the mare in the Pit, to the mare who had looked at my sketchbook. From the gang trying to kill me, to Number Six murdering ponies and helping me escape with him. I realised I didn't even know *any* of their names. I thought back to drawing my own pictures. To wailing as I saw my mother in my own charcoal rendition. A whole day of coincidence, luck, discovery, delight, pain, and miracles. How could I, a slave who'd never dared to think for himself until today, make sense of any of this?

I bucked a scrapheap in frustration, clanging my hooves off a heavy section of metal, an old strut of a long scrapped ride. It didn't move as much as I'd hoped, sending me collapsing forward into the mud.

Mounting emotion welled up, and I screamed, before clambering up and bucking the same metal strut again, and again, and again. Every strike feeling exhausting, but the worry and anger overflowing until I finally gave it one last strike.

With a creak, it tipped back, and took most of the pile with it. Squealing, I dove away, floundering in the mud to escape the six foot tall pile as it dropped and rolled away down the slope.

Yet behind it, something was revealed.

Not more scrap, but the skeleton of a pony that had been half buried in the mud below the broken ride parts. The blackened bones clattered out, knocking against my legs even as I back-pedalled furiously and fell on my rump again. Staring with wide eyes, I saw it was covered in rags. It was all badly burned, most likely from the megaspells.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a skeleton. I had lived in the wastes most of my life. But something about finding remains from those old days never felt right to me. Hoof over my heart, I tried to avert my eyes.

Only, something caught my attention.

Around its foreleg lay what, at first, appeared to be scrap metal, but then I recognised it.

I remembered that mare's cutie mark.

Before me lay a devastated and wrecked version of one of those devices. With shaking hooves, I gingerly tugged it off the skeleton's leg and studied it, turning it over and over. The lock that kept it attached to a leg was broken. In fact it wasn't even there at all. The screen was cracked, and some buttons were missing entirely. On the inside, I saw exposed electronics and magic crystals that were shattered, their remains falling out even as I picked it up.

And yet, I saw a small light flickering on it. The device was still active!

Curiosity overcame fear, and my excitement grew at what this could hold. I started prodding at the machine, hoofing the buttons and turning dials. I even started fiddling with the wires, but to no avail. The most I could get from it was a sort of white noise when I hit one button that lasted until I hit it again. I couldn't get anything to work on it, and I couldn't even read the words written below the buttons, anyway!

With a cry of annoyance, I threw down the hunk of scrap. The same button depressed again by the impact, and began filling the air with white noise. Something about it had just been too much to bear. All this happening to me. All I'd been through. It only took one little disappointment in some little device to tip it all over the edge!

I had only had a few hours since learning that there was more to life! I didn't even know what I was thinking, let alone what to do! I was stuck in a muddy junkyard, and trying to pretend there was some way out of this!

How was I meant to make sense of all of this? Mysterious mares and stallions? Learning to draw for my own? Being within death's reach twice in one day?

I was beaten, bruised, scared, bleeding, sick, and probably going to die within a month, still. They might even come back for me again! And just as I had begun to understand that maybe, just *maybe* there was something more waiting for me, this stupid device up and refused to tell me anything! I needed something! Needed anything to make sense of it all! For just one moment, I'd thought fate had thrown me a bone, when I'd thought I had found something that meant *anything*! Something to tell me what I was doing!

I screamed in bitter frustration and kicked the device away from me with a great cry of rage.

"HOW AM I MEANT TO MAKE SENSE OF ALL THIS!?"

I galloped over, weary and sore, shouting at the device as though it were the cause of all this.

"I'm just a slave! I don't have *any* freedom! I don't have *any* dreams! What am I meant to do? Just tell me!"

I collapsed, my head resting against it. I felt a dial twist, but I knew it wouldn't do any

good. I cried into the mud, exhausted and scared. It was all going to go back to the way it was before, wasn't it? I'd missed my chance.

"I... I need someone to help me... anyone, please. Just someone to show me the way..."

The dial twisted one tick more, and the white noise stopped. In its place came a comforting voice...

"—ello Wastelanders! This is, of course, your friendly little light in the those crazy ol' Equestrian Wastelands day in and out, DJ-Pon-Three! I'm here with, you guessed it, that thing that used to give us all the blues. Yup! It's the news! And let me tell you, little ponies, do I have some good stuff for you today following the activities of everypony's favourite Stable Dweller out in the blasted pit of Fillydelphia..."

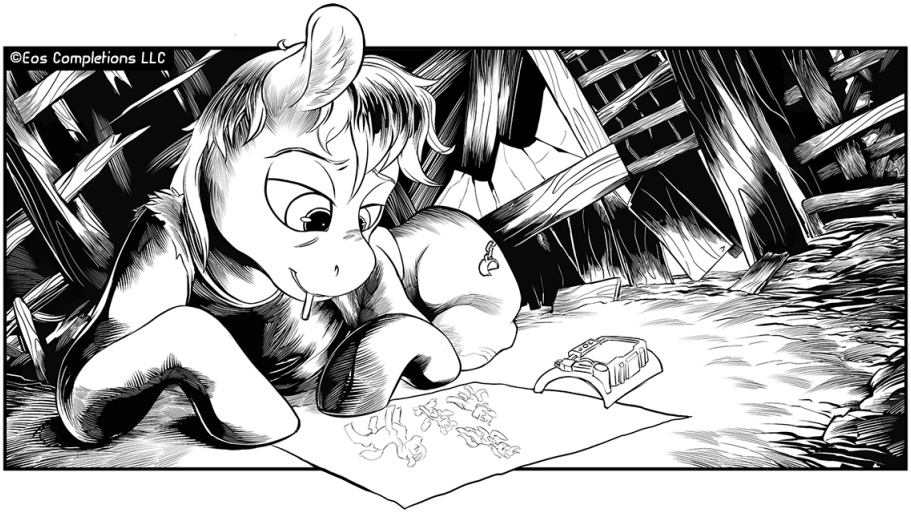
Footnote: Perk Attained!

Lucky Break! — Whatever has changed for you, it has been for the better.

Perhaps you have been working on a sixth sense or maybe you found a lucky charm.

You gain +1 to your LUCK statistic.

Every Pair of Wings



"Item 1: Create checklist of the things I need to accomplish by the end of the day."

"What did it feel like to be alone?"

For the longest time, I had never known. To be alone, you must have had a presence to lose. For me, that had been my mother. To witness her slowly getting smaller as I was dragged away over the wet mud into the barn of the rock farm was the first time in my life I had felt the painful sting of loneliness.

But they say time heals all gaps in the soul, whether you want them to or not, and the life of the slave took over. I missed her, but I no longer felt the loss of her presence so keenly as I once did. After all, my time around her had always been preordained to end. A childhood safety blanket that, after growing up, was thrown away once I had come of age. That was how slavery worked. No, I had never truly felt alone because I had always known I was going to be so one day. I had been prepared for it, however subconsciously, by the conditioning that had become my forced instincts.

That day in Fillydelphia changed all that.

A mother is a requirement. Everypony has one. It is the people you meet who you do not expect that defines your feelings around others. From birth till death sentence I had never known a single pony to come under that label. But approaching my darkest hour I had been shown not one, but four.

Number Six. The fearsome pony that had attempted to set me free and fought with terrifying brutality to escape. I had been nothing but an acceptable tag-along to him, yet such an act was unique in my life, for nopony had ever lifted a hoof in my defence. He had shown me the will to fight; to pursue and attain something. But as my mental instincts kicked in, I lost him to the Fillydelphia ruins, presumably forever.

The unknown mare. A pony that had shown me kindness and concern when I had been injured. Who had seen my somewhat more... risqué pictures, and only grinned rather than

judged. For the brief few minutes I had seen her, she had given me hope that perhaps not all ponies were so quick to leap to assumptions. However, she too was now lost to the masses of slaves, never for me to know if she was still alive or even in Fillydelphia any more. Despite that, I could not remove her from my mind.

The Stable Dweller. The pony who defied a Master. Who alone had fought and escaped from his clutches by ascending to the heavens above, taking with her the zebra who had tried to kill her. A merciful act from a better soul that had lit an inspiration in my heart and soul forever. The sight of her rising in the Pit; bright, fearless, and wreathed in magic would never leave me. I would have drawn it, had I still a journal to draw in. Amongst Red Eye's best efforts, she had escaped and proven that leaving Fillydelphia *was* possible. That if somepony were to show that same courage... they too could take for themselves the freedom they desired and dare to dream of better times.

But even as she brought us hope, that fleeting time in which I had 'known' the so-called Stable Dweller ended. Fillydelphia once again took control with no real visible change. For her impact was not in our environment. It was in our hearts.

One by one, I had lost the three ponies who had shown me what it felt like to have another pony there for me. To protect me. To aid me. To inspire me.

Now they were gone. And now, for the first time, I had felt true loneliness.

It had consumed me. Down in the muddy refuse pit I had lost my composure, my temper, and all understanding of what to do. Personal emotion was not something I was tailored to feel or deal with, despite my regular tears. But in my lowest moment, filled with rage at the solitude I could not comprehend, I was handed by fate the fourth, a voice that could not leave me. Who I could see as a guiding light through the darkness of the wasteland.

So long as the airwaves were open, I would never be alone again.

"So you see, my little ponies, today we bring you the first of a new wave of goodwill to all the unfortunates out there in Fillydelphia. Yeah, that's right, all you slaves in that foul end of the wasteland can have a little cheer once more. Until recently you've been denied the privilege of my oh-so-wonderful tips and tunes. But no longer! DJ-Pon-Three is in the airwaves! Ol' Red Eye can't stop this signal! Thanks to the efforts of the one and only Stable Dweller, these broadcasts can now reach you all down in Fillydelphia to bring that little glimmer of hope to your lives. Warms the heart it does, that finally, I can let you understand that no, you haven't been forgotten out there."

My pigsty hiding spot was gone. But I'd always had something of a talent for finding the little nooks and crannies in which to wriggle away and hide. In this case, an old feed cupboard within the petting zoos that stank of rot and damp with a collapsed roof. The fallen timber created a hidey hole that I could slink off into.

And listen.

"Now information is still creeping into us from out that direction, but from what I know thus far, it seems our Stable Dweller got right into Fillydelphia itself. Not only that, but she made one heck of a show in front of that egomaniac himself, messed up his operations something fierce, and got the hay right back outta there with another slave by her side! Tell you what, folks. I've seen some amazing stuff in my time, but even just

hearing about this, she really is something special, that little mare."

Isn't she just?

I felt that smile creep back into my face again. I had stuffed the device inside my jerkin to hide it as I had crept back to the petting zoo a few hours later. Whiplash had returned, a nasty deterrent for the gangers to not attempt murder again. Not that it had stopped their more 'normal' activities however. My rump still stung from the half buck as I had wriggled my way into the feed shed. I could hear them nearby, discussing things about mares I felt best to avoid my imagination dwelling too deeply on.

"So take heart, little slaves. I'm with you all now, the rebel DJ, as a lovely alternative to all that nonsense Mister Eye loves to spout all damn day long. Better music too, much as Pinkie can bring a smile, that stuff does get a little grating after a while. But that's not all we offer here at Tenpony Tower. We've got wasteland tips, tricks, and lessons to help give you all an edge to stay alive in there as best your little souls can, my little unfortunate ponies. But above all, you can come to this signal for respite. For an escape. Just be careful, I can't imagine Red Eye appreciates superior radio. So find your hiding spots, relax, and get ready to experience some real sound. To let that hard and death defying work shift slip from your mind for a few hours and relax with a little Sweetie Belle, Sapphire Shores, or our wondrous new Velvet Remedy. Speaking of that hot singing and hot-looking mare—hey come on, credit where credit is due—here's some of her right now."

I clutched the device tight, the volume down so low that only my strange hearing could detect the noise. The absolute last thing I needed was for the gangers to know about this precious device. I would never leave it elsewhere, better to remain strapped around my torso under my clothing. My jerkin was pretty good at keeping things hidden after all; it had done so for a very long time and now would do so for even longer with this device. Its volume could be low enough that only I would hear, and remain hidden from everypony else. Only here, safe in a small place, could I take it out and hold it close, almost nuzzling the thing as I sought comfort from the hellish life that I could at last recognise as my own. Since yesterday, I had spotted a few slaves clutching similar such radios, hiding them from slavers to tune in to the new broadcast. The DJ had brought a silent, almost undetectable revolution of hope to them. I had witnessed some being caught; the guards had standing orders to stamp it out wherever they could, both the radio and the slave.

As the music began, a wonderful uplifting beat and beautifully struck first note caught my attention immediately. I heard this 'Velvet' sing of hope and better times, lighting the colour in my imagination to follow what she sung of. I curled up, eyes clenched tightly shut as I held the device close, its small speaker against my ear. Music and voice in such harmony, blessed with a stirring tempo and words that spoke to my very soul. The song rose to a triumphant and motivating crescendo before the quiet and oh-so gentle end. Almost before the dead silence between tracks became unbearable, another began. The DJ was showcasing her to us, the wasteland's own born talent.

I felt wetness on my hooves from holding the device to the side of my face. Even as I imagined the same beauty that she sang of, my body shuddered with emotion as the first *real* songs that felt like they were meant to help me continued through the night. I wanted to hear more, to see her, to try drawing her even though I didn't know anything about her. I just wanted to lose myself in that tune and stay imagining forever.

Filled with emotion by the music and voice of Velvet, I fell asleep to the imagining of

finding the beauty she sang of. I heard her voice in my head gently hushing me to not worry through the medium of her music, even as I heard a growing wind building in force outside.

I had fallen asleep with Velvet Remedy. My dreams of colour, light and optimism afforded me the first real sleep that did not contain the recurring night terrors of my masters deciding they did not need me anymore.

I only wish it could have lasted longer.

With the comfort of the DJ and the music in my ears, I wanted to just sleep forever.

To just not wake up and have to face the day once more.

Fillydelphia was rarely that kind.

Yesterday I had been woken by Whiplash beating on the pig sty. Today differed only in that the pig sty was a feed cupboard. A sharp rapping jerked me awake all the same. Murmuring and groaning quietly I hastily hid the device under my jerkin, not daring to leave it behind where it might be stolen. Outside, I could still hear the wind whistling between the FunFarm's stalls like an ongoing howl in the air.

"Murky Number Seven! Slaves tell me you're hiding in here. Now get your little rump out here!"

Whiplash.

Normality had returned to Fillydelphia. The day was about to begin again.

Hazy-eyed, I rolled my neck and crawled slowly out. Each hoof that left the hiding spot hesitated with the wish to just dive right back into my cosy hole and go back to sleep. Judging from the light in the air, it was still the same night as I had returned to the FunFarm from the refuse pit. All the same, some more open air away from the rank stench of the two-hundred-year-old rotting feed cupboard was easier to breathe. That was, until I remembered it was radioactive and poisoned, anyway. My throat felt dry and tight while my stomach ached with neglect. It occurred to me that I hadn't been given any food or drink for over a day now, and the lack of nourishment was beginning to tell. Once in Fillydelphia I had been reduced to drinking from a sink in a workplace just to survive until the next rations appeared. It hadn't helped my radiation sickness. Already I could feel my rad-fever creeping back in as a stinging sweat all over.

I pushed myself more fully out from the wooden door that had collapsed inwardly and immediately felt every muscle in my body stiffen in shock. Sweet Celestia, it was *freezing* out here! Where had that stuffy heat gone? What was with this wind? The gusts hurtling through the petting zoo felt like they went right through me, chilling to the bone never mind the body as a whole. Looking off to the side, I could see what looked like a growing storm over the nearby hills outside the Wall. The clouded sky had become dark, rumbling menacingly in the far off distance. Thunder, probably a storm coming this way too. I shuddered. Nopony had told me about the rain in Fillydelphia on my first night. Coming through the poisoned cloud of radiation and industry, it *burned*.

Fillydelphia was known for its blistering and stifling heat, but the wasteland, ever powerful in Equestria, could do as it willed *anywhere*. Including making my personal hell

freeze over, apparently.

Any feelings of cold or far-off sounds were quickly driven from my head by the clip around the ear I received for not immediately turning to attention for Whiplash. Caught off balance and still physically exhausted from yesterday, I stumbled and fell from the stinging strike, only barely catching myself before my head rattled off a rock.

“Get it together, you filthy little wretch, get the hell up!” Whiplash’s voice was like his signature item, sharp and cracking for emphasis as I felt him wander forward, kicking me in the ribs every second I delayed as I attempted to get my sore hooves under me and rise.

Wincing in pain already, I reflected that this probably wasn’t going to be a very good day. Well, another one to add to the pile since I was bought by Master Red Eye. Turning, I bowed my head before looking up at Whiplash. Clearly I had been just in time, for that length of leather was already drawn, his whip ready to strike me if I had delayed any further. He must have seen the twitch of fear in my eyes, for the whip moved forward to lightly bat my face to either side on each word major punctuation of his speech.

“You will come when I tell you! No delays, Murk! I’m getting tired of this dragging you out of holes. Do you think I have the fucking time to waste on you?”

I shook my head. An oral reply, I had learned, more often bred a twisting of words and a fierce lashing.

“Good! The only reason I’m not having you strung up and whipped till your back is raw flesh is because your shift changed,” he sternly announced, walking back to the main zoo area. “Your number came up. Lucky number seven, right?”

He sneered at me as I tried to fight the urge to roll my eyes. If I had a morsel of food for every time I’d heard that ‘joke,’ I’d only be slightly malnourished instead of ghoulish. I backpedalled into the wooden side of the petting zoo feed hut as he approached, reaching into his saddlebag. My imagination went wild. Whiplash not using his whip? What was it then? Pliers? A mallet?

It was a piece of old yellowed parchment and a quill. He threw them at my feet.

“Take a note, Murk. I need you to remember this precisely.”

I simply stared at the parchment and quill like it was an indecipherable puzzle.

“Um... master?” I started, “I... uh... I can’t write...”

Whiplash turned his head to me, eyes narrowing as his magic picked up both the quill and whip, a look of ‘You’re kidding... you’re kidding, right?’ on his face before grunting in annoyance and drawing the parchment up before him as well.

“Well, I’ll write it then—”

“I can’t read either...” I muttered, closing my eyes and whinnying as I lowered my head.

His whip blurred, and cracked upon my face.

I screamed, leaping backwards on instinct, half-falling into the feeding hut hole again as the line of agony tore across my forehead. My hooves came up to protect it against further strikes from that whip, feeling a small trickle of blood dripping from my forehead onto them. I hesitantly opened my eyes to see the whip raised, ready to strike again.

“I swear to Luna’s almighty royal *arse*, Murk! You are the most useless slave I have *ever* had the misfortune to own! Now you listen up, boy, you listen good! I’m going to tell you this message once, and if you fuck it up then I promise you’ll be working the Parasprite Pits from tomorrow onwards!”

I opened my mouth to plead or beg. The Parasprite Pits were a death sentence! Those little flying critters had been twisted by the radiation into carnivorous little demons. We had

all heard the story of the pony who had got one in her mouth and been eaten from the inside out by an ever growing swarm. I didn't know if that nightmare-inducing situation was true, but I had seen a pony without a hazard suit devoured by a loose swarm in mere seconds. Working in the pits to incinerate them was danger beyond any other appointed shift, even more than exploring the crater or a Stable. However, I was not given the chance to voice my begging against being sent there.

"I need somepony to run a message for me," he continued, throwing the parchment and quill back at me anyways. "I've got a request for four new slaves from Wicked Slit after yesterday's work shift. Apparently three of them fell into a vat of molten metal or something. The fourth was sent to the Pit."

He narrowed his eyes for a second, before shrugging.

"I guess that means she'll only need three, given the last one is probably you. But that psychobitch could probably do with another one to keep her mollified anyway. You go straight to the manufacturing foundry, Murk. She'll not be on the shop floor this time of night, so you'll need to go find her in the overseer huts near the factory."

I groaned out loud, my own sleepiness had been warning me but here was the confirmation. I had indeed been woken early. This was out of hours shift work, and in this case, it involved potentially having to wake up a slaver who I doubted would be too pleased to see me, let alone have me interrupt her sleep. If Whiplash cared for my obvious discomfort he didn't show it, simply letting his instruction sink in before continuing.

"Tell her that the slaves will be delayed today, she won't have them. The groups are still too messed up from all that... pandemonium... yesterday."

Oh great. It's *bad* news. This just got better and better...

"However, on account of you surviving, somehow, you are to mention that she will have you back again to continue work in her foundry."

I wanted to just start beating my head off of the feed hut's wall. Back to that routine again for another few months until my inevitable poison-aired death? Is that what I'd been through all this for?

"Now she won't be too happy, so that's why I'm sending you."

Oh come on! What was this? I had to speak up, but mentally I was already preparing how to best tell Wicked Slit to not shoot the messenger. A neon sign from three miles away seemed the best option at this point. Accompanied by a very fast train to get on.

"Master... I... I don't think that's a good idea. She isn't too fond of me as a worker," I squeaked out, eyes warily watching that whip of his. "In fact, I think she outright doesn't want me."

"Then that makes two of us," Whiplash retorted, snorting and turning away. "As far as I'm concerned now, Murk, you're expendable. If I have to lose a slave to Slit being in a sick mood waking up to get a message on time, I'd rather it be you than any slaves that the overseers actually want from my stock. Now, leave in ten minutes time, I've cleared the guards for you to leave at that point, understand?"

"Yes master..." I lowered my head, sighing to the ground. Luck may have helped me yesterday, but was turning its head from me today.

Whiplash wandered off soon after. I lightly stomped the ground in frustration at the new

role as 'messenger to be stabbed.'

On the other hoof, at least I had ten more minutes to hide away. I wriggled on the ground to fit under the locked door back into the feed hut. I had spotted the rotten wood around the bottom when I arrived back at the FunFarm from the refuse. A swift half buck had given me some room to squeeze under.

Inside, I didn't own much. Well, I didn't have anything at all, actually, other than my jerkin, sticks of charcoal, a parchment and quill now, and finally, of course, the device. Or radio... or hoofmachine... whatever the thing was called by ponies who had an education or experience of the wasteland. I set it to the side on what used to be a feed box, turning up the volume just slightly, half-hoping to hear the DJ's sweet soothing words to help me feel safe. No such luck, although the unknown singer's voice (not Velvet; I'd recognise that voice anywhere now) brought a smile to my face as I sniffed and lay down again.

What now? Was I just meant to go back to daily life in Fillydelphia? I doubted it could ever be the unthinking toil to inevitable death it used to be. Several ponies, and the music of the wastes had shown me there was more to life. I had shown *myself* there was more to life when I started drawing for myself yesterday. How could I just turn my head away from all that? How could I go through the agony, sickness, and deprivation until death with anything more than a constant fear for losing the small things that I had gained?

A hacking cough sent a flare of pain into my lungs. Radiation sickness reminded me that it, too, was still present, its fever hidden by the chill wind outside. I covered my mouth with a hoof. The last thing I needed was the gangers knowing how bad it was getting.

The hoof came away bloody.

Ooooh, not good.

Only now it occurred to me that my saviour yesterday, the balefire phoenix, had perhaps been a double-edged sword. The same green fire that had driven the gangers off had given me a severe dose of magical radiation on top of what Fillydelphia's smog had already done to me.

I shook my head, driving the thought from my mind. I was dying anyway. This didn't change anything. If anything it was more important I did this right now. I needed to concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing before I was too sick to do anything. Tossing the quill to the side, I drew my charcoal stick instead and pulled the parchment across.

This would be different. I had ten minutes with no interruptions. The gangers were asleep. Whiplash wasn't coming back for now and I had control of my own drawing. Yesterday before the Pit had been... it had been something special. I had to use what time I had left to feel that again. Lacking my journal, it fell to the parchment.

There was only one thing I truly *could* bring myself to draw.

The parchment was large, I wanted to make use of it. I drew rough lines, like before I was simply throwing things at the page and seeing what stuck. Eventually the way shone through to me and I set to work.

Down at the bottom of the parchment, I drew a small figure. Glaring upward with wonder on its face, eyes open and full of realisation. He held limply in his hooves a small device. I dearly wanted to draw what was above him, but that had to wait. Some things needed finishing before it.

To the right, bigger... no, much bigger! Dark and brooding, sharp designs and a look of absolute cold determination. I even felt fear just by looking at him on paper from my own

charcoal's rendition. On the right of the drawing space, he stood with his head low, and ready to unleash imminent violence. As my charcoal darkened the tribal designs, I began to notice that I had unwittingly drawn him to be looking away from the small pony in the centre, as though protecting him.

To the left, I began to draw a second pony. Quickly, I changed, instead doing just her face. A mare with a flowing mane looking off to the left of the parchment with concern and kindness. I remembered that face. Gently, I brushed away some of the blackened markings nearer to the centre, giving it the illusion of light.

I paused. I knew what I wanted above those three, but I was afraid that my skills would not do it justice.

Slowly, I touched it to the parchment.

Gently, I began moving it to form shapes and curves as always. I could feel sweat stinging my brow from concentration. I could not mess this up. A pony took shape, weightless and heroic, floating in the air itself. Growing in confidence I drew heavier lines, magical wisps and beams of light from her horn that would have lit all of those below watching her ascend. The central pony below was staring directly up at her with wonder on his face.

I sat back from the parchment and took in what I had done. I felt a smile creep on to my face, allowing me to almost forget my predicament or sickness as I touched the parchment with a hoof. As though I could somehow let that image become my life before my eyes once again.

I could see mistakes. There always were, but they didn't matter. What I drew was what I felt. My journal was full of such things, most drawings telling my emotional state or hidden wishes, however large or small.

I knew I had to retrieve it. But I also knew that I had no help.

I wasn't alone. The DJ had seen to that.

But I had to do this by myself. Through all sickness, fear, slave duties, and unclear dreams, I could see the one thing I knew I had to retrieve.

That journal would be mine again before I died. I would find it, take it back and then... and...

I looked down at the ponies before me, each surrounding the one in the centre who looked so afraid and lost behind his wonder. I saw the Stable Dweller flying free.

I was going to... be...

No. One thing at a time, Murky.

Flipping the parchment, I quickly sketched my journal on the back corner. I would track my things to do in the day to avoid as much harm as I could. The journal was the signal to find and retrieve it. I placed a curved knife beside it, to go and find Wicked Slit and deal with that job. The last thing I needed was to be thrown in isolation for failing to complete a task.

Two tasks added to the parchment, I rolled it up and stuffed it inside my jerkin along with the device. Pulling the frayed cord tighter about my body, I ensured as best I could they wouldn't slip. If I lost my jerkin...

Shaking my head, I sat and for the remaining minutes tried to figure out why, despite an objective to go for and something to accomplish, I still didn't feel brave or heroic at all.

I was willing to bet the Stable Dweller never felt this way.

The ten minutes had passed. My resolve to begin acting for myself and seek what *I* wanted had not wavered. But as I crawled out into the reality of Fillydelphia, the safety of my drawings and wishes fell away to the cold and harsh weather through the normally stiflingly warm city. No, I was not brave, no doubt there would be tears, whining, and pain to go yet, but I held tightly in my mind the hope that it was all leading to an end soon, and that some time soon, it might be worth it in the end.

I shook, trying to work some feeling into my quickly numbing limbs before moving out. I could see the other slaves clustered together in corners, sharing body heat against the wind. A few, woken by my yelp of pain earlier, glared with hateful eyes at me, apparently jealous of my ability to fit into small places for warmth. The gangers in particular seemed to be looking at me with grim intentions. They had taken shelter in the ruins of the pig sty, the only remaining wall dragged around as a primitive wind break. Seeing it sparked a memory in my mind of being dragged along this very ground, chains around my legs as I watched the sketch of my mother disappear from view.

Whiplash wasn't nearby anymore, so I couldn't linger much longer. But as I harboured the quest to reclaim what was mine, a thought struck me. Those gangers had come back here after chasing me down last night, and I knew for a fact that no other slave would touch the spoils of their 'conquest' over me, lest they became the new target. So it stood to reason that those gangers knew what happened to the small sketchbook.

After a second, it occurred to me that perhaps standing and staring at them wasn't the greatest plan of mine thus far. The black-haired buck in particular was eyeing me up with murderous intent. His muzzle still looked swollen from where I had given it a good kick. Perhaps, though, if I played this right I might get a few clues.

"What do you think you're looking at, runt?"

"Nothing!" I answered as I turned my head away from them. "I... I just wanted to find my journal..."

"What?" The second buck looked around, before grinning. "That thing of yours? Oh don't worry, it went to a better cause, got some gooood swag for it on the slave market."

The what? I had never heard of such a thing in Fillydelphia, although it didn't sound impossible. Everywhere I'd been, slaves had traded things behind slaver backs, or sometimes even in direct view if the material was innocent enough. But a market? I didn't suppose it was impossible. After all, Master Red Eye wasn't stupid. Allowing the slaves a small area to trade their meagre belongings would go a long way towards keeping them in line.

"You wanting trouble? What you doing just standing there, runt? Looking for your head bucked in?"

I drew breath quickly, backing away and shaking my head. Oh please let them think I was just frozen in fear... please please please...

"Yeah, you better back off. Just wait, runt. Just wait till you've got no place to hide in at night," the mare threatened menacingly, spitting into the dirt. "After all, you're 'expendable' now, remember?"

I heard her sick laughter even as I turned and galloped out of the FunFarm, struggling not to show the terror on my face until they were out of sight.

It took me a good ten minutes to build up the courage to go back again. I wasn't done in the FunFarm, not at all. For as much as they terrified me, I wanted that journal. I *needed* that journal. The one thing that I had shown to myself—that I could break the chains on my own mind—was lost to me.

I had to reclaim it.

I had to see her again.

The pig sty had been located near the edge of the low scrap wall surrounding the petting zoo that marked our enclosure. My idea was to sneak back around and hide just opposite the gangers on the other side. If I kept low and crept, I could lie unnoticed and eavesdrop. I would often sneak around using my size to remain hidden behind small objects. I had once done it to steal food from my master in the rock farm.

Part of my mind, the one trying to push me to ignore this and go and do my slave duty before I was noticed, seemed to take sick pleasure in reminding me that 'Yeah, I did sneak out then. *I got caught.*' This was going to stretch my time thin. Being late to bring a message to Wicked Slit often meant being late getting back to your enclosure on account of having to limp the entire way.

Circling around the petting zoo while trying to calm my beating heart, I hid behind a small stall. What it once sold was indecipherable, or perhaps I just couldn't understand the words. Possibly both. My entire body was sweating from the effort it was taking to overcome my fear... but they were the only ones who held any clue as to where my journal had gone. I needed to listen for any clues they might let slip. Names, places, shifts; anything that might give me a lead.

The petting zoo wall was about twenty feet away across the blasted remains of what I guessed was a field where larger animals were kept in the FunFarm's heyday. No noise came from the other side and I could only occasionally see the top of one of their manes popping above the top of the wall. Made of scrap metal and rotting wood, it functioned only as a border. If they were to spot me, it would prove no obstacle and there was no humongous balefire phoenix to save me this time (not to mention I doubted I could survive another rad-burst like that). Gulping down fear, I put one shaking hoof in front of the other and began creeping forwards.

Every small step lit another part of my brain instructing me to turn around. The bleeding wound on my forehead from Whiplash's strike throbbed to remind me of what would happen if I weren't done on time. I blinked the dripping blood from my eyes, lowering my torso to the ground as I slid forward. Great Goddesses... if they only turned around they would see me, I would have to hide right up against the wall itself. Less than a foot from the ponies on the other side

It took every effort I could pitifully muster to not squeak in terror as I dragged my tired body forward, inch by painstaking inch, scooting carefully toward them. The harsh gravel pulled at my jerkin, leading me to take a few tense, heartstopping moments to pull it back into place and ensure the device was still held snugly inside. I couldn't lose my jerkin, not for anything.

Just a few feet to go. I could hear their voices, despite their hushed tones. They were discussing me and their sick pleasure at scaring me off. I trembled as I realised their threats were not idle should they ever get me alone. However, I couldn't stop. I had to be closer or they could simply turn around and see—

The mare turned.

I didn't have time to think. With a quick shuffle, I flung myself forward the last few feet and rolled on my side behind the wall, below her field of vision.

"The hell was that?"

I could hear her getting up and turning towards the wall. Panicking, I started trying to sneak as quietly as I could along the edge, keeping my mouth clamped shut to stop any fearful whimpering giving me away. Every small movement felt deafening to me; my heartbeat alone would be loud enough to hear, surely!

The mare's head peered over the wall behind me. I prayed deeply, 'Please don't look to the left, don't look to the left...'

"Anything?"

"Nah, radroach or some shit."

She moved away from the wall as I took the first breath in over a minute. Resting my head on the ground, I tried to ensure my staggered breathing wasn't too loud as I closed my eyes and shivered on the spot. I was in position. I could still hear them just over the wall.

"Swear, the moment I know I'm dying, I'm bringing that bastard overseer down with me."

It was the black-haired buck. I recognised the slight muffling on his words.

"Fuck that noise, only pony he's getting throttled by is me, Lemon."

That was the mare. But the brown and black buck was called *Lemon*? I... that didn't make any sense at all! Perhaps he dyed his mane. I'd occasionally wondered if I'd like that done, get rid of this murky (yeah, yeah...) colour and get something brighter like a light blonde. I listened to them complaining about who I guessed was a shift overseer from wherever they got sent each day. Apparently, this stallion was a pretty mean apple who delighted in giving gangs a hard time.

Briefly, I sent a little thanks in my thoughts to the overseer and wished him the best of luck in his future for the act.

"Eh, no matter," continued the mare. "You can get rid of your frustrations on the runt when he comes back. 'Ere, Lemon, after the food comes round? Get those hooves of yours into smashing that feed shed. Doubt Whiplash will complain, and it'll lose his only place to hide. I'd like to see how his raggedy little coat takes this wind chill when he ain't got nopony to bed up with. Even the other slaves avoid him, 'fraid we'll take em on!"

I had to bite my lip to stop myself from whimpering out loud as I felt tears well up in my eyes in abject terror. One way or another, I was going to be badly hurt by the end of the day, either from Whiplash, Wicked Slit, or the gang. Holding my head in my hooves, I wracked my brain to think of a way out of this. How could I avoid the beating? Thoughts were slow in coming, like some cogs in the machine of my brain just weren't there at all, never mind being slow. I wasn't brought up to make decisions or be decisive! I just... followed.

The Stable Dweller would know what to do here. I didn't.

That fact hurt. It hurt bad, because I knew that my day was taking an inevitable turn. No matter what, it would end in me returning here for punishment of some sort or another. The most I could do was steel myself against it.

Yeah. Me. Steeling myself. What a joke; I'd probably just cry and beg, like I always did.

"Hey, you got that Wingboner magazine there, Noose?"

"Yeah!" the mare I now knew as Noose lashed back, her voice savage and filled with possessiveness. "I'm not done with it yet!"

"You've had it since we got back from the damn market!" Lemon threw back, "C'mon!"

I've never seen them pegasi like that before!"

"Then you'll wait your turn to read it," Noose spat. "All they're good for these days is sitting on clouds and being pictures in old magazines for our benefit, so I'm gonna enjoy it as long as I damn well want!"

"Like you could ever enjoy anything like that for 'long,' Noose."

I heard a curse screamed incoherently before what seemed to be a small pony-on-pony brawl broke out between them. The sound of them scuffling on the ground, swearing colourfully and beating one another around reminded me all too much of the sounds I had heard in the Pit. Well, at least at first. I sighed about the hatred of the pegasi. No pegasus could ever walk the wastes without being hunted now. The slave in me understood the feeling all too well.

I heard the remaining, yet unknown by name, buck reach forward as the others fought and pick up what sounded like a magazine, muttering something to himself about 'those two weirdos...' before shuffling around.

"While you two mess about, I'll take this."

I heard him pick up the magazine.

"Little runt's pictures of mares were just shit anyway."

I felt offended! I'd always thought they were pretty nice looking!

Deciding to trust the mare from yesterday's judgement more than this ganger's, I kept listening.

"Least Sooty was willing to give us this in exchange for it and a couple caps... heh," he muttered, before leaving a silence. "Ah, not like you two fuckers are even listening..."

That was it! Elation flew through my mind; I had a name to who now owned my journal! The slave in my head came to the surface once again, mentally waving a clock at me and trying to drag me away from the wall. Finally, I could obey and get back to normal. It was time to leave, to go and find Wic—

The pair tumbled against the wall just beside me in their exertions.

I didn't expect it. I squeaked loudly.

"Hey! Noise again!"

"What? I thought that was you."

"Screw you! I don't make sissy runt noises!"

I heard the three of them scrambling to their hooves. There was nothing else for it. I upped and galloped around the wall, hugging it closely. Behind me, shouts and more foul mouthed curses as they heard me take off. The wall shook as they climbed it. I didn't even look back as I turned the corner of the wall, going for all I was worth to find a hiding place before they got over the wall and came after me. I could only pray they hadn't identified me.

Ahead, I saw nothing but road. I tried not to curse out loud (after the gangers, I almost didn't want to swear again) as it gave me nothing but flat ground. Hooves on gravel sounded behind me as the gangers began to come around the wall. For one of the few times I thanked my height. If I had been a normal-sized pony the wall wouldn't have hid me at all while running. I made for the road anyway, what else could I do? The hard surface and my hooves while galloping were hardly quiet, but little choice remained. So long as I could reach the other side...

My sprained front leg clearly thought otherwise.

A clenching pain burst through it, the hoof stomp from the crushing under the slaves yesterday made its presence known again through the mass of bruises and pains I had as it

felt my hooves landing on solid asphalt repeatedly. I fell with a cry of pain, going head over hooves to collapse off the side of the road and down the embankment, the pain in my leg throbbing wildly. I could run no more. Yesterday's exertions had caught up to me through my wounds.

"I heard them fall off over there! They're over the road!"

Noose's vile tongue echoed between the ruined buildings as I lay in the blackened gravel at the side of the road. A foul stench was in my nostrils, making me gag as I lay, awaiting them to appear over the top and do whatever it was they were wanting to do. No phoenix to come to my aid now, and I highly doubted Number Six was going to stop doing his own things to come out and rescue me. Sweet Celestia, that smell was horri—

It was a sewer drain under the road.

I blinked and stared at the small entrance, dripping with mould and slimy substances. Immediately, I knew how I was meant to survive this.

I didn't like it one bit.

The sound of Noose's hooves coming closer reminded me that I disliked dying even more.

Crawling with three hooves, I pulled myself along the ground, smearing over the exuded gel-like liquid coming out of the drain. There was no way this wasn't going to be highly radioactive or filled with disease. But at this point, I doubted my life expectancy would really be worth worrying about. Trying not to breathe, I pulled myself into the small tubular drain and curled up inside it, feeling wet mushy material squelch beneath me.

The gangers ran over the road, their hooves sending echoes down into the drain as they leapt above the entrance. I stared upon them from behind as they stopped and looked around. I had never noticed this drain until I had been lying down randomly from falling. Surely they'd never notice—

"What's that smell?"

Oh, come on!

They paused, looking around and wandering past the drain a few times, muttering about the smell it was making. They couldn't miss the entrance, but if they thought to look inside...

"Eh... forget it. Whoever that was, he's long gone."

"Unless they hid in the drain?"

I froze, every muscle tensing up, my foreleg aching from the injury all the more. I could feel my sickness building, the stench and tension in my stomach wanting to make me cough again.

"The hell? Only that filthy little runt would do that, and he's way too scared of us to eavesdrop. Just come on, I don't want that bastard Whiplash giving me another doing."

I heard them wander off, the buck who had offered to check the drain reluctantly trotting after them. With relief I pulled myself from the drain. With a hideous sucking noise, my hindlegs came free from the smelly slime that composed of the bottom of the pipe, letting me wade through the damp muck surrounding the entrance. I fought the urge to vomit as I let out the rasping cough that I had somehow held in. Checking myself over once again, I felt the radsore on my back left leg stinging and burning from the rubbing on the ground. I was coated in the drainage gunk—my jerkin was damp as well—I didn't even want to identify what was clinging over my cutie mark.

I just wanted to stop. To go into the building to throw up and just lie down, to let myself just... expire for the day. Or forever. But instinct, for all the Stable Dweller's inspiration,

still existed in my mind. I pulled my jerkin tighter, made sure the radio was still intact, and set about being a slave.

What a pathetic little sight I was after that. Just a small pony limping slowly down the roads in the howling cold wind, with a yelp of pain on every step of his front left hoof. A pony covered in the stinking slew of a drain. A pony stopping only to let a hacking cough out from my radiation sickness. A pony... a slave... carrying on walking to his eternal place of work to no doubt be hurt more, with nothing more than a promise of pain on his shifts end.

I couldn't take this...

Not any more...

I needed something to give me hope, more than just the scrawls on a piece of parchment. That journal had to be mine again, to see my mother once more. Those pages had come to mean freedom in some way.

I silently pleaded to the Goddesses, praying that I was right. That by doing something for myself I might finally break the chains and have the courage to do something more.

Something greater.

To follow *her*.

Choking down the pain, I carried on.

Waking up Wicked Slit went much as expected.

Even a pained, exhausted, and dizzy pony like me could muster enough strength to high-tail it out of her scrap-built hut at high speed. Especially when I saw a huge knife like that being magically lifted with great purpose from the dresser beside her bed.

Lacking any support from her guards to wake the overseer, I had been reduced to simply prodding her with a hoof. From as far away as I could. While getting ready to run.

I'd had time to blurt out 'Slaves late, one extra, I'm back' before I'd seen the awoken fury in her eyes and immediately scampered for the door. My mind caught up with me, only now realising that there had been another lump under the dirty covers beside her. Oh this wasn't going to be good at all. Not only had I woken Slit, I had woken her up while sleeping off—

Actually, I didn't want to think on that one too hard.

Diving out her doorway, I stumbled down the metal stairs leading to the second floor workers' quarters she inhabited, falling onto the broken concrete road outside. I saw Wicked Slit scramble to the door, teeth bared and a bed-mane sitting messily about her head.

"Murky Number Seven! I am going to make you wish you'd never been born!"

I fought the temptation to shout back 'Agreed!' as I got to my hooves and galloped for the gateway out of the factory. All around me, ponies working with the magical auto axes were tearing hunks of metal into fragments for the melting pots. They glanced up in curiosity at the sight of me diving madly from their overseers hut.

"I am going to fuck you up so badly, Murk! You get back in here right now! Close the gate!"

To my horror, the guards outside reacted with enough speed to slam the door shut in my face. I hit the thick metal just hard enough to come off of all fours and fall to the floor with a groan. As I turned to look behind me, I could swear some of the slaves were trying not to

giggle at the misheard context of her last sentence. Wicked Slit advanced, devoid of clothing but still carrying that knife magically in the air beside her. I closed my eyes, half-expecting the knife to descend. Instead I just heard the sound of magic as she dragged me by the tail back toward her hut with her own telekinesis.

“I swear, I’m going to strap you down to stop you running away someday, you spineless wretch.”

I saw some slaves snort in laughter... and some of the guards. I facehoofed, even through my fear. I could almost hear the rumours already.

“Now get in here, I’m not done with you.”

She telekinetically hurled me inside, shooed the buck from the bed out, and slammed the door as I heard the entire work yard roar with laughter.

I sat meekly in the middle of the floor as Wicked Slit paced across to her small desk. Sitting on a cushion behind it, she glared at me before slamming the knife point down into the floor a few inches from me. Wrinkling her nose, Slit made sure to keep me some distance from her desk.

“I’m not even going to ask why you’re covered in shit, Murk. Alright, you’ve got five seconds to explain why you woke me... and why you had to do it with a hoof that’s been in some latrine somewhere.”

I wasn’t going to waste them.

“Uh... uh... Whiplash! He says the slaves will be late because they’re all messed up and stuff but... um... you get an extra one!” I tried to smile. “And it’s me, M-Ma’am!”

Someday, I was going to learn that smiling was not something that would help with Wicked Slit. Why, oh why, couldn’t I learn to just nod and shake my head again? Breaking the instinct that had kept me chained all these years was not without its consequences...

If Wicked Slit was ‘mollified’ in the slightest by the news that she had me back, she didn’t show it.

“So...” she said, her knife plucking out of the ground and lightly stabbing the wooden floor in a circle around me, tapping incessantly. “Basically... you’re saying I’m screwed for work efficiency?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Well, maybe not screwed, Ma’am...”

“So you have an idea on how to cover for three lost slaves and my replacement being the most pathetic slave in Filly? Or do you have any talents other than becoming the worst smelling slave in Fillydelphia? Seriously, where have you been today?”

If I had any real pride about my life as a slave, that would hurt. Born to be a slave and given the cutie mark to lock me into it forever... and I was even bad at that. Ouch.

“Well...”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“...perhaps there’s another way?”

Oh, why was I even trying this...

“Do tell, Murk.”

Her voice held no promise of her actually listening. Judging by how the knife missed my tail by a scant inch, she clearly was just drawing this out in anger.

"Perhaps... perhaps..." I searched my mind for anything. "Perhaps one of the machines could be fixed to do the work of three? Like... get the parts and put it all together so you work better than ever? I mean... um... Ma'am."

I was proud. The machines in Fillydelphia were still in the process of repair, many didn't work at all, hence the need for such huge numbers of slaves to often manually operate them on giant treadmills or turnwheels. The war had not been kind to the more complex machinery the ponies of Old Equestria had cooked up.

Wicked Slit's expression changed only from fury-filled rage to abject annoyance.

"And what makes you think, Murk, that we haven't done all of that already? Do you think we are idiots, Murk? Do you think Great Red Eye is a fool who doesn't know when a machine cannot be fixed?"

I saw the traps waiting for me. Years under slavers had taught me that much. Don't argue back, go with the flow and make your point.

"No!" I cried out. "Master Red Eye is very wise... but I think I may know... know..."

What did I know? The knife was even closer to me.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I begged myself to think harder, reaching into every random idea I could.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Yet, I had nothing, I lowered my head as the knife rose up...

"Thought so," she muttered, lowering her head, that horrid cracked horn sparkling wildly as she moved the knife in front of me. "Now you have disturbed me... for bad news, waking me up and bringing nothing but crap to my desk again. In this case, literally."

I fought to not wail in fear as she spoke, her knife floating out in front of me, point down.

"Hold out your hoof, Murk."

I had bitten off more than I could chew here. I should have just kept my mouth shut, accepted the beating, and moved on to get my second beating on returning to the FunFarm. I shivered, my hoof not moving as I locked up, whimpering.

"Hold out your hoof!"

I yelped, fear escaping as I felt my eyes cry, as always. Wicked Slit only looked at me crying, swore to herself and stomped out, screaming into my ear with enough volume to cause me to scream in aural pain.

"HOLD OUT YOUR HOOF, SLAVE!"

Instinct kicked in. My master demanded, I obeyed. My hoof shot out, holding shakily under the knife as I saw it rise up. I shut my eyes.

Yet then, I heard a voice. A voice so quiet from under my jerkin that only I would notice.

"Welcome back, wastelanders! DJ-Pon-Three here with your daily tip of the day! Now remember what I said about scavenging? No? It's the same thing I always say. It's safer to trade than it is to search, ponies. Yes, yes, I know, you'll be paying something—

Eyes clenched shut, I heard her magic begin to spark to move the knife down.

"—but it's better than paying with your life! Remember, kiddies, trade is what helps everyone in the end. Just be prepared for a hagggle, y'here? So visit those markets, you never know what others have dug up!"

"The slave market!" I screamed. "THE SLAVE MARKET!"

The knife stopped. I drew a breath, my eyes opening as I saw the knife midway to my hoof. I didn't dare move it...

"What, Murk?"

"The... the slave market, Ma'am! Perhaps they've got something... something they found and hid!"

Wicked Slit paused, the knife spinning on the spot (did she *ever* stop moving it?) as she clearly thought this over, before glaring back at me, the tip of her knife lifting my chin up.

"Listen here, Murky Number Seven."

Listening! Very much listening!

"You know where the market is?"

I couldn't shake my head, "Um... no?"

Wicked Slit sighed, letting the knife go from my throat and embedding it in the desk a few times instead. It glinted from the small magically powered gem light on the roof each time it came down.

"The old terminal building at the pegasi chariot skyport. There's another slave enclosure in the baggage handling and waiting rooms for the slaves that deserve a roof. They think they're subtle, but we know all about them, Murk. Red Eye isn't blind. We just let them do it because it's just all pictures of mares, rotten food we don't want, and ragged clothing. Sometimes they get something valuable, but really... the advantage of them keeping the slaves down there in line is worth it. But perhaps you can be of some use..."

I didn't like where this was going.

"Go there, Murk. Now. You come back with parts to fix either a machine press control panel or a conveyor belt engine and I'll let you keep your hoof intact. Use however you want to get them. Beg, trade, or steal... but don't you show your face around here again until you have them, understand?"

Not entirely. How I was going to convince anyone to give up valuable parts was beyond me, but it was better than an eighteen-inch knife in my hoof. I nodded, taking the slim cue to get the hell out of here. I got to my hooves, limping away toward the door.

"Oh, and Murk?"

Oh, here we go again... I turned to look back at her, trembling.

"Y-yes, Ma'am?"

"You interrupted my sleep for some very shitty news, don't you have something, anything good to say before you go?"

She was fishing for an excuse to hurt me. I could see it. I looked around for inspiration, yet found absolutely nothing. My eyes fell back to Wicked Slit, standing there near her bed, mane hair fluffed out madly from being woken suddenly.

"I... really like your... mane?" I squeaked.

I only barely managed to dive out the door and tumble down the steps as the knife embedded itself in the door frame with enough force to puncture out to the other side of the hut.

Entering another slave master's enclosure was not particularly difficult for a slave. After all, if you were indeed a runaway, you'd be missed at roll call each morning anyway, so they had no real objection to a slave without a shift wandering into their territory. The fact that most of Fillydelphia was still confused and recovering from the slave riots only harried Red Eye's force's efforts to control the exact location of each individual within the Wall.

Besides, I had Wicked Slit's approval to be here now, if no way to really show it. If confronted, I had to hope that her name carried enough weight to permit me access or avoid the guards simply throwing me out the door again. If that happened, suddenly this would have to become a lot more covert than before. There was *no* way in Equestria I was returning to Wicked Slit empty hoofed. I *liked* having four functional legs.

As I trotted over the concrete expanse of the airfield, I winced in pain as my injured front leg caught one of the many cracks and small fissures. I fell back onto my rump, rubbing the fetlock gingerly.

Okay, three and a half functional legs.

Ahead of me was the expanse of the pegasus chariot airbase. Pegasi didn't need a runway, of course, but some of the larger sky wagons of the past had clearly needed a little space for them to reach some momentum. Strewn across the field were the mangled and blackened wrecks of every type of chariot imaginable, from small personal transports, to huge antique flying skytanks, and well as everything in between. Many were jumbled into one colossal pile of twisted scrap on the eastern edge of the airfield, the opposite side from the crater. Their light materials had simply been blasted away by the force of the Zebra megaspell to become a small mountain of metal against the walls of the hangers that lined the eastern border. Briefly, I imagined what it might be like to fly with one of them tied behind you. I kept an eye on the vehicles, tightening my jerkin. Even as I watched, slaves picked over them. They sought small components, magic spark matrix gems, or cut the fuselages apart with those ever-whining auto axes. No matter where I went in Fillydelphia I could spot or at least hear them in the background.

If I ever got out of here, a silent night would be the first thing I would desire.

Red Eye had not let the airfield go unused. Much of the forces stationed in Fillydelphia used it as a makeshift arrangement ground. In between the wrecks, teams of his army checked weapons or stood ready for instructions on their next task. I suspected they mostly lived in the masses of buildings nearby that used to belong to the residents of Fillydelphia. I always wondered how they dealt with that, sleeping in rotten beds that had once contained somepony's entire life and sense of safety before the megaspells. How could anypony stay sane invading such a sacred place of memories? The FunFarm had been bad enough, but a pony's own home?

A memory sparked, I remembered the first time one of my Masters had sent me scavenging in an abandoned farmhouse. Inside there had been bones, two sets of them, huddled together on their bed with limbs curled around one another for reassurance. The wall had been facing a balefire crater. I imagined them lying there, trembling and saying their last assurances of love as sirens blared and the world ended around them, before the terrible force of the megaspell surged through their home...

In the next room I had found another skeleton, even smaller than I, alone in a cot surrounded by foal's toys.

I cried a lot in life. But that day I had done so more than most. To be standing there, alive and lost in a far-flung, ruined future, seeing the preserved horror of the moment that Equestria had died simply broke me. It had taken my master himself to come in and find me huddled up in the corner. I had been clutching a little woollen doll that had somehow survived, as though it would somehow help relieve the pain.

I kinda missed that doll. Aside from my mother, it had been the only thing I'd ever hugged.

Shaking my head, I let my eyes traverse toward the airfield's terminal and away from the homes of Fillydelphia. One farm had been bad enough. To linger on the hundreds of households holding all sorts of memories would probably drive me insane if I stopped to think about it. Getting to my hooves, I began the journey to the entrance from the runways.

The terminal was a strange building. Most huge public buildings I had witnessed tended to try and be somewhat fancy or stand out. I had once glimpsed Tenpony Tower whilst being dragged through Manehattan toward my next master. The colossal building had struck me as rather pretty, as though some of its elegance had survived the bombs. The terminal, however, was somewhat more hardened.

Pillars supported a flat-topped dome in a slight throwback to the architecture the pegasi of old used to have in their cloud cities. A book my mother had once called an ensico... ensiclo...

Ah, forget it, I couldn't remember. Some big book with lots of pictures about the old world. She had pointed out the cloud cities to me, wishing I could be up there and safe instead of down here in the muddy ruin like all wasteland-born ponies.

But this terminal had none of the light and gentle flair of the cloud buildings. It was built from heavy concrete and inlaid with hard steel panels or angular decorations, the same as the rest of the new age buildings in Fillydelphia. I saw more loading bays for materials than I did areas for passengers. It matched the city's tone even now, clearly intended be functional and affordable in the face of a city that had become the centre of materials industry in Equestria. Empty frames where enormous windows might once have sat dominated the level above the goods entrances. Only the barest roots of pegasi architecture were present with indented lines showing what might have once been columns, save for a single mural above the main entrance from the airstrips bearing a motif of six ponies.

Including that accursed pink pony.

Someday, I was going to escape her gaze. She was even glaring right at me off the mural!

The size was deceptive, what I took for a small mural above a door simply kept growing as I crossed the wreck-filled fields toward it. By the time I neared the terminal, the reason it had stood from the balefire was obvious. Whoever built this had built it to last. The pillars were a good six feet thick, and the entire building was made of huge concrete blocks, now coated in sprays of graffiti from two hundred years of abuse. No wonder it showed little real exterior damage.

As I moved inside the entrance—noting the guards who watched me warily growing in number from the mostly empty airfield—I had a sense that it would also make getting out a hell of a lot tougher than getting in, should I need to leave in a hurry. Concrete wasn't well known for little gaps I could squeeze through to escape.

"Oi! What're you doing here?"

Twenty feet from the main door, the buck's voice rang out just as I approached the gateway into the slave enclosure. It encompassed an entire wing of the terminal building, barricaded off by a huge wall of piled up scrap and metal sheets. I could only presume the slave market was beyond it, somewhere Red Eye would be happy for it to function where they could keep an eye on it.

Even as I approached, timidly trotting, the voice made me stop dead. I looked to the

right and left, but saw no pony at all.

“Oh you... up here!”

I backed off, tilting my head upwards toward the interior scrap barricade and spotting a slave with broken shackles stuck on each hoof glancing down at me. Tall and lanky, he attempted an indignant look as he stomped a hoof on the scrap in annoyance.

“I know every slave around here, I do!” he shouted. I could only presume the act was to try and make him seem intimidating. Well, I had seen a pony beat almost half a dozen to death with his bare hooves yesterday and had a crazed mare try to impale my hoof earlier. This slave didn’t exactly rank too highly on the ‘Murky Scale of Run the Hell Away.’

“So if you ain’t a slave from here, then you’s here for the market, ain’t you?”

Well, not exactly arcane science.

The buck’s face twisted at my general look of confusion and wonderment, lacking the reaction he presumably wanted. At this point, there were greater things in my life threatening my health than this weedy-looking slave. All the same, I allowed him a brief glance of worry... he clearly had a modicum of authority to be up there. Best to play it safe as per usual.

He stomped a hoof even harder, seeking a reaction as he snarled... and promptly screamed. His hoof dislodged the scrap beneath him. With a horrid creaking sound, the entire top layer of the barricade came crashing down, the buck tumbling over it all. Squeaking in shock at the sharp metal barrelling toward me I dived to the side before feeling the buck collapse onto me from above. The impact led to me crying out in agony as my still damaged ribs and masses of bruises were struck. The pair of us rolled to the side as I felt a horrid tug on my jerkin before collapsing to the ground with a solid thud.

Vision hazy from pain, I tried to wrench my pained body up. Exhaustion was kicking in once again from sickness, malnourishment, and the lack of any decent sleep. Perhaps I should just stay down for a few minutes, at least until the spiking lance of pain on my side went away. I could pick up my radio device from over there later...

Wait!

With a shout of effort that ended in a spluttering and bloody cough, I dragged my body inch by inch toward the device. I needed to hide it! I felt panic rising as the buck began to rise on the other side, shaking his head from the fall. I just... couldn’t... move...

My hoof limply flopped down just short of the device by the time he picked it up. I lay flat, feeling my body beginning to fail. A month had been optimistic. I doubted I could last, well... long at all, really. I could barely stand until the pain had died down.

“Tho wuth thith hen?” the buck spoke as he held the device in his mouth, leering down at me. An earth pony, he was almost as dirty looking as myself, with a dull orange mane and a coat that could only be described as the colour of vomit. This included the specks and lumps made instead of boils and scabs from the sickness that pervaded Fillydelphia.

“N-nothing!” I shouted as best I could, reaching a hoof up, “It’s nothing! Just a bit of old scrap I... I wanted to trade with!”

The buck spat out the device to the side before stepping on it with a hoof to keep it still.

“So you want into the slave market, huh?” he said slyly, inclining his head toward me.

“Yes... please?”

He rolled his eyes and gave me a nudge with his hoof to get up. With a grunt of exertion I obeyed, before almost collapsing again as I spluttered and choked on a dry cough. The buck backed off quickly as he saw the light splatters of blood on the ground.

"Aaah... so you're after medicine, I see," he muttered, before laughing and kicking the device just behind him, "well I guess you'll have to submit to a search when you go in and come back out."

"Oh and of course..." he added, "pay the fee to get in. This isn't your enclosure."

Wiping my mouth with a hoof to clear the blood, cringing as I remembered the sewer pipe, I shook my head.

"I don't have anything to give..."

The buck tapped the device with his back hoof lightly.

"Not any more."

Oh no... no way! That device was the only thing that kept me going! I was living on borrowed time with a sickness and untreated wounds that were eating away at me. The dried blood on my scalp still stung as much as my near-broken hoof from yesterday ached. All the while my lungs felt ready to pop out my mouth on my next cough. Without that device constantly broadcasting, I... I didn't think I could have made it without the hope it gave me.

The hope that I could do something worthwhile, before I succumbed in here.

"No!"

I shouted, stumbling forward to try and grab the device, only for the buck to simply knock it out of the way again with a hoof. This was like a child trying to get something away from an older sibling. If I'd been healthier, I knew I could have been more agile. But in this state I was just a little weakling pawing at him, as small as he was, too.

"Oh no, no, noooo..." he cooed, "you gotta pay the fee to get in, or you's doesn't get any trading!"

"I... I need it!" I screamed as I tried to duck around him, slipping and falling each time. I fought back the urge to cry... not in front of this pony. I had been shot at, put in the Pit (well... kinda), and survived a riot. I was not going to cry in front of this little slave! I wasn't! I... I...

I couldn't get it back...

I stepped back after my last desperate grab for the device, strength leaving me as my stamina failed.

"There we go, accept that this is mine, and you can go in," he sneered, "and get me something on the way out if you want to pass this border again. Red Eye doesn't care what we do, so long as we don't have any items he wants in our enclosure or that get in the way of our work shifts. So this is *our* job and right to claim!"

I stomped a hoof and shook my head in frustration. The buck was right. I'd been so damn close. Not only was I having to risk everything for Slit, now I was losing my radio device hoofmachine thingy in the process. As I dejectedly turned, another buck's voice rang out. This one less nasal as the first buck, but filled with a curious tone.

"Hey... what's goin' on with that midget out there?" said the second buck as he trotted out. This one was almost as short as I was, but a lot more thickly set.

Figures, I thought, that the tall and skinny one, and the short and stubby one would be together. There seemed to be one pair like this in every slave farm I'd been to in my entire life. Perhaps every generation had their own in Equestria. Only briefly, it occurred to me that myself and Number Six had been almost the same thing for a short time.

"Little slave here wanted into the market, I was just taking this as the payment."

They continued to talk, boast, and snigger amongst themselves. But even as I cowered

slightly further away, trying to tear my eyes from the radio device, a thought entered my head. I had one ace left up my jerkin's sleeve. I began pulling out the parchment and quill, before taking the quill and pretending to write something. The obnoxious slave pair finally noticed me.

"Hey! What're you doing?"

I looked up, spitting out the quill briefly.

"Oh, me?" I began. "I... I'm just taking your names down. Wicked Slit will want to know who stopped her messenger getting in."

To their credit, they hid the look of stark terror well after the first three seconds. The skinny one grinned.

"Hah! You don't know our names!"

"Yeah," interjected the smaller buck, "you ain't got nuthin' on us! We're not gonna tell you our names... are we?"

The smaller one glanced up at his colleague before receiving a clip around the ear with a hoof. Damn, they weren't completely hopeless. However, for once in my life I felt like I had an advantage here. I could do this without resorting to violence from Wicked Slit or by having to break rules. Call me crazy, but hearing the device playing Velvet's music seemed to clear my terrified and conflicted thoughts just enough for me to know what to say to get by them.

"I'm afraid you have to," I continued, nudging the quill and motioning with my eyes toward the skinny one, "what is your name, so Wicked Slit can find you and gut you?"

The stubby one looked a little panicky at the mentioning of gutting. He stepped from hoof to hoof with nerves as I spoke before blurting out to his comrade.

"D-don't tell him, Pike! I don't want to be gutted!"

Aha! Success!

"You idiot," screamed the taller one, batting the shorter around the head with his hoof, "what did you tell him that for!?"

"I..." the buck stopped as his comrade's hoof belted him across the face a few times, "I didn't mean to, Pike—"

"Stop it!"

"Sorry, Pike."

"STOP IT, COSH, YOU BLABBERING IDIOT!"

I couldn't resist.

"Pike and Cosh..." I muttered, "right, I'll report that you barred me entry..."

The pair turned from screaming at one another to glare at me. For a second I was afraid they'd simply try and attack me... but it seems they figured that Slit would want to know where her 'agent' had gone. They simply shoved the device back to me and stood aside without another word to allow me through. I'd done it. Okay, they weren't particularly intelligent foes, but I had managed to pass without any beatings or injury!

As I retrieved the radio, a happy little note of Velvet's struck a high pitch in my ear from the small speaker, making me smile as I trotted into the enclosure, the volume too low for any but I to detect. With a silent thank you I tucked it back under my jerkin, pulling it back over quickly.

That little device had been meant to guide me. I knew it.

I had envisioned a bustling market of slaves in an enclosure under the watchful eye of guards and slave masters. What I saw was entirely different.

Set among the waiting room where passengers in the past would have sat to await their pegasi transports, the slave enclosure had few boundaries and a lot of slaves simply lying on the floor. What envy I had for them having four walls and a solid roof quickly evaporated as I witnessed the bare stone they had to sleep on in here. At least the FunFarm Petting Zoo had dirt...

The ponies looked like they were sore on one side, presumably from lying on the hard surface for so long each night. The old areas where seating cushions might have sat were long gone, leaving only sharp metal fixtures in their place. Rows of chairs littered the floor, punctuated by empty rigs on the ceiling that may once have held flight times. The displays had been removed; I'd seen them once having in a factory and used for shift work instead. One remained, however, broken and shattered in the middle of the great hall, where it had fallen long ago.

Around the edge of the walls were shop fronts, their windows and walls blown in or stripped out for Master Red Eye's industry. Gift stores, arcane technology and food outlets were visible by their symbols, but these days they held something else. In those broken shops lurked what I was searching for. Three of them were on this side of the waiting room. Through some arches I could see a few more, one boarded up and the other two bearing another couple of 'merchants.' At the back of the room was a set of still escalators that led to the sky deck. That would have been the place I'd seen from the outside with enormous windows over-viewing the runways and, presumably, leading further into the facility.

The slave market was definitely not how I had imagined it. There was a stillness. It occurred to me that the crowded rush I had expected was born only of my brief time hearing about Tenpony Tower in the past. Here, slaves simply had nothing *to* trade except in rare cases. I could see the 'traders' lying down like any other slave next to their wares. I wondered how they didn't have it all stolen when they were called to a work shift. Perhaps they were all pretty dangerous and beat anyone who dared take goods.

There were about six of them. Most didn't seem to specialise, simply having whatever they could scavenge instead. I didn't imagine any valuable goods would be on display where the slavers could see and confiscate them. Five of them followed this pattern, rough-looking slaves with more rags than the others, patched into warmer and tougher clothing to protect themselves.

They seemed better fed too. Three mares and two bucks made up their numbers, and there seemed to be at least one 'guard' nearby to each shop as well, also a slave. Red Eye's guards were beside me at the entrance, clearly more for a presence inside than any real purpose. A sixth merchant caught my eye though... a unicorn with an old saddlebag bearing the image of three butterflies in a yellow and pink pattern. I knew that design. I'd seen it before in the bathroom of the home I'd been forced to search years ago.

It meant medicine!

Even my journal could wait, if it meant I got to see if the unicorn could get me something. Or better yet, heal me!

I trotted as fast as I dared on my now-wobbly leg through the arches into the second half of the waiting room. Dejected ponies lay on the ground around me, watching me with hazy and hopeless eyes as I moved toward the healer. Many moved away from me, hobbling lazily

dragging themselves over the ground on weary legs. At first I presumed this was due to my sick appearance but after a quick sniff... it was probably due to the fact I was still reeking of drainage. Well, bartering was going to be fun while smelling like a latrine.

All the same, the slaves backing away from me only served to remind me I was in dangerous territory here. Slaves were opportunistic. If any of them thought of a reason to bring me down, they would. I was alone. Nopony was waiting in the wings to save me now. Fear bit at my mind and gnawed at my determination to achieve my aims and get my journal back. Was it worth risking dying for a few scraps of paper I never even really looked at?

The unicorn healer seemed to regard me with some distaste as I approached, his eyes following my clearly sick self right up to looking down his own nose at me past a small set of glasses. His cutie mark didn't fill me with great confidence... a bonesaw.

"I... uh... heard you can get healing here," I hardly even knew what to ask for, "could I be healed?"

Fairly basic, but what else could I ask for? I certainly didn't know exactly what was wrong with me and if I started listing everything we'd be here till the end of time. The healer snorted, spitting to the side and moving around me as his horn flared into being.

"Check up is free, shrimp," he began muttering as his glowing horn flickered to and fro across my body, "but the healing costs. What you got to trade?"

I sighed, my head drooping. Just typical... healing equipment away from assigned medical facilities would be rare and valuable to slaves, but healing magic was hardly a finite resource to a *unicorn*. Yet he still charged? That just wasn't fair! As he trotted around to look me in the eye and cock his head, awaiting the offer, I could only lower my head again and shake it.

"So, just another sick little slave who thinks I give out everything for free just because I'm medically trained. What did you honestly expect? It's a buyer's market among slaves these days. Only reason I'm not drafted to heal his army is because I've not got any stamina for this at all. I can only do one pony a day with magic and still have enough left in me to work my shift."

He eyed me up, eyebrows narrowing.

"And here you think I'm going to waste that on you?"

"Please... isn't there anything?" I couldn't hide the shaking fear in my voice as I was forced to admit the truth. "I... I think I'm dying, sir... please..."

"You certainly are."

My heart skipped a beat, I'd had theories, but to hear it straight from him was chilling. I felt my eyes beginning to well up as I stared at the healer. He just tossed his mane and sighed, turning away to his inventory in a bag. I could see little orange packs and small bottles of sloshing liquid alongside a few syringes. Why did the slavers allow this? For a second my heart leapt, until he simply sat on them instead of fetching anything, crossed his hooves and fixed me with a stare through his glasses.

"You have an irradiated lung infection on top of some pretty severe radiation poisoning, kid. Throw on top of that a minor taint mutation—that'd explain the ear—and a high level of toxin in your general respiratory systems from Filly's oh-so-lovely smog. Not so uncommon around here, I get about a dozen or so a week who want healing without anything to trade. For you? Well, the taint isn't curable, that's a given. But the radiation poisoning and the rest? It'd take about five RadAways and a few healing potions with a

charge of magic to save your life. As you might imagine, I'm not about to give them away from free. You can wander off and die in your sleep like all the rest who want handouts."

I felt my hooves going weak, I had to lie down to avoid collapsing.

"A pony in good health might survive a week or so with all this. But you've got multiple barely healed lacerations, bruises everywhere, acute radsors on your leg and face, a sprained front leg and bruised ribs. Couldn't see how many, that jerkin got in the way of checking. With all that? I'd say you've got perhaps a few days time out there in the smog. Hell, you might drop off any night at this rate."

I was trembling, wet dots appearing on the ground in front of me. My raspy breathing led to a few coughs as I attempted to keep my emotions in check. I... I was dying. There it was, right there. The confirmation that my time was up.

I could barely believe it. Yesterday morning I was ready to accept this happening any day... but now after being shown what was truly possible with life I didn't want it to happen... In its own way, this was worse than the Pit. At least there I could have run away or tried fighting back! It wouldn't have saved me, but that feeling of resistance was a small, if important, comfort.

But sickness... I couldn't get around that.

"Please!" I was whining, but I could barely help it. "You must want something! I... I'll do anything!"

I reached my hooves forward to his, only for him to pull them back in disgust and scowl.

"Get off, you irradiated little shit!" he screamed, moving away from me and zipping his bag closed. He made to turn away, before stopping and looking back, a different glow in his eyes as he looked up.

"Actually... anything, you say?"

I didn't like his tone. Not one bit. But I still nodded.

"Well, how'd you like to earn your healing?"

I hardly had a choice. I nodded again.

I walked away from his booth in a fearful mindset.

I had stolen before, but I wasn't sure if I could do *this*. I had stolen to *survive* before, but this was taking somepony else's property for another pony's gain.

But really... wasn't this stealing to survive too?

He had asked me to knock out his competitor across the hall. An earth pony buck who sold a couple of illegally hidden medical items to some slaves for lower prices... thus taking business away from the healer himself. The healer (I really had to learn to get the names of the ponies I dealt with) had said he'd give me one medical item for every two items I stole from his competitor. I had no idea how that would be possible. The earth pony looked hard; tall and strong with an equally big guard sitting watchfully nearby. Clearly he was confident... I could see the items all laid out on his table. Bits of rags, bandages, small bottles of dirty water and oatmeal stored in plastic tubs from past dinners. He even had a thick brown sketchbook that looked a lot like my...

...oh sweet Celestia!

I ignored the pains of my protesting body as I full out galloped to his stall so fast that his bodyguard snapped up, ready to defend his charge. I didn't care, I ducked around him and

grabbed the journal in my hooves, hugging it tight. It was mine! I recognised the feel, the size, and even the smell. As fast as I had it in my hooves, it left me as the bodyguard's magic yanked it from my grasp roughly and held it above me. The merchant, seemingly not having been ruffled at all, rounded with a sly grin and approached. Tossing his braided grey mane, he leaned on the counter to look down at me. He spoke with a high voice, his accent similar to Number Six, if a little more flighty.

"Well well well... eager for that little bit of merchandise there, aren't ya laddie?"

"It's mine! It was stolen from me! I just want it back, please..."

Somehow I doubted my bargaining was going to work, but what was the harm in asking?

One look at the bodyguard reminded me to never ask myself that question again.

The merchant took the journal from his bodyguard, balancing it in one front arm as he leaned on the counter and flipped the pages with a hoof. He glanced, but his eyes never left mine. Immediately, I realised just how shrewd this pony was to have carved out such an inventory as a slave in Fillydelphia and somehow managed to bribe enough guards to look the other way. Despite that, the scars and scabs across his body indicated even that didn't help him avoid the punishing work details.

"So y'say this is yours, little lad," he murmured, before chuckling to himself and continuing, "well I'm afraid I don't see yer name on it, my boy. I got this from some fine ponies who took some quality merchandise off me in exchange for the fine item I hold here and a few caps for my oh-so-loyal guards at the entrance there."

Fine ponies. Yeah, right.

I let my eyes glance to Red Eye's guards. Almost to my amazement they were looking over questioningly until the merchant shook his head. They relaxed. Great Goddesses... how many pockets was this slave *in*? The guards didn't just overlook him, they actively helped him flourish. I wondered what their cut was...

"Now you want this... hmm... piece returned, do you, laddie?"

I was really beginning to hate that accent. It was like every word he spoke was condescending.

"Yes, yes please!" There was no sense in hiding it, he clearly had me judged before I even spoke a word.

"Then let us do business, lad. Me name's Sooty Morass, what about yourself? Shackles?"

He managed to sneer and laugh at once as he patted my brow with a hoof. Urgh... even slaves looked down on me now. Sometimes I really wished I could hide that damned cutie mark. But this was the pony the gang had mentioned! So this was definitely the right place, my journal hadn't gone to anypony else first. His bodyguard snorted with him, but maintained a watch on the merchandise while Sooty Morass dealt with me.

"Murky Number Seven..." I muttered, looking to the side.

"Well, lil' Murky," he began, flicking *my* journal from hoof to hoof almost hypnotically, "for a lovely bound book with thick good quality paper pages filled with all sorts of... interesting pictures of mares for a good buck's enjoyment..."

Oh come on! Those weren't for others!

"...I'd have to say we'd be looking at requiring something to produce more enjoyment. Any chems or even certain medical supplies like Med-X. Normally I'd say about three doses or so. But for you laddie? Ten."

What!?

"Ten!?" I almost screamed it, before choking on my own words. Almost degradingly, I felt

him slapping my back to help me with my coughing. It felt like I was about to cough out my own ragged and bloody windpipe soon.

"Well you see, son," he began, lowering himself down to my level, "I'll give you one bit of information about this world. Nothing is free. Not us, we're slaves, laddie. Not trade, it's a ruthless market and we're all out for ourselves. Last of all... not information. I'm being all nice and telling you this because I know you ain't gonna be around much longer, are you?"

He grinned wickedly as he saw the shocked look on my face. His voice lowered again, becoming airy and dry.

"Yeeees... you think I didn't spot you over by ol' Artery over there? I don't need to be a medical trained unicorn to spot an irradiated little pony on his last legs. So I know you need them there medical supplies more than anypony. As such, I can afford to raise my price because I know no matter what happens... you're going to try and do it for me, ain't you laddie?"

I gulped. He was right. Anypony who knew the position I was in would realise they had me over a figurative barrel when it came to haggling a price.

"Oh and also..." he continued as he rose up and turned away, picking up a few bits of what looked like arcane gem circuitry. "I know you aren't here just for your own little book, eh lad?"

He knew about Wicked Slit? How?

Then it occurred to me. Those two idiots on the enclosure gate were in his pay to find out in advance for him... oh, that sneaky rat!

"Fifteen, Murky," he finished, "fifteen for the parts and the book together. Put that unicorn out of his supply and you'll find me a very able trader. Then we can negotiate your next job for me... perhaps you might like to earn your survival day to day, eh?"

If I took his offer, I wouldn't just be solving one thing, I'd be putting myself in for a whole new level of control from other ponies above even Master Red Eye! He'd hold my very life in his hooves by controlling the substances I needed to survive in small doses.

"I... I'll think on it..."

"Don't think too long," he sneered, "wouldn't want you to... expire... would we?"

I heard his chuckling even as I wandered away from his booth in defeat.

I lay between two slaves in the terminal enclosure. They were asleep, twitching as nightmares no doubt interrupted their brief rest. Both had come back from their work shift, backs raw from whips and choking on what I could only guess was either smog or dust from the mines. They had been too tired to notice my smell or sickness before collapsing beside me.

Meanwhile, I was deep in thought.

I sat with the parchment, my charcoal sketching on my makeshift checklist.

My journal sat at the top. My main goal, provided I could stay alive, was still to regain it. To have it sitting mere feet away beside Morass was loathsome to think about. It was not directly attainable right now. I needed to think outside the box.

I crossed out Wicked Slit's knife. I had already spoken to her and relayed the message. Instead, I added a small magic gem to represent the parts I needed to get for her. Without them, I was due for nothing other than a bloody demonstration to the other slaves.

I added a syringe. That was for Sooty Morass and his will for me to acquire chems from

the unicorn healer. Briefly I wondered why he couldn't deal with it himself. It wasn't like the guards were going to stop him. If anything, they protected him. It had to be some sort of unofficial ruleset from Red Eye on how a slave market could run without becoming a nuisance to him.

A small magic potion was drawn below it... to steal Morass' smaller medical supply for the unicorn, to monopolise the market in his favour for healing. Contrary to what the unicorn said, I doubted it would put Sooty Morass out of business, but it would assure the unicorn's rise within the slave ranks and pecking orders.

I added the head of a ganger. Whatever happened, I still needed to figure out how to evade their attentions tonight. Perhaps if I could find another slave master or get transferred to this terminal building?

Finally, I added the symbol I knew was that of magical radiation. A poison that was slowly taking my life. I needed to survive.

As I looked at the growing list of jobs and tasks before me, I had a sense of impossibility. Some of them countermanded the others. Without Morass, I would get killed by Slit. But without Artery I would die anyway!

I wanted to run away. I wanted to hide. But it wouldn't help any more. Nopony would want to help me and I had nothing of my own to exchange other than a broken radio that wouldn't cover the costs.

I... I didn't know what to do. I clutched the radio under my jerkin, holding it tightly down... but only the thick and full voice of Sapphire Shores greeted me. Almost on cue I felt my eyes watering. I closed them, tucking into a small ball as best I could to just try and escape it all. Perhaps I could find something painless... just take the easy way—

“Haha! Who'd have thought they'd miss our shift, eh, Noose?”

“They didn't ‘miss’ our shift, Lemon, you idiot,” I heard the mare reply, “we got rotated onto a different master for tomorrow who doesn't need us right now, you think Filly ever gives a proper break? We'll be worked to the bone anyway.”

“Same difference,” he snapped back, “means we get to come back here and see about some more trading for a few hours.”

I looked up to see the final nail in the coffin. The gang marched into the enclosure loudly and proudly. Behind them I could see Pike and Cosh cowering away.

Well... that was it then. All I needed was Wicked Slit to appear and then it'd be a full house against little Murky Number Seven. These slaves didn't even like each other, never mind lonely little...

Wait.

An onrush of sudden hope blossomed in my mind as the pieces fell together. It wasn't perfect but... but it was something!

I got to my hooves, tucking the parchment carefully beneath my jerkin. If nopony else was going to help me, I'd have to get on with helping myself!

“Oooh look who it is, everypony!”

The gang stopped in their tracks after intimidating a smaller slave merchant into giving up some month old oatmeal for a few bits of scrap metal to look at my mangy and weakened self trotting up. Briefly I realised that if they smelled the sewage stink about me

they'd be informed very readily about who was spying on them earlier.

Well, best not give them a chance to get their bullying started.

"I've got a deal for you."

The silence that followed seemed to last about a year. I wasn't sure what shocked them more, the fact that anypony had approached to ask them about it... or that it was me. My wondering was answered promptly, as the trio collapsed to the ground in laughter loud and raucous enough to wake every slave in the terminal waiting area.

"I'm serious!"

"Oh, boys, he's serious!"

"What does he want? He want to bargain for his little hidey hole? Too late!"

This wasn't getting anywhere, I decided to play my trump card.

"I can get you chems."

Their demeanour changed almost immediately, the two bucks perked their ears as the word triggered an instinctual reaction. Mentally, I leapt with joy that my wild shot in the dark seemed to be right on the money. Okay Murky, hurdle one crossed. Time for the meat of the issue.

"I know where to get them... help me and I'll tell you."

That didn't go down well. The mare particularly stayed right where she was without so much as a twitch in her eye. I guessed she perhaps hadn't partaken, not good if she was the de-facto leader of their little gang.

"You're playing a dangerous game, runt..."

Her voice was low, ignoring the glances of the two bucks... if I could just get them talking.

That was I could even keep *myself* talking... I felt like I was about to go rigid and fall over. These were the gangers who promised to *kill* me, after all! Noose was right, I was playing with fire by even coming this close to talk to them. She seemed intent on reinforcing the fact, advancing close enough that I had to lower my hind quarters to give my head enough range to look up at her. I was trembling, I knew it... but that was normal for them... right?

"So what do *you* want, runt?"

Right... here we go. I couldn't give out my entire plan or it'd all fall apart. If the gang knew then they'd be able to pick out every problem with it immediately to benefit themselves.

"G-get me some t-too... I can't get them myself."

"And what's to stop us just taking the lot for ourselves?"

I wasn't wanting them to spot that little fact, guess it was too much to hope for. I really didn't want them figuring out the entire story... especially because it sort of swung more in my favour than theirs in the end.

"Because I'm... uh... I'm on a job for somepony," I said, stammering over my words enough to make me mentally kick myself for being an awful liar, "if I get some of it back I can... I can get better deals with Sooty for you!"

Okay... technically true, maybe. Perhaps once he had no real competition he'd lower his trade prices?

Also, Princess Celestia might descend from on high and whisk me off to my marriage with the Stable Dweller in Canterlot Castle.

Noose narrowed her eyes, shook out her mane and looked back at her two comrades.

Their eyes betrayed a fervent wish for chums, to add some spice to their hellish life in Fillydelphia. Eventually Noose sighed and sank her head.

"Fine," she said, deadpan delivery very much intact, "but this isn't a 'deal,' runt. We see something we want or prefer... your loss."

My heart leapt, perhaps this had a chance after all!

"Oh and runt?"

I froze on the spot.

"Don't think you're off the hook."

Her face came right down level to me. I bit my lip, trembling so hard I feared I might shake a tooth loose.

"Your little hidey hole is gone, runt. Y'see... we got tired of you being all cosy in there. Not when we're freezing our asses off outside. More to the point, we still remember that you bucked one of us in the face... we don't let that shit go easily. You listening?"

I nodded a little.

Her hoof struck me across the face hard enough to cause the bad tooth from yesterday to come loose again. I yelped loudly enough from the pain that everypony in the area stared for a second.

"I said... you listening!?"

"YES!"

"Who's in charge of this little thing then?"

"Y-you..."

The hoof struck again, the other side. I felt the tooth wrench slightly further as I fell to the ground.

"Don't forget it. Love taps, is all they were. When we're done with you... you'll wish that we just taunted you like before. Fuckin' runt..."

She wandered off to join the bucks. Teary eyed, I got to my hooves unsteadily, trying to avoid coughing up more blood as I held a hoof to the loose tooth. Of course I couldn't lead this... I was the slave at the bottom. They would lead... I would follow.

Just like always.

I explained my plan to them. They were not attentive listeners and I had an uneasy sense of them just watching to look for loopholes in it. We sat in the baggage exchange of the terminal, a good thirty feet from the slave market. I knew Sooty had ears everywhere, I couldn't take any chances.

I nursed my head as I sat with my back to the way out. If they made a hint of a move... I was gone. I didn't like being so close and alone with these three, but right now they were my only hope.

That thought alone scared me to the core. Being forced to deal not just with one devil, Sooty... but three demons too.

"The medical unicorn, Artery, has the drugs."

The two bucks seemed agitated at the mere mention. I sincerely hoped they wouldn't just go for them instantly. Lemon in particular seemed to have a nervous twitch... I wondered if he was fighting addiction to something.

"I... I need to get the drugs out from him to trade with Sooty. If you three distract

him... cause some disturbance? I think I can sneak his pack away from him and take what we need."

Noose stared hard at me. She didn't like the plan, that was obvious. I could tell what she was thinking. 'Why not just take it?'

"We can't just take it openly," I spoke carefully, "because Sooty Morass is watching and he wants it done quietly... I think. The guards are there anyway."

Noose didn't relax at all. Her stare was beginning to make me uneasy.

"So... um... if we were spotted then we'd all be thrown in the Parasprite Pits or... something."

"Runt, I assure you that if you mess this up for us, I will ensure that a parasprite swarm would be the least of your worries."

Her voice was cold. For the first time I began to grasp the weight of this situation... this wasn't just them bullying me or seeing me as a target any more. This was a gang member making a promise.

"I won't!" My voice was higher pitched as fear ate at my confidence to speak.

I couldn't falter... I needed that journal and medicine!

"So when I have it, we'll take what he wants and then sneak it over to him in a bag. Then he'll... he'll give us stuff."

"What stuff?"

Oh come on! Enough with the questions! I really didn't want them to know so much... given the last part of my plan.

The one that relied on me betraying them.

By my standards, this was pretty inspired. I would take all that Sooty wanted, but also take five RadAways and as many magical healing potions as I could manage. Artery had claimed that I would need magic to repair myself, but I figured that if I took enough healing, it'd restore me to a point where I'd at least live... right?

That was how it worked, right? More healing was good... it had to be. I didn't want to think about the alternative. At the very least it had to buy me time.

But for the gang, that was the next part. After Sooty got me everything I wanted from him, I would also give some of the stolen syringes to them as their payment in chems and immediately get back to the FunFarm after delivering the parts to Wicked Slit. Once there, simply tip off Whiplash about the gang having contraband chems and they'd no longer be around the FunFarm to hurt me!

Sooty got what he wanted. I got my journal and life. Wicked Slit got her parts.

Of course, this meant I was going to be effectively killing three ponies by turning them in. The thought lingered in my mind, no doubt ready to crop up in guilt later. But at this point, surrounded by self-admitted to-be murderers, I realised it was them or me. Artery would lose his business, but perhaps it would make him rethink how he used his magic?

"What. Stuff. Runt?"

My thoughts snapped back to the present.

"Chems!" I screamed. "I said I'd get chems for you and I will!"

The panic in my voice was evident. There were so many ways this could go horribly wrong for me, especially the rogue element of these three gangers. I couldn't tell them how to distract Artery. I couldn't guess what they'd do when they saw the prizes. To them, gaining that entire sack might be worth more than anything Sooty could do for them. My weak assurances wouldn't hold long. It dawned on me how quickly I'd have to get that sack

to Sooty and get my own share before the gang finished and moved to claim their prize.

I could see it in her eyes. She had no intent of me getting anything at the end of this.

They were using me. Just like Whiplash was, just like Wicked Slit was, just like Artery and Sooty Morass were too.

But then, I was a born slave, wasn't that my role in life? Did my cutie mark mean everypony got to use me how they wanted? Even other slaves?

Noose turned without a word and moved off. Negotiations were done then I guess.

"Just be ready, runt. We do this our way. This fails, you're coming down with us."

'Their way' turned out to be pretty much what I expected.

I watched Noose wander up to a group of rough looking slaves. Given their ruined clothing, I presumed they had used to be caravan guards. She had no subtle notion to her approach in the slightest as she saw the guards glance up at her. Gangs and caravan groups did not get along very well in the wasteland. More than once a slave transfer caravan including me had been attacked by gangs.

"Hey boys, lose any good caravans recently?" Her voice was jovial, taunting and just as despicable as ever when she spoke to me. I could see Lemon and his buddy wandering around the long way to sneak up behind the guards.

"Are you wanting your head cracked on this concrete, mare?"

The lead caravanner stood. He was over a head taller than Noose with a shotgun for a cutie mark. Boy... didn't that bode well.

If Noose cared, she didn't show it. Pretending to back off by turning away, she launched a full buck without any warning aimed for the caravaneer's throat. Her legs moved fast enough to blur as she made the cheap shot and the foe collapsed while gasping for breath from his crushed windpipe.

Very quickly I became significantly more afraid of Noose than ever before. I watched as the two bucks ambushed the caravan guards who were still getting to their hooves. In a flurry of hooves, screaming, cursing, and splattered blood on the concrete floor, I witnessed the three-on-three brawl break out as more gangers and caravan guards from across the room rushed to join in. I saw Lemon floored by a unicorn hurling a fragment of concrete, while another stallion choked out a gang member with his front hooves. Sheer brutality and senseless beating between both parties descended into a frenzy of pent up aggression and simple minded violence.

After Number Six, I thought I'd get used to seeing this sort of thing; but as I witnessed wooden fragments trying to stab and the sickening sight of Noose stomping a hoof onto the back of a badly hurt mare's head forced me to turn away in disgust.

I was hidden at the side of the room, taking shelter in a small space of the boarded up shop. I could fit between the boards to hide in the shop beside Artery's one. But until he looked away or moved I couldn't do anything.

He was indeed looking at the brawl, but hadn't moved away from his supplies yet. Clearly, he was made of sterner stuff than I. All I wanted to do was creep into the shop and hide away from the violence now raging around. Even not looking, I could still pick out screams, thuds and sickening crunches every so often. The entire centre of the waiting area was one giant brawl now. Slaves rushed away in all directions, fearful of more riots. I could

hear guards screaming for order to be restored. Gunfire sounded in the air as warning shots were fired into the hard ceiling. I didn't have much time, I'd have to go *now*, and just hope Artery didn't look this way.

Creeping out of the shop door, I hugged the wall edge of the waiting area as I cautiously approached his shop from the side. The front desk was passable at both sides, while Artery himself stood on the far side. I could get in and out, but if he did anything to turn, I would be seen immediately.

I froze as I approached it. I wasn't guilty in this spot, just a little buck hiding away from the fighting. But if I moved further it would be obvious. I fought with my fear to allow me to try, to try and save my own life!

Dare or falter, Murk... dare or falter...

I saw Artery move forward. He was going for an injured pony who was screaming for his help and offering his stock of caps!

Dare!

I rushed forward, my little hooves almost silent on the ground as I ducked in behind the front stand of his makeshift shop. The big saddlebag was sitting there! Tugging it open with my mouth, the RadAways and potions spilled out alongside boxes of chems. Most of them I didn't even recognise or want to try. I couldn't read their labels to check.

But I could count.

Oh... that...

There were only fifteen medical elements in the entire saddlebag. Five RadAways, five potions and five boxes containing a few doses of chems each.

He'd known. He'd damn well known the entire time. Sooty never intended to save me at all.

A scuffing sound came to my ears over the screaming and shouts of the guards striking and controlling slaves. Looking up, I hastily ducked back behind the shop's counter. Artery returning with his patient in tow!

I no longer had time to think. I grabbed the entire saddlebag, stuffing everything back inside it before simply charging back out of the shop the way I had come in. For once, my luck held as Artery was focused on his patient to pull them telekinetically to his shop. I ran back toward the boarded up shop before using the cover of de-cushioned seats to crawl my way out of the area.

Behind me, I heard the screaming of Artery. I had gotten away clean. For once, no overly close calls. No chases. No being spotted. An elation passed me. I had just stolen a whole ton of medical supplies! Go... me?

Moving out of the waiting room, I bucked open a shaky cupboard door and hid inside.

RadAway and healing potions! The two things that would save my life, right here in my hooves! No more sickness, no more rad fevers and aching hooves.

But yet... I couldn't. If I didn't get those parts, then Wicked Slit would make sure my newfound health was very short indeed. Not to mention my journal. After yesterday, it meant more to me than ever before. It was the first thing I had ever been truly creative with, the first thing that had let me show resistance to my masters!

I couldn't abandon it. Or the parts.

I needed a plan, but suddenly resources were so much more limited, and I had to go *now* before the gang returned from their brawl to seek chems and their own healing from the violence, too.

Wrapping the saddlebag in an old cloth from the cupboard, hoping Artery would miss that it was his, I moved out again. My limp returned, the fast rush having aggravated the joint. Biting back the pain, I took solace in knowing that if all worked out, it wouldn't bother me for much longer.

With the adrenaline lowering, the sickness returned like a crushing wave. I had to hang back for a minute as my vision swam and my centre of balance lost its way entirely as I fell against a wall of the side corridor in the terminal. Breathing heavily, my breath thin and airy, I stumbled on, sweating and shivering.

Not far now... not far now till I would be better...

My lungs *burned*.

This was cutting it close... it really was.

By the time I reached Sooty Morass, I could barely carry the saddlebag. I could feel it tugging at my jerkin the whole way. Trotting slow enough to avoid attention had been one of the longest walks of my life and I had to keep stopping to pull my jerkin tighter around me. Fears played in my head... if I was this sick, what if I never even woke up tomorrow to enjoy the journal that I had reclaimed? Was it too late to heal it? Could the RadAway get rid of the magical radiation that infected my body so much for so long?

Dumping the saddlebag down before the sly merchant, I knelt down to merely catch my breath before tipping the saddlebag out behind his counter, hidden from Artery. The medical unicorn was arguing with the guards, but I could only presume Sooty had paid them off.

"So, little laddie," he began, "seems you held up your end of the bargain. Now I may be a ruthless and sly old devil, but I always honour a deal. You don't stay a merchant long if ye don't."

I looked up at him pleadingly, while using a hoof to push my jerkin back into position carefully, dumping that saddlebag had almost made it ride up.

"Please... I need this medicine now," my voice was barely a whisper as my throat fought to move without pain. "I... I can feel it getting worse."

"Well of course it would, exertion won't help your sickness," he sneered, counting the materials. "And I can only presume that you have exerted yourself a fair amount while worrying a lot. Now..."

He nodded in approval at my efforts, before tapping a hoof on the counter.

"What say you and I discuss your employment, lad?"

That grin could have launched a dozen balefire missiles with the sheer hate it brought up. Here he was, looking at a dying pony and all he could think of was how he could exploit him further for his own ends. I had met horrible ponies and seen the work of tyrants like Master Red Eye, but this was a whole new and personal level of malice.

"I... if I agree, can I have some medicine now? Please, I don't think I'll live past tonight."

It was begging, but I had nothing else to bargain with. A ruined hoofmachine thingymajig wouldn't be worth anything, right?

"Oh now, Murky lad. Don't go getting eager now, we've yet to find out what you can do for me before I give you something. Far as I see it, you've got to earn your medicine, not to just take it then not come back, see?"

He had me trapped.

I agreed.

He explained his job. It was quite simple really, but deceptively important. I would have to carry bribes to various individuals, both slaver and labourer. Scrap workers to pocket goods, guards to look the other way for said goods, and of course, deliver merchandise. He would pay one medicine per job, just enough to keep me alive from day to day. That was my only payment to work as his little courier.

My life was entirely in Sooty Morass' hooves now. A slave to a slave.

"Now in accordance with our deal, I'll present to you the things you *did* earn from putting me competition out of business, lad."

He had continued talking even as I sat in the back of his shop, listening to the guards restoring order. The trio of gangers would be along any moment, I could guess. I hadn't cared. I simply sat on my rump, a good little slave awaiting Morass' command or my time to return to the FunFarm for a shift. I wondered if Morass could get me to stay here with him rather than at the FunFarm with the gang...

Wait... the things I earned!

Even as I looked up from my hooves, he let both my journal and the arcane component drop from his mouth in front of me. I didn't hold back, taking the journal in both front hooves and hugging it tightly. I felt my eyes water.

Sooty left me alone to return to his merchant front, no doubt preparing to argue with Artery when the unicorn noticed Sooty's sudden increase in merchandise. He said I was to be sent out at night to take a bribe to a guard near the gate who might be able to hook him up with a small supply of Apple Sugar Bombs from the slaver kitchens. Until then I was just to stay quiet and hidden in the back of his shop unit, and be as invisible as I could be to his operations until called.

Right now at least, I didn't mind that. I had something to look at.

I sat the arcane circuit board to the side, behind the ancient ceramic stove I was leaning against. Old Equestria must have been wonderful to have such home cooking even in an skyport lounge.

I tuned out the slaves crying out in pain as Artery helped them with his magic... he hadn't ever learned anaesthetic spells.

I laid the journal before me and slowly... oh... so... slowly... opened it to the page I knew.

...

"...hi, Mom."

Reaching over for just a second, I crossed off the checklist image of my journal. I didn't have a real home, but looking now at her before me, drawn by my imagination and memory, I felt like I had come home to something. Even as tears dropped on the page, I managed to smile a little as I saw her comforting gaze.

I paused.

She was just a drawing... but seeing this, I remembered.

I remembered the feeling. To have shaken off my Master, to ignore Red Eye's demands and try to stay inside and draw this when they were demanding me to leave.

I had taken my own path.

Looking from the beautifully comforting face of my mother to the back of Sooty Morass, I knew that there was no way he was going to keep me under his hoof like this.

I was getting out of here. I was going to live on my own terms.
“Thanks... Mom. Glad you’re back.”

My plan was not entirely advanced. There was little I could really do here but simply attempt to steal the medical supplies from behind Morass’ back and then hoof it for the exit before finding a way to blend in outside. Morass wouldn’t come chasing me all the way to the FunFarm across Fillydelphia. Even he didn’t have that influence.

Nope. It wasn’t too fancy a plan, but it was surrounded in dangers. From Morass and his bodyguard to the guards at the exit. If ponies tried to grab me, they could stop me. Or worse, they might even tear off my jerkin. The device and everything else would be lost, among other consequences too. I pulled it as tight as the frayed cord around my torso would go, feeling the radio, parchment, journal, and circuit board stuffed inside. I was going to use the saddlebag I’d brought in to leave with the surplus items Morass had left behind his counter, but even so, the amount stuffed in my jerkin felt unsteady and cumbersome. I was not going to risk it being anywhere else, however, they were all too important.

Even as I readied up quietly, I felt another wave of nausea wash across me. Coughing loudly, I stuffed my mouth with a hoof as I attempted to stop myself from drawing too much attention. Stomach retching from the harsh coughing, vision hazy from the pain and exhaustion, I lay back for a good time simply trying to get my strength back. I couldn’t do this, not physically. My limbs were too weak and my injured one was only getting worse. I couldn’t run on a hoof that was mildly disjointed! If only I could dull the pain...

My eyes fell to the syringes around the bag left by Morass.

I didn’t know which one was... what were they called? Med-X? There were a few styles. One with two little pipes to send extra drugs in with it, one thin and simple, one constructed out of a bottle with a greyish liquid in it.

In my condition... to take the wrong one would probably kill me through system overload.

The one with two feeds looked tempting... it was fancy. Pain removal was fancy wasn’t it? The simple one would be just some chem drug, right? I rolled the third one, the bottle over. It had a picture of a broken hoof... then a cured one. Aha! That was just what I needed, right?

I glanced around before gently putting the bottle up against my injured hoof, the needle pointing at it.

Wait a minute... I remembered last night, listening to the DJ. He had been warning about a drug made from the grey blood of a hydra beast. I glanced down at the bottle before almost kicking it away in shock and disgust. My face clenched as the thought of what I had almost done slammed home.

No chances.

I took the simple one. The simpler the better... simpler couldn’t kill as easily, I assumed. Maybe it was the right one. With a little whine, I plunged the needle in and hoofed the plunger. And then I waited...

...okay, I didn’t feel very much change going on. I didn’t feel any—

“Woouooooah booooy... theeeeere we go...”

My vision swam as I wobbled and then fell to the side, my *everything* utterly numb. A

bliss of relief crept across me, as my hoof stopped aching and my lungs dulled off entirely. Sleep felt tempting as the waves of pain receded from my body. Slowly, I began to feel a return of control to my limbs after a minute or so, but in my mind I felt so different. I felt... nice. Like all the pain of the world had just disappeared. If only I had more of this stuff to take...

As I waited for my limbs to regain enough feeling (and to be frank, my mind to stop thinking 'pretty lights, wheeee...' at the ceiling) I began to think about my plan a little. Perhaps I was thinking about all of this wrong, trying to take a ton of medical supplies with me. If I was going to be waiting to regain the ability to move, perhaps I could sneak a RadAway and a healing potion to get ahead of the game... in case anything went wrong?

Couldn't hurt. Not that I'd feel it right now anyway! Hah!

I realised that I had a smile plastered on my face when I saw my reflection in a metal oven door opposite me. Wow... it even made me smile! Med-X! Best. Drug. Ever!

Whilst enjoying the high of a painkiller, I lay back, hiding around the back of the oven from Morass, sipping a RadAway while glancing at my mother's picture. It made me smile for real, even through the haze of medically induced relief from life.

That was a feeling I'd always—

“URGH!”

I almost sprayed the RadAway right over my journal as I sickeningly swallowed the horrid liquid. It tasted like orange *paint!* The cover featured a little foal enjoying it with a straw, smiling like a little puppy. I *seriously* questioned the taste and *sanity* of any pony who enjoyed this stuff. It'd take clinical craziness to see this as anything but just disgusting.

Sighing, I kept drinking. All things considered, I had no right to complain. I watched Morass from behind. Clearly he believed me to be a broken in worker given that he was paying me little heed.

I'd show him. I'd show them all. I was going to get out!

Just... just as soon as the wallpaper stopped dancing.

When the time came, I didn't hesitate.

For once, I didn't falter. I didn't hold back or restrict myself. I couldn't feel the pain any more. I didn't feel as sick after a RadAway and a healing potion. They'd taken the edge off things, I knew I'd need more to actually combat the sickness. But I had to go suddenly. Morass was coming back from the front to inspect, so I had gone for it.

I barrelled past him, ducking to one side and grabbing the saddlebag in my mouth as I darted out into the waiting area. Slaves looked up at the commotion, and I saw the guards look ready to repel another riot. The entire place was already on high alert, even as ponies lay on the ground injured still from earlier. I felt my jerkin bounce about a little from all the items stuffed tightly in it, including one healing potion for quicker access.

“Get back here, you little thief! Chisel Hoof! Get 'em!”

Morass bellowed behind me, sending his bodyguard to chase me down. Finally able to gallop properly, I put my head down and pushed harder, ducking under chair platforms to avoid the huge bodyguard with his longer strides. I felt his mouth try to grab my tail even as I wriggled between two rows of seating, the ensuing tug pulling a few strands of hair out with a horrid snap, but with Med-X still dulling some of my senses, the pain didn't register.

The bodyguard snarled, shoving chairs away in his frustration at missing me, as I ran between them or over them. My hooves clattered and slipped; I weaved this way and that; I threw myself around pillars before making a mad gallop straight for the exit the moment I heard him trip on a low waiting lounge table.

“Dammit! Guards! Stop him!”

Up ahead, there were two rows of chairs on either side of the pillars that went all the way to the exit. I could see the two guards already galloping towards me from ahead. I hadn’t anticipated them openly helping Morass like this!

Hurdling the chairs with a quick hop, skip, and jump apiece, I kept ahead of the bodyguard, but the guards were clever. They backed off a little, spreading out to block my route.

“Halt! Stay where you are!”

There was only one hope to make it by them. I saw a huge pile of mangled chairs thrown together in the waiting area near a barred window. Presumably the megaspell shockwave had blasted them away from the large open area near it. Two choices... jump the window and fall, or hide in the chairs.

As much as the Med-X dulled pain, I knew leaping from two stories up with a damaged hoof would be asking far too much of it, and my sanity. I dove into the pile of chairs, wriggling in among the twisted metal and sharp edges as only a small pony like me could. The bodyguard and two slavers arrived and just stared at it, before starting to hurl wrecks off of the pile. I could hear the other slaves milling about in fear or confusion while Morass was arguing with Artery over what I had really stolen. Somehow, I doubted I would have many friends around here after this.

I crept through the wreckage of the chairs, invisible to the guards tugging on them frantically. I could hear them screaming for me to come out and be punished. As terrified as I was, I had to agree to the snarky part of my mind that they were not using the most persuasive argument to convince me. Fighting down the overwhelming urge to curl up and shiver, I kept creeping. I had to get out, I had to get my Mom out, too, even if it was just my drawing!

Sneaking through the chairs, I noticed an error on their part. They were all on one side of the pile, assuming I was just hiding.

Quietly, I pulled myself from the opposite side, silently praying no watching slave would give me away. Cautiously, I trotted off. The guards were still pulling at the pile! They hadn’t even looked up as I began to canter and then gallop again, looking behind me. Hah! I felt an elation as I saw them get smaller and smaller, not noticing me. What idiot wouldn’t watch everything around them?

I promptly felt myself run into something with a dull thud.

Well, that answered that question.

It hadn’t hurt, but the impact had knocked me over, spraying the chems across the floor. In a panic I reached out to reclaim them before seeing what I had hit. My mood dropped like a stone from the top of the terminal control tower.

“Hi,” sneered Noose, as her two buck companions spread out around me. “Come to give us your prize? Or just to report for the flank kicking your going to get for trying to betray us?”

My blood ran cold. No! This wasn’t supposed to happen! I was so close to being out!

She didn’t hesitate either. Noose had taken a heavy blow to the head during the brawl and

blood still matted her mane. She wanted payment, and she wanted revenge. Her front hoof slammed into the side of my head hard enough to whip my small frame clean around and launch me a good three feet to the side. Even through the Med-X, I felt that hard as pain lanced through my mouth and jawline. Whimpering and trying to get up, I saw her shadow. Noose raised up on two legs and slammed her front ones home upon my chest. I couldn't hold it in. I screamed at the top of my voice as I felt ribs take the impact, and a spray of blood come from my mouth. High pitched and raspy, I howled as she beat down on me. Hoof after hoof after hoof. I went blind in one eye as it blackened and began to swell up. She picked me up to my hooves and bucked me into the wall. The hard concrete re-awoke my sickness as I felt the wind knocked out of me through a rough throat and lungs, only to wail as she kicked out my injured leg.

"Don't, please Noose!" I pleaded, trying to stand back up, but it was to no avail. "Don't k-kill me! Don't!"

I collapsed against the wall, sliding down. I had been beaten before, but this was different. She wasn't aiming to knock me around. This was ruthless, with the intent to genuinely hurt me. I... I wasn't built for this!

"Please... Noose, I'll do—"

With a sudden removal of gravity, I was hurled back toward the centre of the entranceway. Landing on my front, I cried out as my ribs crunched on the floor directly. My legs didn't even bother to stop me. Without the Med-X, I'd probably have passed out.

I tried to stand. If I could just reach another healing potion, gulp it quick. Or another Med-X! Anything! Just enough to give me a boost to run! If... if I could just get away! My efforts led me to stumble and collapse as every joint shivered and failed me. Gritting my teeth, I sought to crawl, whinnying as my eye pounded with the pain of quick swelling around it. The feeling of not seeing... oh Goddesses, was it permanent?

They weren't willing to allow me to move. Her hoof descended on my injured leg, putting enough pressure on it to make me howl in pain as she grinned wickedly. I could see Morass and the guards approaching. He had that look of justification on his face as he looked on me, beaten and bloodied. I shivered constantly, my body retching from coughing and feeling pain from my legs, ribs and face. I could feel blood running from somewhere on my face again.

Noose's friends were approaching, clearly wanting some of the game too. She only glared at them as she looked down at me, her prize to beat on. As I stared upwards, my tears mixing with blood from stinging wounds flowing around the already swollen parts of my face, I saw the lack of mercy and the cold sadism that drove her. My chest moved sporadically, my breathing irregular as I struggled to regain breath.

"Hey! Noose! He didn't drop many chems, where's the rest?" Lemon seemed intent.

"Fuck if I know, just wait, we'll get em later."

The third buck wandered up to me, looking down.

"Maybe not..." he grinned, his eyes looking at my jerkin. "He's hiding something, there's lumps."

No! I struggled, pulling my hoof with a wrenching pain from under hers and trying to flail to my hooves. I received only a half buck for my troubles sending me staggering even as I forced myself to my hooves. They would get my journal again! And... and...

"C'mere! You're hiding my chems!"

They advanced, I felt them on every side, grabbing, pulling, and trying to get at the

things I had hidden beneath my jerkin for so long!

“GIVE!”

“No!” I screamed forcibly, lashing out to little avail as my little hooves were batted aside.

“GET HIM!”

I felt teeth grab my jerkin and *pull*, I tried to pull away but the pressure only increased!

A horrible ripping sound met my ears as I fell forward, the pressure released. I hit the ground without my jerkin, feeling the concrete across my whole body. Adrenaline overcame the searing pain enough to turn and hobble backwards. My journal... my radio... the parchment checklist and the arcane circuit all fell on the floor beside the medical equipment and the torn remnants of my jerkin...

But none of them were looking at them. Everypony in the entire terminal simply stood and stared at the battered little pony before them who could barely stand up, who was crying with pain as blood from small cuts dripped to the floor. They didn't even look at his swollen and blinded eye or the bleeding lips.

They all looked at one thing. And one thing only.

“What?”

“Is... are...”

Lemon broke the ice proper.

“What!? He... *he's a fucking pegasus!*”

“Hang on a second, you kept it hidden all that time?”

I... may not have been honest with everyone.

As you can see, I'm not an earth pony. I am indeed a pegasus.

But believe me when I say... how could I just admit it? So many slaves in Fillydelphia *hate* pegasi. Wasteland ponies are bad enough, seeing us as an easy blame for the sky; but in Fillydelphia, that just makes you an east *target*. Someone to take their frustrations out on. I've been lucky my past masters were content to have any slaves, regardless of what type of pony they were.

I do not know how it happened. Perhaps genetically, my mother was related to a pegasus lost in the wastes. Perhaps my father was one and my mother never told me. Maybe it's just blind chance of long lost genes from two hundred years ago. One way or another, it happened. I was born with these wings on my sides. More than my size and timidity, they have been the reason that every place I was sent to work as a slave immediately treated me like dirt. I would be blamed for mistakes that pegasi made before the balefire bombs or for the rumours of them surviving up there happily and ignoring us all. I would receive less food, have my wings prodded or struck by other slaves. They used to call me 'flightless.' Many of them used to make up stories that I had come down from the clouds because my real parents didn't want me anymore. But I swear, this is the honest truth. I am a born wastelander, a born slave.

My mother told me while I was young a little saying.

“There's a story behind every pair of wings in the wasteland, Little Murky.”

Pegasi were so rare that every one of them had a story to tell about the places they had flown to, such as what the world was like above the clouds. About how they had survived in a world that generally hated them or the things they had done thanks to their unique

abilities. Pegasi were incredible, unique, and every single one of them had some sort of tale behind them.

When I was at the rock farm, I was still very young. I hadn't yet grown up enough to fly, but once I was developed enough, my wings began flapping. They had moved and twitched about however they wanted, and I kept imagining that if I could flap them hard enough, then my mother and I could have gone some place safer. My master had spied them beginning to move and... and he took steps. Steps to ensure his slaves did not leave.

A blunt mallet in his mouth, he had ordered two other slaves to drag me into his storehouse where an anvil had waited. He... he didn't want me to fly. Ever.

I had never recovered. Damaged while too young, unable to develop properly, they ended up weak, with muscles too withered to lift my own weight or flap properly. The bones in my wings were fragmented and too poorly healed to not have enough strength to withstand the forces required.

A pegasus without the ability to fly. In other words, just a very weak pony with two big targets on his sides to draw attention and malice. To draw hatred he could barely escape from. I'd suffered from it in every camp before Fillydelphia. I knew they would be the worst.

And now they knew, too.

I didn't have long. Their confused stares and disbelieving mutterings as the crowd gathered would only distract Moose and Sooty for a short time. Even as I heard some voices begin to raise, hatred and bile spilled forth with shouts demanding I be brought in to take revenge on. I knew not everypony in Equestria hated us pegasi, but the slaves, often prone to emotional simplicity and seeking to vent anger, would see me as a common foe.

I reached down, grabbing a healing potion in my mouth and simply letting the liquid fall down my throat without even swallowing. The act almost made me choke and vomit it right back out, but the refreshing feeling of my new wounds beginning to close gave me enough strength as I scrambled to pack my things into the fallen saddlebag. The entire crowd began to move as one, a surge of screaming faces still hopped up on violence wanting to express their anger on one of the race who they crudely believed had abandoned them.

I could see Moose trying to force her way through. Sooty Morass's bodyguard was behind her. I only had seconds to get away. Lemon was still standing beside me, scowling as he attempted to grab me with his front hooves. Panicking as I heard the stomping of the fanatical slaves gunning for my blood, I lashed out. My back right hoof flicked out just like before, connecting with a... much softer area. I heard Lemon squeal and felt him fall right off of me.

Throwing the saddlebags over my torso, I immediately galloped for all I was worth. Ahead of me, whistles blew and warning shots blasted into the air as a line of guards galloped into the terminal building past the scrap wall. Pike and Cosh dove for cover as the large ponies thundered through. Stuck between the two, I opted to keep going, trusting to my small size compared to the huge crowd behind me.

Praying silently for safety, I dodged as best I could around them, even diving beneath a guard, shouting out in pain as his battle saddle opened fire right next to my ears. I scrambled out the back of their line just as the slaves collided behind me into the guards.

One guard looked at me for just a second before being pulled back into the terminal by

the rush of slaves. Assuming they were rioting, the guards paid me little heed. I stopped for just a second as I glanced back, seeing the rush being barely held in by the guards from charging onto the airfield after me. All of their eyes were on me, or rather on my torso. I heard shouts, like ‘Tear his wings off!’ or ‘Revenge for the wastes!’ A hundred ponies crying for my death...

Radio or not, hearing that, I felt very alone indeed.

I galloped off, trying to not cry so much I couldn’t see where I was running, as I hunted for someplace to hide. Somewhere. Anywhere.

I didn’t have to travel far. With adrenaline dropping off quickly, I couldn’t go too far. On instinct, I sought out a place nopony else would ever go normally.

The Fillydelphia skyport’s control tower.

Old scaffolding had been torn around it from the blast, but to a pony with nothing to lose right now it was an acceptable risk to climb. I sat on the top, the roof above the control centre watching the expanse of industry and red haze of Fillydelphia around me in all directions. On the horizon I could see the sunset, blurred and impossible to properly view given it was behind the cloud layers above. Tonight it was just a deeper smudge of orange, but something in me, perhaps driven by my status as a pegasus, just... *knew* it meant a lot. That sunset escaped the darkness of the night each day... what lay beyond that horizon? Could I ever follow it into the unknown?

Sometimes, it felt like it was calling me to a way out, if only I could follow.

Funny. If I were a *real* pegasus I could have just flown away from here. I was higher than the wall after all. That sunset would be a beacon to call me to freedom. But now, it played only to my deepest and most impossible wishes.

I sat under a small tarpaulin that had once been used for observation to hide from the griffon patrols. I doubted they’d be looking for me, their jobs were more specific and never involved hunting on top of control towers or other high places. Indeed, most of them flew below the height I was sitting at.

I was crying. Of course, why wouldn’t I of all ponies be? My eye had slowly regained sight a little, but everything on that side of my face was still hazy from swelling.

My journal sat open next to me. The parchment sketch of the Stable Dweller, Number Six, and the unknown mare was beside it. The radio was playing. Its ever energetic host spoke of the efforts of heroes all around Equestria, but really, none of it seemed to make a difference any more.

Word would spread. A pegasus was in Filly. Then the witch hunt would begin.

Not that it mattered. I had the parts for Wicked Slit, but even now I realised a stupid point I had overlooked. Like Morass, she had tricked me. The machine would count for three ponies. She never really intended to let me off the hook at all, given I was her fourth allotted replacement. Everypony could take advantage of me, it seemed. Even when I thought I had been solving things myself.

I lay down, covering my head with my hooves as I sought to somehow make it all go away. No more merchants tricking me and withholding medicine until I worked for them. No more sickness eating at my lungs and blood. No more gangs trying to kill me. No more slavers abusing my life to suit their needs. No more everyone judging me because of some

idiots who ran away centuries ago!

I had perhaps bought myself a few days, but my sickness hadn't gone away, only alleviated a little from the small amounts I'd taken before leaving. Even then, the healing potions had used most of their potency fixing what Noose had done to me.

It still hadn't fixed my tooth though.

My blood was rising just like in the refuge pit. Scrambling my hooves over my head in frustration I stood up, pacing back and forth as I tried to think. I drove myself to just... just think! Think think think! I beat my hoof against my head as I stared out over the city. I could see the Funfarm, its rollercoaster ruins widely recognisable, as were the giant pink pony balloons above it.

I could swear each one of the massive laughing faces was looking at me. That freaky laughing pink mare... I really hoped I could never see her again! That I'd never see *anything* again! Just to leave and go some place it could just be *me* and my *drawings* and nopony else ever again! *Who needed others anyway!?*

I sighed, not even finding the energy to stay properly mad. I was exhausted after two days of running, being beaten, and having the conditions in here aggravating my radiation sickness. I couldn't move properly. I couldn't even think properly to come up with a curse colourful enough to describe this life. But as I turned from the FunFarm... an idea sprung to mind. A little thought that I realised had always been in my mind. An inkling that had remained with me all throughout my life but until today had never quite surfaced on how to protect myself from all the pain.

There... there was a way.

I trotted forward to the edge, not quite feeling my conscious thoughts in control of my body. I looked down at the ground thirty feet below.

...just one way I could avoid anypony else ever hurting me again. The only way out I could see right now.

Shaking frantically, I climbed up on to the parapet. I could feel my breathing getting faster. One hoof raised as I felt my balance waver in the wind.

I felt my centre of balance adjust, drifting out a little. The ambience went silent as though waiting for me, other than the rush of wind by my ears. I fought down the sense of vertigo. Just one little bit of pain more and that'd be it...

The wind caught my mane and wings, as though trying to remind me of what kind of pony I was. I ignored it. The wind and the sky had no place for me.

And in that moment, I felt all the noises gradually turn quiet. All my thoughts began to settle and find peace. It would be so simple... so simple that I began to question myself. Was this right? Would this work?

Would it... hurt?

Yet, I was so afraid to go on...

I leaned out.

Beep!

I stumbled, my hooves skittering about as I fell back from the ledge to land solidly on the concrete of the balcony again. Hot pain lanced through my body as I impacted on my side. In a moment of terror, I hadn't known which way I was falling, tumbling head over hooves before dropping hard onto the tower again.

Safe.

Panting, eyes wide and staring at the parapet I'd been leaning over, I heard the noise

again.

Beep!

My radio... the music had stopped.

I scrambled over, picking it up, almost dropping it as my thoughts caught up with me.

Replaying it in my mind, I realised what had just happened. I had been about to jump.

Oh... oh Goddesses...

Like a wash of clarity, the insanity passed. The temptations washed away to leave horror. I'd been so... so zoned out. So detached in my fretting and worry, with my mind racing too fast to keep up with rational thought.

More than any beating, that felt truly horrifying to have experienced.

Shivering, I clutched the radio tightly. What in all of Equestria had I been doing? I had been about to leap from the control tower! I screwed my eyes shut, shivers turning into furious shaking as only now the reality of how events were affecting my mind became clear. Emotional discovery could go both ways. Learning what choice meant, it seemed, also meant learning of the bad choices available to us.

My stomach churned at the thought of what I had almost done. In fact, it did more than churn.

Dragging my belongings further from that location, gasping for breath after my stomach had been done emptying its pitiful contents, I sat down with the radio. 'Concentrate on it', I told myself... It saved me before, it could do it again! Perhaps it would be more of the Stable Dweller? I honestly didn't care, I needed something, anything, to stop me thinking about what I'd just come so close to doing.

On cue, the speaker started up.

...ffzzzssshh...

"...uhm... hello? Oh wait, why am I saying that? This is a diary thing, isn't it?"

I blinked, the voice was that of a young sounding buck. He even sounded a little like me on a good day. Our ages were perhaps similar.

"Well, what can I say for a first entry? My dad told me I should keep this up to date. For the record, he says. Well, I don't quite get what he means by that, but there's no reason I shouldn't, right? What's the harm it could do? Plus I kinda owe him... he bought me the Stable ticket after all. If things do go bad, at least I'll be safe underground while Dad should get evacuated with the pegasi. We'll be safe..."

This message, it was from before the war! Bewildered, uncertain of what this device was saying, or why it even had this, I found myself captivated, holding the device gently between my hooves as the little speaker played out the apparently voiced diary.

"So I got sent this thing, right? Came with the ticket, they said. My PipBuck. Crazy little device really; pretty cool. I get my radio, audio recording, a little light to brighten up the darkness of the night and it even interfaces with the terminal Dad bought me for my birthday! Some places don't get them early, but many of them are manufactured right here in Fillydelphia, so I guess they just send them direct because there isn't any shipping. Well, I can say I'm glad for it, this thing saved my life already!"

You aren't the only one...

"I was coming back from picking it up, right? Well, Equestria's not how it used to be. Happiness, joy and understanding, right? Things are just, well, different these days. Some earth ponies tried to take my ticket on my way home. Came right out of the alleyway down Old Woodtree Road! I... I mean this thing, it saved my life. S.A.T.S.

saved my life tonight, I mean. Oh dear, I'm all shaky again. Ponies aren't meant to fight, so why do we have to?"

There was a pause, as though he was considering something. I could swear I heard a sniff.

"I just... I want this to stop. I don't want to go into a Stable knowing that everything out here is going to die. But it won't happen. My dad tells me it's just all posturing and nopony would ever be so stupid as to do something that would endanger us all. All the same, why else would he spend almost his entire life savings to get me this ticket? I don't want to know what it feels like to be the last of a generation. If the worst does happen, what will we be left with? What poor ponies in the future will have to live not seeing the things I have here in the lovely city of Filly? Grass, trees, pure water?"

I looked around at Fillydelphia and saw the slave driven hell industry and radioactive poison filling the air.

There were no words to describe the weight of that thought.

"I... I guess I should wrap this up. I need to go find a job since I moved here to get the ticket. Well, bye I guess, to whoever listens to this. Probably me. I can look back and realise how silly I'm being to believe that any of this will actually happen. Well, my name is Sundial. I'm a unicorn, I guess it's worth saying. Maybe I'll tell this thing how I got my cutie mark or something next time. Till then... I guess. Bye?"

"Bye..." I muttered, before wondering exactly why. I heard the speaker cut, before it switched right back to a song by Sweetie Belle. A PipBuck then. That was the device's name. Sundial's PipBuck.

With a sudden and horrifying realisation, it all slammed home.

That skeleton... that... that had been...

I huddled down tightly, hugging the PipBuck for all I was worth while sniffing, and trying to quell the hollow, aching feeling in my stomach.

Sundial...

My return to the FunFarm was as reluctant as it was inevitable.

I had returned the parts to Wicked Slit. Her 'reward' was a week of shifts working on the molten vats.

My saddlebag had a couple of chems left over. That might be able to mollify the gang enough to not kill... ah, who was I kidding? They would kill me as soon as look at me now.

With a little biting, I had torn up the cloth I'd put over the pink and yellow medical saddlebag to make a rough vest for myself to hide my wings. Only the gang knew at the FunFarm, provided the word didn't get out from other slaves across Fillydelphia. It'd only be a matter of time till Whiplash knew. If he found out, I was dead.

Wandering past the mirror, I only merely glanced at it. I didn't want to look at myself. Yet my eyes were drawn to it, not in the least due to that big silly image of the pink laughing pony sweeping her arm towards the mirror as though encouraging me to look at it again.

I saw little different, yet for a moment I stood in surprise. My sickness didn't look quite as bad as before. It wouldn't last, but, for a moment it felt like some little victory. I'd survived. I'd lived. I didn't feel overjoyed, but I was alive.

It had been something, but more importantly, it had been done not by somepony else, but by the choices of the pony I looked at now. That little pegasus with sad eyes and a slaver

moving up behind him in the mirror.

My eyes shot wide.

"If it weren't Wicked Slit I'd sent you to, I'd probably have you up for delaying coming back. Thankfully for you, I know she's crazy."

I squeaked, jumping as I spun and fell into the cold glass of the mirror. Whiplash had moved with uncharacteristic silence up behind me from out of the mirror's line of sight. From the grin on his face, I could imagine he had meant to scare me.

"Y-yes... master," I whispered. "She... kinda held me back..."

"Whatever. Get back in the enclosure, I have a meeting with a liaison from Protégé."

"Um... master?" I had to at least ask. "Are... are the gang members back in? I think they want to kill me..."

"Murk, shift your arse."

"Yes, master..."

It had been worth a try. I slumped and wandered past Whiplash as we both headed into the Petting Zoo to his slave groups. Waiting beside the old staff office that Whiplash used as his quarters, I saw one of Stern's griffons waiting for him. Much bigger than a pony and bearing sharpened talons, the mercenary nodded curtly to Whiplash as he wandered over. She was clad in tough looking body armour over her almost jet black feathers. Even the areas most griffons had lighter colours were still only a thick grey. Across her back was slung two long looking firearms, one a magical weapon and the other looked like some sort of scoped rifle.

Her eyes watched me carefully as I moved past her, trying not to let myself stare as I sought out the gang. I needed to avoid them and find someplace safe, though every instinct told me that there were none left. Behind me, I heard Whiplash begin talking to the griffon. It quickly escalated into a near on argument; apparently she was wanting slaves for this 'Protégé' from Whiplash's stock. He didn't seem too happy.

Neither did the gang. They stood in the middle of the enclosure.

Waiting for me.

Noose had a look of murder. Her back showed signs of lashing from the guards.

Lemon stomped impatiently. I didn't imagine a hoof to the loins was going to give him much mercy toward me.

The third buck, I'd never heard his name, simply snorted.

Well, here it came.

"Forget your own desires, Whiplash! You are not in control here. I'm taking the ones that I want, you do not have the choice in this matter, **understand?**"

That voice had not been the griffon.

Rough, mocking and overbearing, that tone had reached the ear of everypony in the petting zoo. It was direct and loud with a fierce authority, like the words were spearing into my skull. The sheer power of command in that voice sent a chill down my spine, accompanied by feeling like it locked my hooves to the ground.

Even the gang perked up, their gaze turning to look at the situation with Whiplash and the griffon. Where they had been talking previously, now a third presence had entered.

Yesterday, I had been sure I had seen the biggest pony in Equestria from Number Six. This earth pony stallion seemed to be even bigger, if only through girth. He had simply barged in, the griffon clearly aggravated at her own meeting being interrupted by this new arrival.

Number Six had been the single most terrifying pony I had ever met. This one was perhaps the more disgusting, yet he carried a dominating presence with him. Mangy dark brown made up his coat while his mane (and several patches of his coat) had a filthy grey to them. His huge girth came atop powerful looking legs and, while he wasn't as tall and muscular as Six had been, he looked astonishingly strong from such a massive centre of force. He was not obese, rather just largely built with a lot of weight and power. Across his hide were strapped high quality leather barding and metal plates that hung with trinkets and small bags. Whips, clubs and what looked like a magical energy stun rod hung within mouths reach.

I tried not to look at his mouth, filled with rotting and often missing teeth, I could almost smell him from here. I had to fight to not gasp as I saw his cutie mark and almost checked my own flank to be sure. It was a single unbroken loop of chain! The pattern was almost identical to my own shackles!

He dwarfed Whiplash and even put the normally larger than a pony sized griffon to shame. He was addressing them both, clearly higher in the pecking order of Red Eye's slavers. In fact, to my astonishment, Whiplash, the hard faced terror of my life, looked ready to whimper before him. Who *was* this pony?

"That little upstart, Protégé, won't let me anywhere near the slaves in his stock, so I got to come to you, understand? Now I asked you, which ones do you not mind, heh, misplacing? I require more for my own stock."

That rasping and filthy mouth grinned at Whiplash, before glancing at the griffon.

"Unless you want to start anything, Ragini. You still loyal to the code, eh?"

The griffon nodded sternly, without a word. I could see her talon resting tightly on the strap of her weapon. Whiplash looked between the two with nervous eyes. This was clearly an animosity well above his level.

"Look... I'll give you one slave right? Go ask the lads at the terminal, I hear they want rid of some troublemakers after today, alright?"

Oh boy, couldn't I just guess where this was going. I stood rooted to the ground, wishing I could somehow make myself invisible in plain sight.

"One, eh? That all? And what makes you think you can decide on only one? Better impress me, Whiplash. Who is it?"

"...Murk! Get over here!" Whiplash hadn't even taken his eyes off of his visitor's.

I didn't move. I didn't want to get any closer to that horrid beast of a pony.

"Murk! Move yourself over here right now!" Whiplash's voice was a mix of anger and fear as he finally got the courage to look away at me. I was getting the feeling this wasn't entirely official business for Red Eye, judging by how the griffon was lurking to the side.

I still didn't move. I couldn't have. My hooves were locked firmly in the ground. With horror, I saw the new slaver instead simply follow Whiplash's glare before advancing toward me. Standing barely two feet in front of me, I almost retched on the stink of him alone. I trembled, clearly shivering and hyperventilating as he stared at me, looking me over.

"Interesting... not often you see a small pony like this these days. Pity I couldn't get a hold of that other one while she was here."

He seemed to lick his lips. I had to close my eyes to not dry heave on the spot. The thought of this disgusting slaver anywhere near the Stable Dweller offended me to the core. The thought of him anywhere near *me* just felt like it was violating my sanity by his mere proximity. I felt his hoof reach out, lifting my chin and roughly shaking my head from side

to side, examining me from angles. Bruises and sprained muscles screamed in pain, as did I. He didn't relent, judging my size and shape. My saddlebag was pulled from my back as he reached for my makeshift vest...

No!

Almost on instinct my back right hoof shot out again as he spun me around, aiming for the one spot I knew I could hurt him.

A bellow of rage blasted my sensitive ears as he slapped me across the side with a hoof hard enough to catapult me over into the fence. Crunching against it hard enough to set the entire fence wobbling, I fell to the ground beneath it and curled up in agony. Gasping hard, I felt my balance spin.

I'd never been hit that hard. Never.

The slaver had murderous eyes as he shook on the spot at my impertinence to try and strike him.

"You... little... runt..."

He slowly started stomping towards me, one hoof at a time.

"You think... you can just try bucking me in the loins... and get **away with it?**"

I squealed in terror as I saw Whiplash not moving to interject. The griffon had disappeared.

"You know who I am? I am going to be your new owner! How do you you like that?"

He yanked me up by my jerkin and slapped my clean across the face.

"My name is Chainlink Shackles, worm! But you will only call me by one thing. To you, I am nothing but The Master, **understood?**"

His hoof knocked my cheek again.

"What is my name?"

"Master Cha—"

Again, his hoof connected. I screamed. I squealed. I fought but he lifted me off the ground.

"You didn't listen! What is my name?"

Gasping, whimpering, I retraced what he'd said. I'd missed the particulars in my panic. Every instinct I had kicked in. This was not just any slaver. I had been born a slave, named as a slave and gained my cutie mark as one. Somehow, somehow I just knew that he had been born the opposite. His cutie mark seemed to make that clear! He was the opposite side of the coin; born to command me. I could *not* disobey. In seconds, he had asserted himself over my subconscious greater than anypony before.

"Master!" I screamed, "Yes, Master!"

Everything about him seemed designed to be the antithesis of myself, large where I was small, strong where I was weak. Number Six had terrified me. The Master had an effect more profound, there was something deeper. There was a need in his eyes, a desire that I felt affronted by, but unable to escape its demand.

He threw me down to the dirt.

"Now get that vest off, I want to see what I'm getting."

No... I couldn't allow that! But I felt every muscle rushing to obey. The DJ and others had broken me free, but I could feel the everlasting chain of The Master locking me back into place.

"Hah! I'll tell you why he doesn't want it off!"

I looked up to see the third buck was running up to The Master. The gang member

skidded to a halt before him, pointing a back hoof at me. The Master merely glared down at him with stern eyes and a scowl. I was terrified, if my place as a pegasus was revealed here I would be nothing but dead! Or paraded in front of Master Red Eye by... by *The Master*! My imagination outran my horror and revulsion so far that I almost didn't notice for a second as The Master's hoof slammed the buck to the ground mercilessly.

"I didn't!"

A hoof shattered the buck's mouth.

"Ask you!"

His mouth drew a knife so big it almost looked like a sword.

"TO SPEAK, SLAVE!"

The knife descended with enough force to puncture clean through the buck's neck and embed itself into the ground beneath. Twitching and gurgling, the buck died within seconds as lifeblood pumped out over the dead grass and dirt. His hooves continued to spasm for a few seconds before everything went still. The blood ran around my hooves, but I was too frozen in fear to move them as I felt the dull warm creepy over each hoof. Whiplash looked too terrified to react. The gang simply fled into the Petting Zoo.

"Enough!"

The griffon landed beside The Master. Mouth splattered with blood, he rounded on her. The rifle was drawn as she looked him in the eyes and stood firm, if cautiously.

"Slaves aren't transferable until tomorrow night anyway, Shackle," she barked. "You know that. You'll get to see him then, you'll get your prize. I'll have Protégé look elsewhere tonight for a replacement to fill the gaps."

She was trying to mollify him by giving him precisely what he wanted, to avoid any more bloodshed or brutality tonight. I had seen Master Red Eye's griffons display such behaviour before, their loyalty to him was absolute. They would often protect slaves against overly eager slavers to keep Master Red Eye's stock intact for work shifts if they felt the production was threatened. The Master narrowed his eyes, before bellowing in laughter and angling his head toward me.

"You're just what I need, Murk!" He shouted, voice rasping on the air, just like mine. "I'll be back promptly tomorrow to take you to my... hmm... special stock. We'll have fun for sure little Murky... find you some *real* work in Fillydelphia that you slaves should be doing, none of this pulling carts rubbish!"

That decaying grin made me break down on the spot. I had heard the rumours, slavers who kept "special" stocks of unofficial slaves for extreme work environments that they hoped would gain them more influence with Master Red Eye. Some rumours even said they were little more than sick death games with slavers gambling on the survivors, or the ones who didn't live through them.

To go with him was a death sentence. The second one in two days. The Master was something bigger in Fillydelphia, part of the layers that led to such a heavy cost of lives. Inwardly, I cursed my life. Everything I did just seemed to end in further slavery. Was that really all my talent was? To simply put myself into the service of others all the time? Today alone I had run almost a half dozen errands for various ponies both slaver and slave, and I had not one thing to show for my efforts other than a couple of extra days till my sickness consumed me or The Master throwing me into some brutal 'game.'

Even as The Master left and Whiplash hurled me into his storage cupboard, I just felt numb.

“Now you’re staying in here for the night. If you get brutalised in the night by them, Shackles will not be pleased. And I like having my own hide. You’re still working tomorrow though, so sleep.”

Of course I was. Why wouldn’t a good little slave be?

I didn’t sleep all night.

My imagination kept me awake filled with pain and bitter ends. Perhaps I had been right in my belief. A slave’s life only ends in one of two ways, really. Either a slow lingering fade from sickness or a painful and violent killing.

I kept pawing at the PipBuck, willing it to say the right thing again. It had broken me free before. It had stopped me taking that last step, why couldn’t it do something now? All I was getting was music from Sapphire Shores. I didn’t even like her, why couldn’t it be Velvet Remedy? At this point I’d even like to hear more from Sundial. But with no way to understand how to control the PipBuck’s diary settings, I could only presume it had glitched out before or something.

I really was without any help.

Alone.

I couldn’t see too well in the dark to spot any of my pictures I had before me. I had tried drawing, but with no light to see by it had failed immediately ever since Whiplash had locked the door. All I could do was wait until my shift, work myself to death and then be handed over... over...

I gulped, breathing ragged.

...to The Master. He had haunted my thoughts since the moment he had left. A giant pony who had been born to keep me in line. It was his destiny to find me, just as it would be mine to be under him. But I didn’t want that! I didn’t want to die! Hadn’t I just spent two days trying to prove that to myself?

I thumped the wall with a hoof, trotting around before settling, my head in my journal with a hoof over the PipBuck.

Click

There was light.

I jumped, startled as the sudden brightness seared my eyes that had adjusted to the darkness. Covering them with a hoof, I glanced carefully out to see the source of the light. The PipBuck sat across from me, the smashed screen emitting a glow that flickered and occasionally died for a second or two from the faulty arcane technology inside. Sundial’s words echoed in my mind.

“...a little light to brighten up the darkness of the night...”

Thank you, Sundial. With the light that his little legacy brought, things changed. Slowly my mind found the solace I had fought so hard for. To push back the slave in my thoughts.

I could see. If I could see, it meant I was not alone.

Before me lay my drawings. Myself in the corner of an empty piece of paper, smiling so joyfully with no injuries or sores at all, my wings spread out. My mother, forever beautiful and comforting who looked at me off the page, so proud and hopeful for her lost little foal. Number Six, strong and relentless, his stoic manner defending me from fear. The mysterious mare, aloof and filled with intrigue yet an undying kindness radiating from her eyes. Above

them all, the Stable Dweller, bringing light not to one hurt buck, but to everypony that laid eyes on her.

I grabbed my charcoal. I began to draw again. I needed more, if this were to be my last night on Equestria, then I would die surrounded by those who meant something to me. I scrambled to the parchment, filling it with images of myself standing with the others. Of the mare helping me up, and giggling as she looked at my more... uh... personal, pictures. Of Number Six diving with a scowl in my defence.

The parchment filled, I grabbed my journal, and by the flickering light of the PipBuck, I could not stop. My eyes strained, but page after page filled with images of anything and everything I had seen from PipBucks to Tenpony Tower. My mother cuddled into me in one, hushing away a little foal's fears. I imagined what my six other siblings looked like. I drew them, too. Velvet Remedy, the DJ, and so many more. Charcoal raced and scratched, covering page after page...

It wasn't enough!

The journal was ditched, the walls themselves would be my canvas. With each flicker of light from the PipBuck, more was added. A frame by frame patchwork gradually coming together each time it was visible, a stop motion wonder before my eyes as I swivelled my head from side to side with the charcoal in my mouth. My eyes dried, my movements grew confident and my heart, while weak and sick, began to beat with the adrenaline of purpose.

I moved from wall to wall, my movements hidden by the darkness between each spark of light as shape after shape appeared. Eventually... exhaustedly... I lay back, holding the PipBuck in my hooves. As though driven by destiny, its light finally became a constant to witness my work.

Around me, on all sides, was the outside world. A gigantic montage of the things that held hope from the Wasteland still. I saw Tenpony Tower and the little settlements I had passed by, like New Appleloosa. I saw ponies moving as friends helping one another. The Stable Dweller was running to the horizon into the glorious sunset, floating in the air as ponies gathered around her in awe, she knew what lay beyond the horizon. My own mind's vision of the DJ's broadcast room was imprinted beside his tower in Manehattan with a microphone. Velvet Remedy, the most beautiful design I could imagine chosen for her, was singing her heart out, notes drifting around her from where she stood in the images.

I saw the world I had left behind when I had been locked in here. The world with ponies who wouldn't hate me or simply want to abuse me. Yes, there were bad ponies out there, too, and even worse on top of that, but there was good! Ponies who might call me a friend... or heal me to save my life...

I sat up taller.

...who might save my life...

...there was a way. If only I could... could...

With a fervent rush, I pulled my journal over and grabbed a new piece of charcoal. I had plans to make. I needed supplies, weapons, armour, routes and above all... a method with which to make the terrifyingly real concept in my head come to life that would make my montage into a reality. To allow me to travel into that sunset and find out just where it went to escape the darkness.

I *would* escape it. My life depended on it now.

Tomorrow, I had one day to prepare and execute my plan. To escape Fillydelphia. To go beyond the walls and run from this slavery that had held my life for so long to seek a pony

who could heal the radiation and diseases that were killing me. I caught my breath, holding a hoof over my frantically beating heart. After so long of not seeing it, not knowing what I wanted, it was finally to happen.

It was time to stop crying.

They say there's a story behind every pair of wings in the wasteland.

Tomorrow, I was going to start mine.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Low Hoof! (Rank 1) – You have something of a habit to let your attacks go for those somewhat sensitive areas. In other words, you fight dirty! Your first unarmed attack of any given engagement has a small chance to stun your opponent immediately!

Forlorn Hope

"Stitch by stitch, stitching it together... deadline looms..."

"What is it like to desire freedom?"

Even as I drew my dreams upon the walls of Whiplash's storage cupboard, there was a niggling doubt in the back of my mind asking just that. That part of me still chained to the ground and held to the whims of Master Red Eye would let doubt trickle into my thoughts, even as I made my decision to try and escape.

But there was going to be no turning back. I had beaten away the slave in my mind, I knew what I wanted now. I was going to escape. I had thought that might make my mind shut up, to let my subconscious finally die off and give me a break from the torturous duality in my thoughts these past two days. But no, it didn't slink away and cower as I smiled, drew, and wished for a better life at last. It just lurked in my mind, feeding doubt and questions to try and unsettle the new parts of me that wanted out. But it would not win. I wouldn't let it.

After all, I had another reason now. A very basic and utterly driving one. I needed to escape to live. Before the Pit, I had been perfectly willing to slave away until I eventually keeled over and simply expired. To be nothing more than a statistic of caps for Red Eye to replace in short order. But I had been shown the value of life, but more importantly, the value of my own life and to what extent it should be fought for. My sickness clawed at my lungs and blood. Irradiated, mutating, and aggressive, the disease was accelerating at a rate that, had I not taken action in the Slave Market, would have probably killed me in my sleep within hours. Even as I lay in the dark, surrounded by visions of a happier future, and the drawings of those that mattered, I could feel it in my lungs. Burning, straining, and only growing. My coughing was under control for the moment, but my mouth still had the sharp, metallic taste of blood at the back of my throat.

Instead of trying to make me stay, the born slave in my mind merely sought to make me

question. Did I really desire freedom as I thought I did? Or did I just want out to continue living out of fear? The fear that I would die soon? Look, I am not a brave pony. What if I got out and found a world I could not survive? Was my desire for freedom truly wishing for me to become threatened by a world that required decisiveness and strength? Could I even think for myself after? I mean, I didn't even know how old I was to know how long I had simply been taking orders. Even when I set out to do something for myself, yesterday I was still just following orders much the entire time.

I just didn't know. I didn't know *how* to be free.

There were other things, though. I had always known a certain range of permitted boundaries. Whether it be the walls of an enclosure, the length of the chain that held me, or an assurance that if I moved over a line I would be shot immediately, something had always stood that told me where my world ended. What would I even do in a world with no limits but my own choice?

But that world was now calling to me. I could not deny it any more than I had obeyed the beck and call of every master from here to Shattered Hoof to Manehattan. I didn't care if it was a desire for freedom or a desire to simply live. That voice in my head would shut up. I would overcome it, I had to! To escape *was* to live.

I won't say I wasn't afraid. I was *terrified*. Perhaps that fear was what propelled me to actually take those first steps? To wish for a better tomorrow where I might live for longer than a few days.

A few days...

The same time it took me to realise why I needed to live was what I now had left.

I couldn't fail. It was do or die.

No time to falter. I had to dare.

Dare to dream.

The colossal length of piping crashed down behind me. Scrambling back to my hooves, I began coughing as the dust and dirt flew up in my face from the shockwave. My dive to dodge it had only just carried me out of its path, but the weight striking the ground had still shaken me to the core.

Spluttering and fighting the urge to continue coughing (I would not let it win, not now), I began untangling my harness from the pipe I had pulled free. Slaves began to move in with auto axes, whirring ready to cut the pipe into smaller chunks for transport to the steel mills. Whiplash had come to fetch me in the early morning, thankfully not noticing my drawings on his wall, to bring me out for the first of my multiple daily shifts. In this case, helping dismantle a section of roller coaster wrecked by the Stable Dweller's escape. Surrounding me in the cordoned-off section of the FunFarm was a whole bustle of activities. Ponies pulled the roller coaster's struts apart with ropes tied to harnesses, while others clambered over the coaster itself to tear down the metal from all the damaged sections. Old dust and dirt beneath the coaster was kicked up from so many hooves galloping back and forth, or small craters from the explosives used trying to catch that elusive mare two days ago. It was dangerous work, requiring ponies to pull free huge lengths of the scaffolding after they had been bent out of position, and then pray it didn't land on them. Somehow I had been allotted to that job, despite my weak physicality.

The irony of being in danger from the aftermath of her escape was not lost on me.

Like every other role I had gone through in my time in Fillydelphia, it was back breaking, lethal, and exhausting. Already I had witnessed half a dozen slaves carted off to... someplace for failing to meet quotas.

More than ever I was taking care, however. My makeshift vest had nothing near the same reliability as my now sadly lost jerkin for keeping my wings hidden. Many times I'd had to risk being lashed by pausing to ensure it stayed in place. I guessed I was just lucky that no slaves from the Terminal enclosure had been sent here. Already rumours had spread. I heard them as I worked.

"Did you hear? Red Eye got himself a pegasus slave!"

"I heard we're getting an execution of a pegasus soldier in a week."

"They say some pegasus killed three slaves already, pushed them into a vat of molten metal!"

Just like every encampment before. Hearsay and gossip travelled like wildfire among slaves who had little news or input from any source other than rumour and stories from other slaves.

Even as I picked myself up and trotted to find the next pipe on weary legs, I could hear the buzz word around me. But let them. I wouldn't be around here much longer to be affected by what they had to say about pegasi. Perhaps they were all evil and killed foals up on their cloud fortresses. I just didn't care. I had never been a pegasus in any sense of the word. I had more in common with my 'fellow' slaves than I would to any so-called "Pegasus Enclave."

Indeed, none of it mattered. Not even the work. For the first time in years, I didn't mind the dreary toil I was expected to do, for I now knew these were the last shifts I would ever work. I think I even let a smile creep across my face in the down times between tasks, just imagining everything that was waiting for me. In my wildest dreams, I imagined escaping past the Wall, finding a small settlement, and encountering a lovely doctor. A kind one who would heal my wounds, cure my disease, and maybe have some directions to Shattered Hoof. There I would find my mother and we'd both escape and go off to live in Tenpony Tower. Somehow. Safe forever. Maybe I'd even meet the Stable Dweller there. The DJ talked of her enough to imply she occasionally visited. I'd get to say thank you, shake her hoof, maybe even give her a hug. I could offer her a home with me and my mother, good ponies all. And there was so much the two of us could do! Save the slaves in Filly, explore the wastes. We could travel together, get to know one another more, get closer and...

...and my imagination was getting a little too carried away.

I lightly thumped my hoof to my face and shook my head. Crazy dreams were great and all, but now was the time for planning. I had less than twenty four hours to sort everything out, find my route, and go for it.

"Hey! That damn pipes still attached up there!"

My reverie broken, I turned my head to look at the slaves behind me. They were trying to attach the ropes from my harness on to the next scaffolding pipe of the roller coaster's broken track section. The filthy slaves were using grapple harnesses to pull themselves up to separate the pipe from the track. I was a bit envious. A grapple harness was a bit like a battle saddle, really. I kinda wanted one still. But none of the ones they had would fit me, so I was left grounded (as always...) while even earth ponies got to fire hooks and tow themselves off the ground.

Pegasi got to fly. Unicorns powerful enough could self-levitate. Earth Ponies got gadgets. ...when would it be my turn?

But no, no helpful things for a little pony with no unique features at all, bar hearing that made it hard to sleep at nights and a mental conditioning to obey whatever he was told.

I sighed, lowering my head to stop looking at them as they started sawing into the pipe with mouth-held hacksaws. At least I'd get a brief break while they took care of it. Immediately, two ideas came to mind. I could look around the roller coaster area for anything handy to escape with, or I could use the time to work in my journal. The former was perhaps the most practical one, but looking around me at the dusty work area filled with teams of ponies tugging on larger scaffolding, slavers barking orders, and the danger of consistently tumbling scrap from the auto axe wielders up high made me reconsider. Sure I might find something, but I was still trying to plan my work. Randomly searching would only lead to a beating from a slaver if I was late back here. No, I'd need to take risks to get supplies soon enough. Don't gamble it all on an area with little worthwhile loot.

Besides, I was in a quieter section nearer the FunFarm Barn, and I got the pleasure of watching a gigantic pink pony statue being torn apart. One more face to not always seem to be staring at me. That was worth something, right?

When I got out of here, I'd never need to see her laughing face ever again.

I lay down as the slaves behind me got to work setting up to pull the next pipe down. They wouldn't disturb me. No pony disturbed me today. Word had gotten around that I was property of The Master now. Apparently, you did not disturb his prize if you planned on living another day in Fillydelphia. The mere thought gave way to trembling as I pulled the journal from my acquired saddlebag. Dropping it, I curled up around it as I tried to fight the terror that he gave to my mind. By some distance, the most vile, horrifying... intimidating pony I had ever met. His cutie mark seemed burned into my mind almost as much as the imagery of watching the Stable Dweller rising into the air. The eternal chain. A symbol of slavery. I feared that he would show up right at the last moment to prevent my escape by destiny itself, observing his right to own me. Born slaver to born slave.

No. No, I couldn't let the fear overtake me. He was just a pony. A big scary one, but a pony all the same. I'd met a stronger pony. I was sure Number Six could have flattened The Master.

But he wasn't around.

The fear wouldn't go away. I could reduce it, but in the few minutes I had met him, The Master had left a mark. I wondered if ten years down the line, in my dream castle of living in Tenpony Tower, I would still be afraid of him turning up to reclaim me. The nightmare of waking up in the middle of the night to find his rotten grimace smiling at me as the chains locked home, of him dragging me away with no pony hearing my cries.

I couldn't even bring myself to open the journal. I was afraid I'd just end up drawing *him* and being stuck with his image forever. I felt my eyes beginning to water. I knew I was going to try. Nothing was changing that now, but I was so afraid.

"Heads up!"

My eyes sprung open to look upwards before screaming as I saw a shard of scrap falling from above, a panicked-looking mare with an auto axe glancing down in horror. Slaves scattered, I tried to follow, but my harness was still tied to the roller coaster pipe! I screamed for somepony to help, trying to unfasten it as the massive object hurtled vertically towards me. I was pretty dexterous with my mouth and hooves. I had to be, really. But the buckle

was jamming on rusting parts and frayed cloth.

A weight crashed into me. But not from above. From the side. Pulling me sharply to the side hard enough to cause me to squeal in pain. I felt my body stretch against the harness, before the deafening sound of the scrap hitting the ground knocked out my senses entirely amidst a miniature storm of dust kicked up by the impact. A sudden pressure was released as I catapulted backwards away from the scrap, barrelling into somepony else to land in a heap on the floor.

Gradually, the noise of metal fragments landing and screaming slaves died down, my own voice probably last of all. I could feel somepony holding on to me before quickly releasing, the pair of us scrambling up.

"I *really* hope pulling you out from under things isn't going to become a habit."

My heart almost skipped a beat as I whirled, ignoring the bodily pains as I saw... saw...

A creamy yellow coat... a light orange mane, tinged with red...

It was her! The mare from outside Slit's factory two days ago! She stood up, shivering with adrenaline from the death defying dive she had used to save my life. I just stood gaping. I had never expected to see her again. I had been too nervous, shy and brutalised last time to really respond to her or show proper gratitude. I had to make up for that.

"Y-you..."

Smooth, Murky. Smooth.

She tilted her head, as though confused, but grinned anyway, reaching out to steady me on my hooves with a front leg. Without a word, she simply led me to the side, encouraging me to lie on my side upon a dust mound. Feeling the adrenaline pass, the shock overcame me enough to half-lie and half-collapse down. Only now I noticed my harness had been cut by the shard that fell, the razor edge severing me from the pipe as easily as it would have cut me in two.

"Woah. Careful there," she whispered, catching my head in her hooves, "Just take it easy, okay? Geez, you look even worse than when I last saw you. You sure you're all right?"

No. I'm dying of an irradiated lung infection and ever-growing rad-poisoning thanks to Fillydelphia.

"Yeah." I muttered, rasping a little on the dust thrown up from the impact, "I just... just need to get my breath. Thank you. I mean, really, thank you. For both times."

"Well, I couldn't stand by and just let you get crushed."

She sat down beside me, a couple feet away.

"Seriously, you look terrible. Those rad-sores. You've not had a very good time, most of those cuts look barely healed. Say, what's your name? Sorry, I never asked last time."

I was about to simply say it, but part of me stopped short of saying my full name. I really didn't want to explain it to her. I felt too ashamed to mention it.

"Murky."

"Well, Murky," she said, oddly brightly, "glad to see you again. It's a rare day in Filly you meet someone who isn't out to abuse you somehow. Pity we don't seem to share shifts more."

I nodded, with a brief smile coming to my face. I liked the thought of us sharing shifts, she actually seemed pleasant. The mare glanced out at the other slaves, most of them being directed to harness up to the shard and drag it away to continue work on the scaffolding around the rollercoaster. Apparently, the whip-happy guards were too busy and occupied to notice us on the other side of our dust mound. Nearby to us, one of the odd little

Spritebots' buzzed around. This close to the FunFarm's big barn, they were fairly common. Honestly, I hadn't a clue what they were other than sources of irritating music. This one was a little different, showing an old, cracked video screen as it glanced at us for a second, before buzzing away silently.

"That said," she continued, "I wouldn't wish anyone to be around the FunFarm. This place has some nasty ponies, even by Filly's standards."

"I'm from the FunFarm," I said quickly, coughing for a few seconds, "I'm held up in the petting zoo near the entrance. Whiplash's stock."

"Oh no, no, Murky. Don't say that."

"Say what?"

"Stock. You aren't just some stock. You're a pony. A thinking being. You aren't just some number."

If only. I even knew which number I was.

"But you're from the petting zoo? I'm from the Bumper-Plow pit. Huh, if only we'd known we were so close, y'know? I could have done with somepony to talk to..."

What!? This entire time, she'd been less than two hundred metres away? Hearing her say that, and talking to me as a person, not just a slave. I wasn't entirely sure what to respond with. Social interaction wasn't really a skill of mine, I was conditioned to be led.

"Huh, I... I hadn't realised." I glanced over toward the Bumper-Plow pit itself, thinking about what she'd said. I began to feel awkward with my quiet responses, and push myself to say more. "I'd have liked that... sorry, I tend to hide and draw so I guess I never saw you. I wish I had."

The mare relaxed, smiling gently at my response. Briefly, I felt a surge of achievement. It wasn't often at all that ponies I spoke to seemed happy to listen to me.

"Me too, Murky. So, drawn anything else lately? I have to admit, I couldn't stop thinking about that. I even tried my own, y'know? But I'm no artist. Can I see again, please?"

That I could do. Hoofing over my journal, I realised it was still clutched under one hoof from the escape. Taking it with her magic, the mare began looking through more of it again. I blushed as I saw her grin going past... well, *those* pictures, again. She looked at ones of Number Six, whistling at the sheer size of him beside a to-scale version of myself. I sat in silence, trying to calm my rampant hoarse coughing every few seconds. Something about somepony else looking at my drawings just helped them feel... justified. Is this what ponies who draw are supposed to do? Show others?

"Wait."

She pointed a hoof down as she looked at one of my more recent drawings.

"This is you, right?"

I nodded, slowly.

"Why do you have wings in this?"

My heart skipped a beat. Gasping, I glanced from side to side fearfully, no other slaves were paying us any heed. The slavers were still sorting them out.

"I... I..."

I didn't need to speak.

"Shh." she whispered, her eyes trained on my vest, "I think I get it. Not a word more, okay?"

I couldn't believe it. That was it? A pony who didn't care what I was? Did she just see the pony in front of her? The poor slave? No bias? No bigotry? I knew I should have felt happy

or liberated, but frankly, the concept was so alien that I couldn't even bring up the courage to speak about it. But as she continued to turn pages and came to my ones of the Stable Dweller, I couldn't keep quiet. I was so proud of them, so happy to know I could draw for myself.

"Th-that one's the Stable Dweller."

"The who? Oh, that mare from the Pit? Oh, wasn't she incredible, Murk? Wow, it's really nice to see her again in this."

"She— I mean, yes, she is something. I wouldn't be alive without her."

"Why is that?" She looked up, suddenly serious.

"I... I was number five."

The mare just seemed to take a breath, before moving forward quickly. I recoiled, startled. Could you blame me? Everypony who moved toward me yesterday had wanted to hurt me. Sensing she had scared me, the mare sat back, waving a hoof.

"Sorry, I just... I mean, I..." she seemed to search for words, flicking her long mane behind an ear with a hoof, "it's... it's horrible to be sent there. I'm glad you got out."

"Me too."

She paused, looking up into the sky, before speaking quickly.

"Think she'll come back for the rest of us?"

I blinked, caught off guard. "Huh?"

"The Stable Dweller."

I really had to stop and think. That thought had never really crossed my mind. If she was out there, then I suppose I'd always thought I was just left here, that I'd have to do it myself.

"I-I don't know. I can't wait for her anyway."

My mind only caught up after I'd said it. I'd let my plans slip. I mentally bucked myself hard in the head. I couldn't afford to mess up like this. But, it was her. How could I lie? Gulping, I admitted it.

"I'm going to try and escape, like her. I need to."

She was silent. Her eyes stared as though trying to discern if I was serious.

"I wish I could too."

My head sprang upwards, eyes wide. She wanted out too? I wasn't alone!?

"I need out of here. I can't live forever in some slave pit. Hell, I can't live a year in here. I'm sure you feel the same, Murk. But I just don't know how."

My heart felt aflame. A kindred spirit to escape. I dragged myself up, looking around.

"Come with me."

What was I saying?

"We can go together. Two ponies are better than one, right? I'm going tonight, I have a plan and everything. Kinda."

I barely knew her, but she was nice! She was being nice to me and a friendly face could be useful out there.

"No. I'm sorry, Murky. I can't."

My rising hope fell like the scrap from the roller coaster. I felt my legs buckle under me.

"Oh."

"Sorry, Murky. But, please, it's not you. I... I have to wait for someone. Someone I..."

She paused.

"Someone I care about. Someone I love. We were brought in around about the same time and, well, just found comfort in one another. Such a strong spirit. He always wanted to plan

to escape, you know? I think you'd like him. But he... he was in the Pit, the same one as you. I convinced my slave master to allow let us be together again after the Pit. I did a job for my master, stole something from Wicked Slit's factory the day I met you. But he hasn't come back yet. I didn't see him in the Pit, so I can only guess it's all been held up by the confusion after the Stable Dweller and the riots. So, I'm sorry, Murky. But I need to wait for him. We promised one another we'd escape. Together, or not at all."

She was crying. Not much, but I could see the sparkles around the edges of her eyes. I felt the urge to do something, but I didn't know quite what. As though I just didn't understand how to react or help her.

"I won't abandon him, Murky. Even if it means having to turn down your offer. If you could wait for us..."

"I can't," I interjected softly, struggling to not cry myself at her tragic tale of two lovers separated by slavery, "it, well, it needs to be tonight for me. The Master..."

Something about the way I said those words led her to know exactly who I meant. Fear crossed her eyes before she nodded slowly, wiping tears with a muddy hoof.

"I understand. Then good luck, Murky. Don't tell me your plan, keep it secret. And if you do get out, draw a little picture of me, will you? We often will meet people only briefly. Know so little about them and never know the truth. Fleeting glimpses and random luck to bring two ponies together, never to meet again. Some things are never explained, like why I saw you dragged under those ponies and knew it would be good to rescue you. Perhaps good attracts good. Just remember the mare you met, to show that even in the darkest of places, ponies can be nice to one another, okay? That is all we need take away to know that Equestria isn't dead yet..."

I presumed she had missed that I had already drawn her. Multiple times, or was that on the parchment? I couldn't remember. My eyes were wet. Her words were just beautiful. The idea that you might any time meet wonderful people even if only for a few moments of bliss and relief from pain. Her eyes were dripping tears still, leading the mare to wipe them again and go back to looking at the images, smiling sadly as she saw pictures of ponies, myself, and the mares I had once drawn in rather... interesting ways.

"I'll do that," I whispered, completely failing to keep my own tears away, "I'll remember you."

To my surprise, she gasped, as though stifling a sudden sob.

"Thank you, Murky, we've got to... to remember those we care about. Even if we can't remember what they—"

"Hey, you two slackers!"

The foul voice rang out, making both of us jump in shock. I turned and looked over at the workplace, seeing a thin but muscular earth pony mare stomping over.

"Slaves don't get breaks! Get back to work!"

The mare hopped up,

"He's hurt, Nightfall. I was just—"

"SHUT UP! Back to work!"

"Please! He—"

The mare recoiled as the whip lashed across her side, yelping.

"I said! Back! To! Work!"

Two other slaver cronies galloped forward as the mare fell back, aiming to drag her forward. I don't know what drove me. I knew I should have snuck off and gotten back to

work. But before I even knew what I was doing, I felt myself charging forward in front of her, taking the third lash to my own brow to protect her. The two thugs backed off in surprise.

“Leave her alone!”

I could see the stunned look on the slaver’s faces, probably not as much as mine as I realised where I was standing and what I’d just done. The pain from my head stung badly.

“Get out the way, Murk. The Master has plans for you. I wouldn’t want to affect his ‘prize.’”

“I...”

I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know why I’d run forward. The slavers grabbed me with their magic. I felt the telekinesis working together to yank me away from the mare, my legs pulling from under me as they began roughly yanking me to the dirt, dragging me toward another work area to separate us. I struggled, kicking and writhing, my hoof trying to land any sort of blow.

“Don’t fight them, Murk!”

I glanced up, seeing her standing there, crying as she waved a hoof softly before turning away.

“Don’t fight them, please. I’ll be fine. You go do what you need to.”

Noting my lack of resistance, I was pulled at a frightening speed away, feeling the ground rub against me enough to sting as I fought to hold my vest around me. I tried to find my voice, to fight the dryness of my throat. I hadn’t even... I needed to...

“What’s your name!?” I screamed, as loud as I could.

But over the screaming auto axes and crashes of falling scrap, I couldn’t hear if she replied, even with my hearing. The last I saw her, she was being shoved towards her workplace again. The slavery would not end even for one so nice. I cried openly as the dust swirled around us again, making me choke up.

I would remember.

I hadn’t been left in a good mood.

The slaves had dragged me back to Whiplash’s enclosure in the petting zoo. He was not happy to see me being rejected from a workplace for causing trouble, but the normal punishment and reallocation was held off. I could only guess being at threat from The Master had its short-term advantages for my workload. However, Whiplash was not deterred, as though seeking to regain some face, he arranged for me an additional two shifts.

No matter. I would take whatever they threw at me now. They were too late. Meeting the mare should have made me sad. Any other day, I might have curled up and cried my little heart out until I fell into a restless sleep. I might have let the weight of sadness crush me.

But not today. I couldn’t cry. Okay, maybe I had at the moment, but after being thrown in the petting zoo again, I had felt something change within me; a determination I hadn’t felt before speaking to her again. Yes, her separation for a second time saddened me, but for her I would dry my tears and continue on.

I crept across the petting zoo. The gang probably wouldn’t cause a problem any more since their encounter with The Master. I could see Moose and Lemon resting nearby, waiting for the food run for the day. The pair had been put on a night shift among the factories,

apparently. I didn't pay them heed, instead watching Whiplash resting just outside his office, the old petting zoo staff room. He wasn't asleep. I didn't think he *ever* slept, but he was certainly less watchful right now. I used the opportunity to creep around the back of the petting zoo stables and find a more secluded spot.

Nestled between the low scrap wall and the burned out stable, I gently pulled my belongings from the saddlebag. My journal, parchment drawing, old quill, and of course, the PipBuck. Since hearing Sundial's message, it had taken on a meaning to me. This was no lucky piece of scrap. It *belonged* to somepony, a pony who had died wearing it when the world ended hundreds of years ago. I couldn't help but feel that it was better in my hooves than somepony who might abuse or harm it. Besides, I couldn't help but feel a certain curiosity to find other messages. I had spent some of last night, while sleepless, toying with the controls to try and find more messages, but all I'd ended up doing was tuning into the "Ministry of Morale Perk Up Twenty Four Hour Party Line."

"You gotta share! You gotta care!"

Sorry, Sundial. But if I hadn't figured out how to turn that off, I might have just smashed your PipBuck in an effort to preserve my *sanity*. Hearing her voice coming from the speakers inside the pink pony's statue's mouths was enough, but to have it on my PipBuck now? Not a chance.

I thought I had an idea on how to activate another message. I'd made the first one play again, but time was short. I had more pressing concerns right now than listening to another diary entry. No, I had another message to listen to. I'd heard the announcement yesterday. The DJ was going to hand out survival tips for a large chunk of today. I'd need everything I could if I were to survive outside.

Switching to his station through memory, I turned the dial until I heard the cute voice of Sweetie Belle. It hadn't started yet.

I sat it to the side, dialling the volume down to the level of only my hearing before drawing my journal across. Before opening, I had a thought. The mare had looked at my drawings from about when I had started drawing for myself today. Two days before she had looked at ones from when I had been drawing from my subconscious. She hadn't looked at my own drawings from longer back, from when I first got my journal.

It was for the best. Before the day of the Pit, I did not want to look at my own sketches. I still remembered drawing my own death. I still remembered a few that I'd done just prior to that, since I'd been sent to the FunFarm. A few of the slavers, some other slaves, myself, and not much else.

But anything before perhaps a month ago, I didn't even remember.

It wasn't a small amount either. I'd been drawing my entire life, but the more I had drawn, the more it began to blur together and just become something I did to let out the pain or seek solace in. Thus, before me sat a journal in which I didn't even know the contents of more than half of it. Pages filled with mystery, drawings I hadn't remembered doing.

Some days I felt tempted to look at them. But not any more. That part of my life was done. Perhaps one day, when I had escaped, I might look back when I felt safe. But not now. What resided in the earlier pages of my journal would remain a mystery to the blurry past when I didn't care to remember or really think about anything. I just worked, suffered, and drew pictures of whatever was causing me grief. The here and now was too important to risk the emotional turmoil if I found a picture of an anvil and hammer, or of my mother

being dragged away.

“Come on, Murky, keep it together...”

I muttered if only to remind myself of my place right now, concentrating on the pages leading further ahead in my journal. Occasionally, I stopped to glance at a recent one. I even took a minute to sit and stare at a picture of a mare I'd done just after arriving in Fillydelphia. A gorgeous mare with a flowing mane and a long, bushy tail lying on her side with the angle of posing tailored toward...

Coughing, checking over my shoulder, I thought it best I moved on. Now wasn't the best time to admire my perception of beauty in mares.

Picking an empty page, I sat quietly, my mouth tracing shapes without any real idea. Part of me wanted to draw the mare (No, not like *that*) but somehow, I felt that I shouldn't. She had asked me to do so once I had escaped.

Escape...

I knelt down, instead drawing several thick lines in an arc across the page. Smaller wisps of charcoal began curving around the middle. I had no procedure, no patterns to always follow. I simply drew what I felt like and let the eventual picture come to be. Others may have mixed opinions, but to me they were simply my own little rebellion against the chains on my life. Quality wasn't so important as the process of just drawing.

The thick lines became a structure...

The curves became somepony...

With every shape I drew, I could feel the theme emerging, more and more.

The structure became long and strong. A Wall.

The pony became a pegasus, above the Wall.

Delving deep down into my wishes, the things I wanted for myself.

The Wall had slavers on it, light wisps of charcoal showing gunshots missing the pony.

The pegasus was flying free, heading for the open wasteland.

I sat back, smiling. It no longer shocked me or gave massive rises of emotion. I could draw for myself any time I wanted now. I would fulfill my—

A wheezing cough hurtled through my system, causing me to collapse to the side, eyes screwed shut. My stomach ached. The lack of sustenance hadn't been helping. I'd grabbed a quick drink from a rain barrel meant to gather water for primitive purification near the roller coaster just to stay *alive*, away from dehydration. But I could still feel the brutal effects of no real food for... oh Goddesses, how long was it now? I couldn't remember.

Ok, I'd fulfill my promise to the mare. My picture proved my will to escape for my own life. My cough only reinforced it. To stay was to die.

Briefly, I tried not to think that I'd been prepared to throw that life away to end the pain.

“Hello out there, wasteland!”

My mind snapped back on track, that hated subject falling immediately as The DJ came on the airwaves through the PipBuck. This was it.

“Now I bet many of you are wondering, ‘Hey Pon-Three!’ Or, ‘hey Pon-E,’ I kinda get both from time to time, you all say what you want, I know I switch it up sometimes, but anyway. I get you folks asking, ‘Why are you callin’ out all these basics to everypony in the wastes? We all know this stuff!’ Well, my little veterans out there, sure you might, but recently I’ve been thinking. Since about, what, a month and a bit ago, we’ve had a big rise in ponies going out into the wastes themselves. I swear, it’s like every settlement and Stable from Filly to the Hoof is waking up and finding its own little hero to go out

there to save Equestria in one way or another. Not all of these ponies are getting on too well, so I figured, why not revise some of the stuff I've been teaching you all these years? Besides, judgin' by the news, I figure some of you 'vets' could use a tip or two remembered. Remember children, the wasteland is the real enemy and it doesn't like pride or ego."

I had a new page in my journal out. It stung to lose my imagery of escape so suddenly, but this was important.

I couldn't read or write. I couldn't write a plan.

I was going to draw it. Little images to remind myself, step by step of what I would need. Of my routes and timings. Of any handy little tip I could remember from the education to come. I would be a good little student and listen closely.

"So, without messing you folks around any further, allow me to cut to the chase, wastelanders. Here's survival one-oh-one for the Equestrian Wasteland."

So it began. I prepared myself, this was to marathon itself all day. I'd have to listen on and between shifts, collect everything I needed, and be ready.

...here we go.

"Now, for all those of you who want to fight the good fight, all power to ya, if only more would do that. But first things first, know that the world may be dangerous and a Hellhound would tear you in half. There is something much more basic. Food. That's right, children, you gotta eat and drink! Store all you can, you cannot rely on the wasteland to provide for you. Last thing any would-be hero wants is to die of hunger. While we're on it, make sure you got everything tied safely to your body where you can reach it quickly. Nothin' worse than finding you lost your water can half a mile back in the wastes to a faulty knot, right?"

I drew lines...

The gang was arguing. Or rather, Noose and Lemon were arguing. I didn't know if they really counted as a "gang" any more. One way or another, their bickering distracted them from their food. I'd thought about it, and simply could not bring myself to take the food from anypony other than them. While I was sure the other ponies would not hesitate to beat me just as bad if they knew my winged secret, this gang I had a particular loathing for.

"So what, Noose? You want us to just cower away because some fat pony killed Nails?"

"That 'fat' pony would tear you in two for smelling the wrong way, Lemon! Know when you're beat! We lie low."

I was using the wreckage of the old pigsty to creep around behind them. They'd taken to storing the bowls of oatmeal inside it to prevent them from falling away in the wind. Most slaves devoured the oatmeal immediately. Hell, my half portion (thanks, Whiplash) was long gone to sate my days long hunger.

Wow, it really said something about slave life that such a meagre amount was enough to almost make me feel full.

I could only presume they had left the food to, as some slaves claimed, 'settle.' To be less

fresh' and become a thicker and more substantial-feeling meal instead of the watery goo that we were normally given. I hadn't ever tried it on the few occasions I'd ever been given a meal, but for the sake of supplies, I was willing to try.

"Yeah, when? Both of us are sick, we're being put on the foundries soon, and that bastard is back again to shove us around at the workplace."

I leaned forward, my mouth closing around the first wooden bowl, gently pushing a small tin can forward. Please don't make noise, please don't make noise...

"Can't even take out my frustration on the runt either. If he hadn't bucked me in the danglies I might have felt so— ah hell, what am I saying, bastard pegasus can get whipped to death by The Master for all I care."

I tried to not let my imagination take over as I felt my entire body shiver in fear, not just from being nearby to the mare who had almost beaten me to death yesterday, but the sensation of even remembering *him*. The oatmeal slopped and gurgled in a way that food really shouldn't into the tin can. Taking a second to catch my breath and calm my nerves, I reached for the second, trying not to let the realist side of my mind catch up to what I was doing.

"Just shut up, Lemon. Go eat your oatmeal, you stupid buck."

"Are you crazy? I'm not touching that stuff till I *know* it'll stay down this time. Shit tastes even worse coming up!"

Okay. Ew. All the same, I remained thankful for their continued distraction of conversation to not turn around as I poured the second bowl into the tins. Ducking back, I began wrapping them tightly in a wad of cloth with some mouth and hoof work to keep as much of it inside as I could. It wasn't much, but it was all I'd reasonably get that wasn't already being eaten or liable to poison me. It'd have to last till I could scavenge something outside the walls.

I began sneaking away, scooting as quickly as I dared along the wall, hiding behind other slaves as best I could. Most were sleeping, any that did see me wouldn't say a word. No pony particularly liked the gang. As I began to re-approach my hiding place, an unusual sound made me dive for cover.

A sound like a screeching saw through rotten wood had startled me. Poking my head out from behind the old pig trough, I glanced in the direction of the horrid noise before sighing in relief.

Whiplash had finally fallen asleep, head lolling sideways on the fence from his resting point to drool over the metal. The noise matched his breathing. He was snoring loudly and proudly. I could hardly suppress a small giggle at the sight of such a fearful pony in my life completely left without any poise. If The Master had done one good thing, it was make Whiplash seem not so bad any more.

I was about to turn and go back to my hidey hole. The DJ was going to continue with which towns to avoid soon after Sapphire Shores was done singing. But something clicked in my mind.

"...make sure you got everything tied safely to your body..."

I had no real rope or twine, but a long piece of leather might work.

Every part of my mind that remained sane was telling me this was a bad idea. All the same, I felt my hooves carry me as stealthily as I could towards Whiplash and his little office.

I had just stolen food from the gang. What in the Goddesses' great eyes was I doing

thinking about stealing from a *slave master*? I moved one step per snore, fearfully struggling to keep my breathing as regular as I could. I found it was matching Whiplash's snoring patterns out of sheer habit.

Ten feet.

Whiplash snorted, shifting. I froze on the spot. After a second, he rested. I let my hooves carry me forward. Three slaves were watching me, rolling their eyes at this stupid runt about to get himself killed. The gang was around the corner of the building, oh so thankfully. I could still hear them arguing about who else they should pick on after I got lifted.

Five feet.

The door was right there. Inside I could see a short bed stuffed into the corner, surrounded by old bottles of alcoholic drink. Whiplash had often taken to sneaking shots whenever he thought a griffon hadn't been looking. Stern, the fanatical leader of the griffons, was legendary for coming down hard on slavers who drank on the job, but the allure of taste I guessed was too much for many. A schedule was drawn on the wall in Lash's crude handwriting, or at least I guessed it was. Either that or he was into abstract art beyond what I could fathom.

Sitting near the door in the tiny room (how did he even fit?), there were four whips of varying sizes. He even numbered them. The number one whip he always carried, whips two through four were of ever changing sizes. I immediately regretted the fact that I could probably recognise them specifically by the feeling of being whipped after only a month in Filly.

I went for the number three whip, the thinnest and made of strong brahmin leather. It was the one that left the stinging lines longer than the others, often allowing a slight breakage of the skin and making a sound akin to a gunshot with.

Stopping on the spot, I shook my head fiercely. It occurred to me that my perception of life was *really* messed up.

I realised that I'd have some real explaining to do to anypony outside the Wall why I knew so much about whips and chains to avoid them getting weird ideas about my tastes in life.

The whip was hard, very hard, but flexible and if pulled tight, incredibly durable. Perfect for the idea I had in mind. I quickly stuck my head in the door and plucked it up into my mouth.

Whiplash stopped snoring.

I collapsed backwards, trying to run around the hut, but his eyes opened long before I got the command to my frozen joints from the fear.

"..mm... hmm? Murky Number Seven?"

It took him a second to see. His eyes lowered in fury as he snarled and twisted to look at me, the number one whip levitating up.

"You have precisely three seconds to explain why Betsy is in your mouth, Murk."

I gulped, too scared to even drop the whip.

"Because... because—"

"One, two, and three."

His whip cracked around my hooves, leading me to stumble backwards, dropping the leather.

"Wicked Slit wanted it!"

I shouted it at the top of my lungs. Not very much, given all illnesses considered.

"She wanted to borrow one to do her shift! She wants to, um, broaden her horizons!"

Whiplash didn't look very convinced, but his eyes were still full of sleep, to the point where he waved a hoof.

"Whatever, but if it isn't back by tonight, I'm holding you responsible, Shackles be damned. Least it'll maybe stop Slit bitching about slave efficiencies again to me."

He turned, aiming to go back to sleep as I made to run. I could rest up somewhere else before moving on to my shift anyway. But as I turned, breathing a sigh of relief, I heard Whiplash speak up.

"Oh, and Murk?"

I didn't even dare look around. I wish I had, for the next thing I knew a burning line of pain whipped its way across my flanks and rump, leaving me to squeal loudly and hop away rather pathetically to fall on my side, rubbing a hoof on one flank. The lash had went right across my cutie mark.

"That's for waking me up. Now bugger off to your shift."

I said I wouldn't cry, but I couldn't avoid tears of pain from that blow as I felt it throb and sting. I could hear the other slaves laughing at my lashing across the backside.

How I wasn't going to miss this after tonight.

"Now I can't say I enjoy this bit of advice any more than you will... well, some of you anyways. See, as much as the good ol' Equestrian spirit should run free and solve everything through just talking out your problems, there's a whole lot out there that begs to differ. Gangs, ghouls and if you're real unlucky, raiders. Hell, there's even worse on top of that. So as much as it pains me to say this, children, if you're going to go out into the wastes, make sure you go out there packing. Get some weapons and armour, whatever you can. Better to live, folks. Better to live."

Lines became curves...

The cart's harness was already giving me a nasty burn on my back where I bore the brunt of the weight when I pulled. Wicked Slit had set me right to my oh-so-favourite activity in her factory: cart delivery. Weighing what felt like half a ton per cart, the exhaustion factor didn't so much creep in as slam home. Five deliveries throughout the day, one to each of the ammo mills in Fillydelphia carrying various types of metal for even more varied types of rounds manufactured to feed Red Eye's army. Copper to the Ironshod Foundry. Steel to the Saddlesore Manufacturing Facility. The others I didn't even know the names of. I just put down my head and got on with pulling weights far too large for my somewhat, less than stellar levels of strength.

It still didn't matter. These were the last five carts ever to be pulled by Murky Number Seven. I'd see to that.

Plus, I had a little plan. Wicked Slit believed me broken in and too cowardly to try anything. It was why she sometimes left me unsupervised or without a handler to better serve her "efficiency ratios" elsewhere. As such, I'd been able to dump my saddlebag at the side of the factory by the road and use it as a dead drop location. Each trip I made I had

stopped my cart, slipped free of my harness (the builders clearly didn't factor in ponies of my size when they designed it), and shoved a slab of flat metal into it. Five trips, five sheets of differing types of metal. I knew nothing of the composition of metal, so I hoped they would each do the job.

I tugged the empty cart into Slit's factory, limp-hoofed and gasping for air in the sweltering air of machinery and industry. The drop-off zone was heavily guarded by slavers who directed me into a port to store the cart for some poor pony on the next shift. It had become almost a tradition, actually, for them to take bets on how long it took me to back a heavy cart into a bay with my pathetic levels of strength. The current longest time, I believed, was six minutes after a day I'd been overloaded. My record was two minutes.

Rather embarrassing, really, but that was all I could do after a full shift of pulling those damn carts and having jelly legs and most of my back muscles feeling stretched out by the end of it.

I heard, rather than saw, the guards bickering over amounts. It was never much, none of them liked betting more than a few caps or a couple cigarettes on me. Sighing, I once again played their game. In theory I would just dump the cart, but I had to judge every time which slaver was most likely to beat me up for not having him win, then try and aim for their timing. They hadn't yet worked out that I could hear their whispering rather clearly. I let my ears do the thinking, hearing a couple bet high, citing my time in the Pit and sickness to slow me down. A third voice, a buck, commented on his bet he'd made in advance, as well as the annoyance levels if I didn't do it in under three minutes.

Well, crap.

I tried my best, I really did. But my aching muscles, barely healed injuries, and low energy levels just wouldn't make the cart move at all. With a slip and a surprised shout, I fell to the floor while straining to push the cart on its rusty wheels.

"Oh for the love of— get a move on, you whelp!"

"Thirty seconds or you're getting it, Murk! I got a full pack on you!"

"Get it in less than thirty seconds and *I'll* get you for it!"

My muscles just wouldn't give. I couldn't risk forcing them further, I had to retain enough energy for tonight, what little I'd have left. I sighed, falling over and tilting my head against the cart. Some days you just couldn't win.

"Oh are you kidding me? He's giving up! C'mere!"

I looked up, breathing deeply and simply hoping to myself that the beating wouldn't be *too* bad.

"Hey! What did I tell you bastards about interrupting slaves?"

The trio stopped dead in their tracks, two of them even made to leave immediately. The third who had advanced on me turned, immediately sweating. Wicked Slit was stomping her way towards us all across the delivery room floor out of the manufacturing areas. She had old pegasus flight goggles on to protect her eyes from foundry sparks, her knife floating obediently beside her. I felt envious of her stamina to keep magic up like that all day.

"You beat them, they work less! Beat them when they *aren't* in work hours. You think I can afford you to lose me ten minutes of labour every damn time you feel like smacking something? Go hit up a slave in their pen after your shift is done!"

Of course. Even slavers had shifts, albeit shorter and less laborious than the slaves. I couldn't imagine Slit would be any happier about losing her slavers than her slaves from their workplace.

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Right away, Ma'am! Sorry, Ma'am!"

They scurried away, leaving me to get back on my hooves and with great effort, shove the creaking cart back into the bay. An eighteen inch curved knife on a sadistic slaver mistress has that sort of incentive effect on even weak ponies like me. I collapsed against it, breathing hard as I felt the five or six miles of pulling take a toll on my stamina. My front right hoof was aching, a dull pulsating pain making itself known every couple of seconds while every muscle in my torso hurt to move. It was a familiar pain, I had endured it after every shift under Slit for the past month. I tried to take a few breaths, get to my hooves, but my lungs reminded me they were yet uncared for by medicine, causing me to hack and cough for a good few seconds, even as I heard the rough tread of Slit nearing me. Clearly the medical potions from yesterday were beginning to lose the temporary relief they had granted me. Judging by the pain in my throat and the swimming of my vision, I figured I had till tomorrow morning before the sickness kicked in again.

"Guess it's up to me to unharness you, stupid morons."

Slit was muttering to herself as she reached out with her magic, unlatching the harness from my body. Clearly she hadn't clocked that I could simply slip out myself. Dragging my tired body across the floor with slow, deliberate, and laboured movements, I collapsed just beside her. I couldn't help it. The tiredness went to my brain, a night lacking any sleep and only a small portion of foul oatmeal to power me just drained my energy reserves completely. With a snort, Slit roughly knocked me with her front hoof a few times.

"Get up, Murk. You've still got four minutes of shift time left. Make yourself useful and carry that bag of scrap into the factory before you go, I'll show you where."

"Urggghh..." was my well thought out and dictated reply.

"Shut up, get up, and *hurry* up!"

Her half-buck gave me enough reason to find some strength deep down to dodge the flying hoof and clamber to my own four legs to nod quickly. My eyes were hazy, I just wanted to lie down somewhere and sleep. Maybe a massage to my aching muscles. Would a bit of food go amiss? Proper food?

With a sigh, I stretched out and trotted over to the sack Slit was motioning to with her knife. Biting the neck of the bag, I didn't even bother throwing it over my back but rather just began dragging it. Rolling her eyes, Slit merely turned and cantered into the factory.

"Celestia help me from hopeless slaves," she muttered, "or banish them all to the fucking moon where they can't bother me anymore."

I had to bite my tongue. The urge to quip something off at her as a last action before I never saw her again was so strong. Thankfully, I allowed the slave in my mind to take control for a few seconds to remain *alive*.

I followed her, dragging the sack a foot at a time, the heavy leather tasting disgusting in my mouth from old dust and grime across it. Pull. Step back a few feet. Pull. Step back.

Inside the factory, the heat hit me like running into a wall. The massive metal vats radiated warmth so strongly that mere proximity was enough to dull the senses and make a prickle on my skin. Metal shards stuck out of the bag where they had pierced the lining, their scraping sound not helping on top of the mass of noise within the factory. My ears ached, almost missing Slit's sudden command to stop before walking right into her rump. With a sigh of relief, I dumped the sack where her knife tapped the ground before kneeling down again. One of the shards fell out. While Slit was still glancing at the industrial presses

to observe the slaves, I quickly shoved one down my vest. I had an idea for it, courtesy of a radio-born inspiration.

"Shift's over, Murk. Get out of here. I hear Whiplash has some more work for you over at the threshing mills. They need a small pony over there. Go straight there."

"But..."

"No buts, Murk," she spat, "So get *yours* over to the damned mill before I ensure you can't sit down again for a long time!"

She removed her goggles, sitting them on the bottom of the stairs that led to her office so she could pull my face up to her eyes.

"I don't think I need to explain to you how much I do *not* like you, Murk."

The knife gently seemed to caress my forehead, the tip dragging my lanky mane from my eyes for her to see clearly.

"So I'm going to tell you this," she continued, her voice so low I began to worry she knew about my hearing, "I don't want you back. I know that Chainlink Shackles is coming for you. 'The Master' will not be so forgiving as I have been. He isn't like me, Murk. He won't threaten you. He won't scare you with imagination or promise implausible things."

She had my attention, not from the knife that rested between my eyes from above, nor the hard hoof holding my chin up to her face. It was her tone. She spoke almost with reverence, as though she wished she never had to meet him. The Master even made her terrified with his reputation among the slavers. My eyes were wide.

"He breaks slaves, Murk. As far as I'm concerned, I'm glad you're going there. Perhaps you'll learn something about why you should have tried harder in life. My little slave. So woefully pathetic. You *never* tried, Murk. You think I can't see your destiny? Look at that tiny flank of yours, a set of shackles? I sometimes wish I could just close them around your hooves and leave you out to die because *you are so fucking useless to me*. Born into slavery and you still can't hack it."

Her hoof roughly shoved me away. I fell on my side, shivering as I pulled my hooves in.

"Get out of here. The Pit was too good for you."

I shakily got up, nodding my head. No... she was wrong. I wasn't going to go to The Master. I was going to escape. I stared at Slit, looking her right in the eyes. I wanted to tell her, so she would know by tomorrow that she was wrong. If Slit saw my defiance she didn't make a sign, instead turning to scream at some slaves for stopping as they fought for breath from the heat. I wanted to whisper something, to shout something! Just one last word that proved I wasn't going to be beaten by her cruelty any more!

I couldn't think of anything. I never was good with words. She scared the slave in me too much to dare speak out against my masters.

So I stole her goggles instead.

I took great pleasure in her scream of frustration as I high-tailed it from the factory at top speed toward the threshing mills, collecting my saddlebag as I went to add my new acquisitions into it.

"Now there's one unfortunate truth about the wasteland, children. I always tell you, I bring you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts and that is exactly my point. If you go into the wasteland, it will hurt you. Physically, mentally, hell, even spiritually for those

of you who believe. So make sure you have those potions handy, as much RadAway and Rad-X as you can get your hooves on too. Keep some bandages if you can, they're light and you never know, you can't rely on just potions. Now a gun or a nailboard may be an obvious way to experience the pain of the wasteland, but let me remind you that we are all dirty. Yes, children, it's true. We scrounge around in the dirt scavenging all day or go out in weather nopony has business being in. So remember. Disease and illness is the greatest killer. Wrap up. Keep yourself as warm as you can and dress appropriately. Take the advice from Daddy Pon-E, children, you do not want to get sick in the wasteland if you can help it."

Curves became shapes...

The threshing blades missed me by a scant inch as I dived to the side and rolled over to land out from under the machine. Hissing and clicking, the blades skittered across the ground, improperly calibrated to score the floor as they moved. The huge machine stretched fifty feet down the mill hall, threading string into greater shapes as it worked ceaselessly. Like a piano's strings, it held thousands of strands beside one another down its whole length, the whirling machinery racking up and down the material to slowly and gradually bring it together into something useful. Beneath the machine lay the refuse, an empty space filled with the fallen threads and lint of severed lines that usually was only used to give the machinery's mechanics space to move. An automated scrap collector was installed, but was far beyond repair.

As such, the smaller ponies got the glorious job of rushing under it once the blades retracted, grabbing as much thread as they could and then diving back out before the blades caught up with them. It was lethal work, hours of death-defying movements against a time space of only perhaps fifteen seconds. Slavers waited with canes for the slaves who didn't bring back enough on each trip, leading to gradually more daring runs every time. The thread was more important than our safety, apparently.

Oh, and that was the kicker. The space was only two feet high, so a pony couldn't gallop or even stand up. They had to crawl on all four hooves. Many slaves rolled sideways, but aside from emergencies, I found that hurt my wings far too much. I couldn't afford to be yelping in pain, drawing attention to my sides. Even now I was still nervous, the rumours were spreading still about a pegasus in Fillydelphia ever since the accident at the Terminal. I really wished I could just fly away from all this.

More than most, to me, that wish was cruelly denied. Just one mallet and anvil to...

I shook my head as I dumped the threads I had collected down. I couldn't go back to thinking about it. I still woke up screaming sometimes as I imagined seeing it descending again and again, finding myself huddled up with my hooves trying to cradle my inert wings as best as they could. If only they didn't still hurt so much when touched.

"Ready up! Cycle's coming back again!"

I pulled myself to my hooves. They ached from the cart pulling earlier, but the immediate exhaustion had worn off. Thresher grabbing may be dangerous and in the short term tiring, but the rests every few seconds to dump the light material and wait were the closest thing to a rest in Fillydelphia sometimes. Of course, that presumed you didn't get caught even briefly. I'd had my fair share of cuts from this machine, but I'd seen far worse. This machine had

claimed more than a few pints of blood over the time I'd been here, and at least a couple limbs.

The blades spun. I watched them twine the thread, twisting it into thicker lines approaching string. Alongside me, another thirty smaller ponies waited ready for the mad dash. Many of them bore scars or even open cuts from the blades if they had missed getting out. I myself had almost come close before I got used to the rhythm again. Annoyingly, even among this bunch of small ponies, I was still the smallest.

The blades stopped, before detaching and spinning back along the threads.

"Go!"

As one we dove under, sliding as far as we could on our bellies. I saw some of the others 'scooting' with their back legs, grabbing with their front. I didn't like that, too easy to get stuck or be unable to turn around. I used all four hooves, crawling to the back of the machine, as far as I dared. The trick other slaves missed was to go as far as you could, turn, and then push as much as you could back. It saved time. On my first day, I'd tried scooting and gotten my side sliced open as though with a scalpel. Only the timely intervention of a new slaver not wanting to lose slaves on his first day had saved my life, and given me pain for the next week for almost screwing it up for him. The next time back I'd watched the ones who seemed to stay alive better.

The space was claustrophobic, my throat and nose felt clogged from thread fibres in the air kicked up by scrambling slaves. My legs scraped and burned on the ground as I madly dashed forward toward the spinning blades that moved back ahead of me.

I heard a scream from further up the line. Somepony had caught up to the blades too quickly with their front legs and cut themselves.

The noise shook me. I bottled and turned, shoving as much as I could back. Even as I moved, I heard the noise of the blades whirring toward me from behind. Closing my eyes, I pushed as fast as I could, whimpering as I dived out from under the machine. Behind me, the blades met the end, a second or two behind me.

Fifteen seconds spent under there. It had felt like minutes.

"Ready up!"

We didn't have a chance to rest. I saw the slave with the cut being beaten with canes for crawling back out with nothing but an injury, he was being told to run back in next time. My own pile was small. I hadn't been taking risks, but I usually managed to get it up to what I needed. I was small enough to scraper around down there.

I pressed myself down to the floor, ready to push in quickly.

"Ready up! Cycle's coming back!"

I took a deep breath. One good run would let me be able to take it easy for the rest. Stay safe. One danger run was better than a dozen where one trip could be a risk.

I thought?

"Go!"

I kicked off the wall rolling on my side to hurl myself right at the blades, stopping just short before crawling in after it. Inches from my face, I followed them, feeling my entire body trembling in adrenaline and terror as I stared unblinking at them. I swore I could see bloodstains.

Deeper. Deeper. Three seconds. Four seconds. Five...

Then I heard another scream.

It came from beside me. A young stallion was struggling on the spot amongst his pile of

wool.

"Help! Help me! Somepony help me!"

I turned to head back, but doing so let me see his predicament. His clothing had become tangled in the wires and gears that pulled the machine back and forth! Eyes wide, he pulled at it in a panic, screaming blue murder the entire time.

In a moment of hesitation, and a glance at the blades as they stopped and began to come back, I dove at him. Grabbing at him, I pulled and tugged even as his thrashing limbs knocked and confused where we were trying to free him.

"HELP!"

"I'm trying! I'm— yes!"

With a tear, the clothing came loose. I grabbed the pony, trying to push him ahead of me until he got his hooves working again. Scrambling madly, he rushed ahead, tripping again in his rush. I bit his jerkin and tugged, but I felt my heart sink. The sound behind me was intense. The blades were coming. Every other pony was already out.

I dove as hard as I could, yanking him with me, but it was too far, I wasn't going to make it. We fell together, and I curled up over him. I tried to pull all my hooves back from it, maybe I could-

The blades sheared down and I felt my vest tear. A hideous, screeching, and disgustingly crunching sound filled my ears. I screamed out loud, closing my eyes.

The pain never came. Slowly, I opened my eyes, before writhing and shoving the stuck pony out before hurling myself against the wall in a sudden panic of my own. Panting hard, I stared at my body and behind me.

...I was unharmed. The machine had jarred and jammed.

A second scream split my ears, ongoing, agonised, and wailing for far longer than a scream should. Begging, squealing, and crying as I stood up and looked down the line before almost being sick.

Red.

A pony had become caught in the machine, one I had seen trying to take too many risks. His back leg... it wasn't there. Red blood coated the thread and the blades.

I wanted to be sick. If that hadn't happened...

But I couldn't have just left the one who had gotten stuck, could I? I hadn't even thought about it.

The one who had gotten caught was thrashing on his three remaining legs, screaming as slaves and slavers tried to pull him free. Tugging him out to the side, I saw the slavers discussing amongst themselves. I could only just pick out their voices.

"We've got some potions in the back, want me to get 'em?"

"No."

"But—"

"He's just a slave. Useless to us now. Stern would have our hides if we used it. You want executed for wastage?"

I didn't even have time to process that before I saw the revolver magically float from its holster and fire a single shot. Everypony in the entire line screamed, flattening to the ground as the shot rang out. The screaming stopped immediately even as the echo of the shot rang painfully in my ears.

Below me, the pony I had rescued finally opened his eyes, before hugging me tightly.

"Oh thank you! Thank you! I just... I..."

He broke down, crying into the wall in relief and terror. I just sat silently, not really knowing how to handle that sort of reaction. Eventually, I raised a front hoof and meekly patted his back.

Feeling a light draft waft against my right wing, I looked around to fix my-
My wing was showing through the tear.

Stifling a shout and a curse, I backed against the wall as fast as I could, frantically trying to twist my vest around and hold the tattered fabric in place.

The slavers stood up, most of them bloodied from the wound of the slave. One of them looked disgusted, another merely annoyed.

“Get a slave to drag it in the back. We’ll take it out back to the pit for the incinerator tonight.”

It. They had called him ‘it’. The mare’s words came back to me. We weren’t stock, we were ponies.

Then it became clear. That was why I had risked myself. A *pony* had been at threat. Not a number. It’s what the mare had done for me earlier.

Briefly, past the sickness that I would have gotten killed were it not for someone else’s unfortunate accident, I felt a brief sense of pride.

To these slaves, we were just a statistic. Wicked Slit’s efficiency, The Master’s games and tasks. Red Eye’s industry thrived on statistics, no matter his smooth words.

Even as I heard the inevitable call for it to be me to drag the body out to the back room, I found myself with a sensation of absolute worthlessness to anypony’s eyes. Just a little cog to the machine. To run inside the machine to clean its workings in a mill. Now that I had seen what it was to do the right thing, it held my surroundings in a stark contrast. The uncaring nature of it landed all the harder. Fighting with my vest, I nervously approached. I needed out of here now. Now. Right now.

I put my shaking hooves around the body of the dead slave, trying to avoid his blood. I wasn’t strong enough to pull or push him with any dignity, but I’d be damned to the moon if I was going to simply treat him like a piece of meat. The slaver standing beside him stood up from the body and glanced at me.

“Hey, you got cut on your side?”

I drew breath sharply, shaking my head madly.

“No! I, uh, just a tear!”

My hooves were the only thing covering my wing. The slaver glanced down at it, as though looking for blood. An aching slow moment of him examining.

“...carry on.”

I hoped my sigh of relief wasn’t too obvious as I moved to the body.

Gently, I closed his eyes once I was sure the slavers weren’t watching me any more. As I pulled the body away towards the back of the mill, I heard the whirr of the machine starting again as though nothing had even happened.

“Ready up!”

Like good little cogs, the slaves stood ready again, even through a mask of tired tears. The one I had rescued shook his head and moaned in fear, until he was cuffed around the head until he got back on the line again.

Moving through double swing doors, I moved the dead slave to the back door and tried to arrange him as best I could. He wouldn’t be treated well, dumped in a mass grave and then left until incineration rounds reached the mill. But at least I could give him something

approaching peace for now. Perhaps his soul would be gone by the time they came to make him into ash.

I sat back.

Then it hit me.

I began shuddering, unstoppable heaves of my chest as suddenly it all landed at once.

This poor pony had saved my life. This would have been me, if he hadn't gotten stuck. Without him making a mistake, my back hooves would have been torn off and shredded. I would be the one with the magnum round to the forehead.

I felt my eyes watering badly as I fell to the side, trying to stem it and failing completely. It wasn't sadness, I saw slaves die every day in some way or another. But this was so close, so random, so without reason or purpose! What kind of world was this for ponies?

I looked up, trying to find *something* to help me, anything! I'd left everything in my saddlebag in a safe location, hidden in an old pipe, so I didn't even have my journal or PipBuck to help me. The walls were coated in slime and rust, cracked paint gave way to bare concrete so popular in Fillydephia. Some posters ran the walls, one had an all too familiar and hated face watching me, apparently forever. A couple had military advertisements, huge metal ponies, and swift blue and gold pegasi.

The last had a gentle yellow and pink mare sitting amongst a peaceful field watching a sunset. A tranquil scene. The colours were that of my saddlebag. Was this a medical poster? I didn't care, all that mattered was the peaceful scene.

Was that old Equestria? A place where you could sit upon hills and gaze with no worries?

I looked to the slave again, I looked to my own grimy and scarred hooves and felt the trembling return.

What *was* this world I had been born into? I had never even known a hint of the past, but still, the feeling of dislocation from what I was supposed to be living like was so strong. It led me to not even care that it made no sense to feel that way as I let tears stream from my eyes and hugged myself tightly. Ponies shouldn't have to go through this.

I couldn't stay here. My mind was too fragile, too newly open to things other than the work and my masters for this sort of horror. I sniffed, got to my hooves, and stuffed as much material as I could along with a needle and thread into a bag before leaving the mill via the back door, stopping only to grab the one healing potion I could find left by the slavers.

"Aaaaand we're back again with the continued wasteland survival one-oh-one today! Now this next part is pretty vague, so I'll try to be clear. Exploration. It's a big world out there, and if we want to help it, to fight the good fight, we'll need to get out and see it. Now, first up, stay away from Stables. Death traps, every one of them from what I've heard. But other things? The more we find out and know, the more we understand, the better we'll be to handle the future, children. Make maps, chart where you're going, get to know your own area well. It'll always pay off in the end when you get lost or need something specific to help you. Speaking of finding things, here's the fun bit... loot! If you can find it, think about taking it! It may be scrap to you, but somepony might need it. Just like I said before, folks, trade will help us all. So don't just throw away that wonderglue or scrap electronics, y'hear?"

Shapes came to life...

The wind roared about my head as I squinted my eyes into the harsh and now warmer gusts that blew around Fillydelphia. My mind was whirling just as much, trying to locate the best positions, the safest routes, and the cosiest hiding places I could think of. My small talent to find hideaways being strained as best I could at this distance. In all, I was trying my best to not think about a dead slave in a threshing mill.

I sat atop the pink and, uh, more pink helter skelter of the FunFarm with a rag tied around my mouth against the smog up this high. Okay, perhaps I was coming back to the FunFarm just once, but not to the petting zoo. That counted as never coming back, right?

Towering above everything other than the huge Barn and the roller coaster, it afforded the best view of Fillydelphia I could manage within my limited accessibility. Within the small cage meant to contain, presumably, a staff member for setting small foals on their way, I cast my eyes across every street, building, and scrap pile that made up the horrifying vista that was the slave city. The burning pits dug into the concrete and covered with wire mesh forever spewed smog into the air from parasprite incineration. Armed guards cantered to and fro around them, occasionally glancing off to the axe pits. In there, slaves were cutting up old scrap and passing it on to carts to be sent to places like Slit's factory. In fact, I could even see her giant concrete block of a workplace nearby, the furnaces adding to the dirty cloud that permeated the air. Further out, I saw the slaver camps surrounding the entire work areas, just short of the Wall.

The Wall...

That gigantic obstacle to my escape lurked not an impossible distance from the FunFarm. Piled high, crammed with guard towers, magically charged fences, and beyond it, a tainted moat. What lurked beneath the sick slime there I could only hazard at, but if regular gunshots from the guards were any indication, it was not a dormant threat. I had to cross it somehow, and simply pray I didn't meet the rumoured... things, that existed in there. Even being exposed to a slightly tainted mother had given me a mutation on birth, not to mention whatever effect it had on my development and organs.

All my planning failed the moment I reached the Wall, but I'd find something. There had to be other ways than the main gate. I had a knack for finding small spots, maybe a drain or a hidden escape route to flank attackers.

It was too horrifying to think on for long. I let my eyes drift closer in between scrapes of my charcoal to draw up my map.

I could see the entire FunFarm, still filled with toiling slaves as they worked in shifts to drag off all the unneeded scrap metal and scavenged items. I'd be doing some of that later myself, according to the DJ. Who knew what I could get for some oddities? I needed trade items for the wasteland, especially as I owned no bottle caps myself. The radio had even said that some places would trade three hundred caps for certain drugs or types of healing items that I had almost come close to getting away with yesterday.

I was *painfully* aware of the fact that those items were worth three times more than my own price on the slave markets.

I wondered what my listing would look like now. Tiny and weak young buck, slight taint mutations, non-functional wings, twelve previous owners, answers to the number seven, has

no talent for anything other than failing, apparently.

I lightly tapped my head with a hoof to clear my mind, I couldn't let that kind of thinking get a hold of me again. I didn't want to go back to the grind, I didn't want to be a slave any more.

Flicking my loose tooth with my tongue, I began to wonder if my slave instincts were a bit like it. Like I was close to casting it off and getting rid of its pain but just not quite yet gathering the courage to actually go through the effort. Sighing, I went back to work, comparing a mental defect to a loose tooth. What idiocy.

My map was almost done, as was my perceived route. I had drawn thick lines for buildings and roads, dotted lines for patrol routes I could spot from up here, and small crosses on where I knew there were hiding spots. Dumpsters, drain ditches, piles of metal crates.

Who made those damn metal crates? No matter *where* I had been sent to work in the wasteland, there were always the same shaped and coloured metal crates. They ranked just below the pink menace on the creepy scale of always seeming to follow me around! Who made them? Whatever pony came up with the design must have been rolling in... what did they use? Bits! They'd have been rolling in bits!

I looked to my left at the life-size pink pony cut out on the wall, a hoof and a smile showing all the foals the way to the helter skelter's slide exit. Her eyes were fixed on me.

"Don't suppose *you* know? You were around back then, weren't you?"

It beeped at me.

After I had pulled myself to my hooves from behind the nearest corner and breathed into a bag to stop hyperventilating, I realised the beep had instead come from my PipBuck. I was fairly sure that nopony had heard me yelp in terror.

Okay, it was more of a scream. I was a pathetic little slave, what can be expected of me when I get scared by a freaky pink pony thing?

I looked down at my PipBuck.

Beep!

The same noise as last night on the control tower.

Beep!

With a small click, the speaker cut the music that had been playing (how dare it interrupt Velvet Remedy!) and replaced it with the somewhat faded and slightly distorted ambience I'd heard from the last diary entry. Holding it close, I left my plans to listen.

"Oh, gee, I hit go already, um, ok. Hello!"

"Hey..."

I don't know why I did it. It just felt wrong to not answer Sundial.

"Day two of my continued PipBuck recordings to tell of my pretty boring life amongst a not so boring period of history. They said on the radio that somepony took a shot at the Princess out near the front today, no reports back but they have said she is still alive. I dunno. Rumours get everywhere these days. I swear, Pinkie's Ministry seems to be everywhere to catch the bad ones, those posters creep me out."

I glanced back up at the cut out, staring right at me. 'Pinkie', huh? I considered the colour of the helter skelter and rolled my eyes. Of course it would be.

"Well, I guess I'll tell you, whoever you are, about my day at work. See, I work at the Ministry of Wartime Technology in Filly now since I last spoke to this thing. I figured it only makes sense, they're always looking for ponies for the expansion efforts in

Fillydelphia. Only catch is it's in weapons. Yeah, Dad didn't like that. He's a doctor, of course, so I guess his son making guns really isn't too good for his mind. We argued, but frankly I don't care. I need the money. I'm sorry, Dad, I know you paid for my Stable insurance and the PipBuck, but I need to live day to day and taxes are so high right now with the war effort. See, if I work in a war factory, I get exempted from them."

This didn't sound like the picture perfect Equestria I'd seen in the posters and heard Sundial talk about last time. I wondered just how much changed so rapidly back then on the lead up to, well, Doomsday. The close of Equestria and the dawn of my dreary world.

"Now, anyway, I don't like to ramble so I'll cut to the chase, okay? I met a mare today. See, I was trying to get leave to go post a letter through to the Equestrian Mail Service in time, but my supervisor was having none of it. It was to my Dad! I couldn't see him any other time, and I was trying not to lose my job as I explained that. But then... she came along. Oh what, I mean, heh, yeah I think you can hear where I'm going with this, eh? She's a pegasus mailpony, offered to carry the letter there for me during her time off. I won't lie, she's quite pretty, lovely blonde hair, some nice flanks if you don't mind me saying, heh... oh why did I say that?"

I could imagine him blushing. Yet another similarity between Sundial and myself, a mare who helped us both. This co-worker for Sundial and the Stable Dweller for me. Both willing to help others, both flying and both had pretty nice—

I sat up straight, blinking. Now I was blushing too.

"Well, no matter, maybe I'll just look back on this and laugh at myself. Wait, I said that last time too, didn't I? It has been a few days since... oh well. Look, I've got to get to work, alright? The Ministry doesn't like workers not turning up on time. Pinkie is always watching for stuff like that."

Again, I glanced at the cut out. I wondered what it thought of me about to not turn up for any shift ever again.

"I'm hoping to see her again anyway, her name is Skydancer. Maybe next time I'll actually work up the courage to ask her out, say I'm just thankful for her help? Anyway, gotta go. Oh yeah! I said I'd talk about how I got my cutie mark. Well, maybe next time, okay? G'bye!"

"Bye."

I set the PipBuck back down beside my crude maps and plans. Sundial's journal was so different from my own. Detailed, full of opinion, emotion, and a connecting voice. Suddenly, my own scrawls on paper felt utterly worthless beside this fancy machine. Maybe I could work out how to make it operate someday myself, but all I knew were the volume button and the light. Any other buttons or flips were far beyond my ability to understand, especially with a broken display. Not that it would have helped, I didn't imagine they catered to illiterate slaves. No, I was stuck with my scratches on paper, understandable only to me, interpretable only to the creator. What kind of journal was that?

Briefly, I remembered the mare looking over them, remembered her smile as she looked at what I had done. Did she really understand what I was trying to say in my drawings? Or did she just like the pictures? Did every... what were they called? Drawer? Sketcher? Art pony? Did they all feel this way, that only they truly understood their own creations?

I reached out to grab my journal as a foul smelling wind blew in over the factories into the helter skelter's top cage and flapped its pages away from my map. Muttering a half-curse, I stomped a hoof on the page to stop it before leaning back against the rusted cage wall that

once used to stop foals from falling. Only then did I look down at my journal.

I saw a broken wall, sunlight shining through from behind it, sketched clearly in my own style. A small pony stared at it, his wings spread as he seemed to be waiting for something.

The page was from years ago, far back in the areas of my journal I never went back to, never remembered, and never ever touched. I wanted to slam it shut, I didn't want to know these things, I didn't want the temptation. But this picture seemed to stand out to me. What had I been thinking back then?

Suddenly I began to regret a lifetime of slavery indoctrination to not pay attention and simply put your head down and not think at all.

With a sigh, I closed the journal and set it back in my saddlebag. The sun was going down. I needed to get to the ground, pick up whatever I could find in the helter skelter's bottom areas, and then get ready. The Master would arrive within the hour and they would soon realise I was gone. No time to think about old pictures. Time to act, to move.

But first, how to get down. Those stairs were pretty steep for four legs.

My eye caught an old rectangular cord mat sitting in the corner. I couldn't help a small grin coming across my face.

Tucking everything in the saddlebag safely, I reached out and dragged across the foul, old-fibred rug to rest on the helter skelter slide before sitting on it, holding myself in place with my front hooves. Well, perhaps *some* things related to this Pinkie could be good!

I let go, quickly sitting back on the rug as I felt the lack of friction take hold. With a slow acceleration, the rug began to slide down the helter skelter. The wind caught on my mane and face as I felt the momentum picking up. I couldn't resist a big grin as the rug began to twist around the tower and hurtle at great speed down the tower, spiralling and throwing me from side to side as my entire body felt the bumps in the notched wood beneath me. Two hundred years hadn't made helter skelters any less fun! Whee!

I closed my eyes, feeling the sensation of movement, of free speed and momentum carrying me without any effort through the air... well, kinda. My mane whipped backward hard as I felt my eye sockets and lips blown wider by the rush of air before me. I could feel the g-forces trying to push me outwards from the tower by the speed. If I opened my eyes I could see nothing but a blur. Finally, a chance to not see Fillydelphia as I spun and spun down the tower.

With little effort, I imagined it as it was in Old Equestria, beautiful and wondrous. I was out for a day at the Filly FunFarm with my friends. At the bottom I'd find that mare, the Stable Dweller, the nice ponies... and my mom! We'd be having fun, with no worries in the world. No work and no slavers at all! I saw coloured balloons being carried by foals squealing in happiness. Their voices came to my ears from the whistling wind on my descent. Everything was so bright, so colourful...

I laughed. I had thought of a fun joke to tell them when I got to the bottom. Then we'd go get some ice cream and go watch the ice skaters. Ice and ice right? That made me laugh more.

The slide tossed me from side to side, making me instead just start giggling. I lifted my front two hooves, holding them up as the wind brushed them. Cool air from the warm sunny day. I could see the crowds around me, all smiling and laughing. A peaceful Equestria.

Suddenly, the feeling of the rug sliding disappeared entirely as I felt my entire axis of balance invert.

“Woo— yargh!”

Before I could even react, I felt my rump strike a harder surface and flip me forward into a large lump on the ground that seemed to envelop me completely as the soft sponge pit at the bottom absorbed me into its safe embrace. I couldn't stop laughing as I reached upwards, waving my forelegs to and fro.

As I pulled myself out and stared upward at the helter skelter, I felt dampness in my eyes as I woke to the reality once more around me. Harsh, unforgiving, and ruined, nothing like my dreams. But even as the bittersweet ending to my fun settled in, I did not feel upset. These tears were different.

Collecting my saddlebag from where it fell, I made to walk to the nearby scrap yard, even grinning widely at a confused looking spritebot as it slowly rotated, following my path before buzzing away erratically. I still enjoyed the ability to close my eyes, smile, and just imagine. To remember that feeling, those blissful seconds of fun and happiness.

I drew pictures to express myself. But my imagination was the greatest canvas I could ever imagine. I couldn't wait to go out and make it a reality.

“Before I go any further, I'm going to pause for a second and just consolidate the things I've been teaching you all for so long. We have the world we do today because of mistakes. Yes, children, nopony would deliberately want this severely screwed up living in the wasteland, so listen closely. It was a mistake. But the reason we survived and continue to survive is down to those ponies who can dig in, find something to believe in, and get stuff done. Be it a faith, a virtue to hold on to, or perhaps even somepony else, the good fight only began because of those who would dare. So I ask of you all, think carefully before committing. Many of them have paid the highest of prices in the fight to save Equestria from mire and ruin. But if you do decide 'Yes!', then you have to pursue it as best you can. We've all seen that, we've all heard of the Stable Dweller. Hell, she even took a side in this developing civil war between the Rangers. So trust me, wastelanders, it is possible to make progress, but only if we're willing to dare.”

Life... sat before me.

My plan. The method by which I would take my life back was finally ready. All day, bit by bit, lesson by lesson; I had adjusted it, gathered what I needed, and gradually come a step closer to this moment each time. Now, the life that was to be mine was right there.

I ran the plan over and over in my mind as I set about preparing my equipment, hidden inside an old Hall of Mirrors in the FunFarm near the bumper-plow pit. The temptation to go there, to visit the mare once more, was so strong. However, I knew that she wouldn't appreciate it, for me to hurt my chances by taking an unessential risk. I was in a bad enough state as it was. My lungs ached and breathing induced a burning sensation within my throat. Bruises, knocks, and small cuts covered my body from the slave work as small burns from the harnesses and carts irritated me from clothing touching them. Despite the healing potions, my eye still felt swollen from Noose's beating, affecting my peripheral vision to that side.

I had one potion, that'd help me though. Time to get ready.

Step one. Escape the FunFarm across to the roads I had run to while evading the gang yesterday. I knew at least one hiding spot to use, the old drain.

I pulled across the dark fabric I had acquired from the threshing mill. Tearing it with the sharpened shard of metal from Slit's factory clenched in my teeth, I set about creating something better than this rough vest. I dumped it from my back, feeling the pressure ease from my wings for once. I wreathed myself in the material, taking rough measurements and cutting appropriately. Double layered for warmth, the DJ's survival tips had told me that. I also added small areas for pockets, two on each front leg, multiple within mouth's reach. I had come to accept that I was, by and large, a thief. I may be forced to steal again, and as such, I decided to prepare for it.

Frankly, I'd always been one anyway... today had only proven it. A little cowardly thief, but it had felt good, taking the items from those who had tormented me.

I stitched the material, roughly and heavily with little real skill, but it worked. Clambering about on the floor, I pulled my new fleece over me. Darker to hide, warmer for the weather, pockets to store things in, and some slits in it for the next stage.

Step two. Creep from the road into the old ruined houses there, overcome my fear of old living spaces, and continue toward the industrial sector, using them as cover against griffons watching from above.

Pulling the fleece off quickly, I drew the metal plates from my bag. With some tapping on the ground and a bit of chipping with the shard, I assessed which ones were the strongest and began to slip them into my fleece. Hidden armour within my clothing to be more inconspicuous. Slaves didn't wear armour outside of dangerous work, and I'd rather be able to move fast and duck around small spots without huge layers holding me back. I was escaping, not going to war.

I placed one over my back and two on my right, side and flank. One more went over my left flank while the last went over my chest, the smallest piece. My front left was exposed, but that would be covered by the saddlebag which would, hopefully, absorb most impacts. My thick journal would hopefully help in that, as painful as the idea of it taking a bullet would be.

Step three. Make a dash from the ruins towards the threshing mill, plenty of hiding spots and minimal guard cover after viewing from the helter skelter. A low risk environment.

I rubbed the shard against a rock I had dragged in from outside, smoothing off the serrated edge to make it cleaner and sharper. It took time, but tapering to a rough point as best as I could, I fabricated a somewhat rudimentary knife point. As I scraped it off, I glanced around me at the old mirrors. It was almost darkly funny to see the mirrors meant to make a pony look fat made me look like a normal pony. I didn't even glance at the thin ones. No pony needed to see that. Turning back to my knife, I grabbed a little spare fabric and some wonderglue I had found in the helter skelter for repair work to make a grip for my mouth.

I stared at it. Could I use it to kill somepony? I had been around death every day. Could I take another's life to attain my own? Not an issue, no. I couldn't think on it. I'd defend myself, but it was more of a utility tool now.

Measuring it against my left foreleg, I made a little sheath for it with some fabric, giving me easy access to it should I ever need it. Hopefully not.

Step four. Move from the mill toward the slave camps. Stay hidden, stay stealthy. Use what I had learned about moving quietly to sneak by them under the cover of dark and in the shadow of their huts. Most slavers stayed around fires, ruining night vision. Use that advantage!

I ripped up the remaining fabric, rolling it into tight bundles and pouring a small section

of the healing potion onto each one. The DJ had mentioned the trick to create healing bandages to help close wounds faster. I figured that one healing potion wouldn't help me for serious injuries anyway. If I got wounded, these would have to do until I could locate better supplies. I made a small bag for them, keeping them separate and safe. They would go near the top.

Beside them, I placed my two spare Med-Xs. I still had them from yesterday. Whiplash hadn't even bothered to check me over while in fear of The Master. They were my insurance to keep moving. Find a place to hide, stab one of them in me, and ride the high-time express to movement again. The DJ had talked of the dangers of addiction. I didn't want to risk it, but I was prepared to take both if I had to.

Step five. The camps are near the Wall. Wait until the guard changes each half-hour and then move in the blind spots up to the wall itself. A huge shadow from the sunset makes it very dark behind it, use that space.

I dragged my saddlebag outside. The bright yellow and pink was lovely, yes, but it stood out. Reluctantly, I placed it face down in the mud and smothered the entire thing to ruin the colour. I rubbed dirt into the metal links to prevent them shining, used differing types and colours of dirt, mud, and grime to camouflage it better, and finally tore off the small plastic glittering dots on the butterfly antennas.

Back inside, I began to fill it. First the scrap. Wonderglue, some old tins, a small box with some old wires poking out of it, a small bottle of cleaning fluid, old duct tape, and a few old bits of magical circuitry. Then came my food, old tins wrapped in cloth and filled with rapidly solidifying oatmeal. On top of them, I placed my journal to slide along one side closest to me, the quill and parchment, and my medical supplies. Snapping the saddlebag shut, it weighed more than I'd like, but needs must. With a quick flick of my mouth, I downed the remainder of the healing potion and rested, feeling the whip scar on my backside along with various other cuts and bruises lose their sting soon after. I gave myself some time to settle and breathe as it worked and let it beat back the disease for now. It'd be enough to get by.

Step six. Find a way through the Wall. Ideally, a drainage pipe or something. I'd seen a ditch running the length from my perch earlier. That had to lead somewhere. A wall could never have only one entrance. There would be something, I just had to find it. Keep moving. Don't stop until miles from Fillydelphia. Use Med-X if it was needed, just keep galloping until unable to gallop any more.

The colours in the clouded sky began to change, and I rose from my resting. It was time to gear up. I struggled into my armoured fleece, pulling it tight about me and shaking out my neck. With a slight heave, I lifted the saddlebag across my back, shifting till it was comfortable. A few adjustments to make sure it didn't make noise when I moved and it was ready. With some mouth work, I strapped on my sheath for the knife to my left foreleg, ensuring I could reach it at a moments notice. I dropped a healing bandage into my front leg pocket as well, setting a syringe into my front right for emergencies. With a little smirk, I snapped Wicked Slir's flight goggles onto my head as well.

Just one more thing left.

I turned to it. I'd left it sitting in front of a mirror deliberately until last. The PipBuck.

She had shown me the way. I couldn't not show my respect by carrying it like she did. I used Whiplash's leather 'number three' to weave between the metal joints. Those joints had once let the PipBuck lock onto a pony's leg, but with only the top panel remaining, the

entire holding mechanism was gone. With some tying, pulling, and a good few knots, I pulled the PipBuck proudly onto my right foreleg. Just like hers. It flickered its light once or twice, as though recognising it was now being worn properly, if held in place by old leather cord.

Step Number Seven.

Have a life.

I turned, dressed ready, all my equipment and supplies borne on my back or body. I felt proud, ready to fight the good fight. Ready to show Equestria that the slaves need not sit idle in the dark.

I saw myself in the mirror. The third time in three days I had looked at myself.

The first time I had seen a dejected slave, too broken to even complain about his imminent death.

The second I had seen a dying buck with little hope for anything, but trying to stay alive however he could.

But now, I saw me. I saw Murky Number Seven, tooled up and ready to go. Stuffed fleece covering his malnourished body and eyes that showed a hope I had never before imagined that they could own. The Stable Dweller, the mare, Number Six, the PipBuck, Velvet Remedy, Sundial, DJ Pon-Three; they had all helped me, prepared me, and given me things to hold on to. Now it was time to act on my own.

I hoped they would be proud.

I didn't look strong, indeed I looked pathetically weak still. I didn't feel confident, only that my hoof had been forced to ensure my survival. Biting my lip, I touched a hoof to the mirror, like two days ago, just to prove that I was what I was seeing, that I was actually standing up and about to do this.

A wave of cold shot through me at the touch. I gasped in shock, recoiling as I looked at my hoof. As fast as the sensation had come, it left. I looked up, trembling from the sudden effect of the glass.

Before me in the mirror, I saw myself.

But not me here. It was me as a colt, standing with innocent little wide eyes filled with tears, my two stubby little wings flapping pathetically as I stared at... well, me. Sweet Celestia, I was *tiny* as a kid! I felt locked in place, looking down at this little colt slave's mouth gasp open, like he was as shocked to see me as I was to see him. I mean me... it...

I felt frozen for a second, unable to process what I was seeing, before shaking my head roughly and frantically, waving myself away from the mirror.

Stunned, shocked, and confused, I looked at the now empty mirror with an open mouth, just like the image had borne. Taking a deep breath, I tried to control my thoughts. No time to think on it. No time to think on old drawings either, I had to get going. I'd work it all out later, definitely. But not now. I galloped to the back door.

For now, I had a life to claim.

My own.

Step one would be easy. I'd left the FunFarm so many times in my life within Filly that I knew every route and little object by heart. The slaver walkways and towers only covered the areas approaching the Pit and the Wall, the areas considered important. No slave would

attempt to escape *into* the rest of Fillydelphia, it was presumed. Or at least, I hoped that was the case. Whatever the reason, they were why my route had such a roundabout manner through the ruins and the threshing mill rather than directly for the wall.

I stuck to the back staff areas, small alleyways between rides and stalls that employees would, by my guessing anyway, have used to travel between places of work without being held up by the cheering crowds. Briefly, I wondered what they might think of their place of work now, before dismissing the thought; this was no time for an idle imagination.

Moving at a light canter, I stopped only occasionally to adjust my bag and pockets to not rattle or shake during movement. Everything I had learned across my life about staying silent and hidden to avoid harm had to come together here. If I were caught, I didn't want to think about what they would do to a little thief like me.

I stopped in the shadow of an old games stall. Within it stood milk bottles stacked in perfect towers, challenging players to knock them over. Apparently, even a Balefire Megaspell hadn't been enough to make those rigged things budge. Gently easing open the creaky door, I stepped inside and used a fractured hole in the back to observe the side exit to the FunFarm. No guard towers, this was a route only for those going to shifts with no requirement to stop them before they got to the Wall. Beyond it, I could see the road I had escaped to yesterday, the drain waiting on the other side as a reluctant hiding place should I be spotted.

Tensing my legs, I prepared to go into full gallop across open ground, but something gave me pause.

A sound... a flutter.

I craned my neck upwards, glancing left to right and checking every perch I could imagine. Nothing disturbed the FunFarm at this level. Higher up, I could see teams of griffons soaring on the warm currents of Fillydelphia, but they were much too high to have caused that sound. Minutes passed as I hid, awaiting another occurrence. Slavers wandered past me on the road, trotting and laughing on their way to their dwellings. I waited for a gap, the flutter had to just be another ghost noise from my freaky hearing. I often picked up sounds that I didn't want to hear or were too far away to matter.

The moment any slavers seemed to be absent from the area, I made my move, galloping immediately, keeping low to the ground and moving as fast as I dared for the opposite side of the road. A shiver passed down my spine as I felt open ground lose all sense of cover or concealment from my escape, but I pressed on.

"Eh, shite! I forgot something, mate. Gimme a second!"

I heard the clatter of hooves running back down the road from around the corner of the FunFarm and increased my step to dive off the over edge of the road. Skittering down the ditch side, I frantically looked for the drain, sweat dripping from my face already. Panic set in, I couldn't be spotted this early!

"Hey, hear that? Somepony trying to hide away?"

"Ain't no shift to come out this time. One goin' AWOL for the market?"

Rotating all the most colourful curses I knew (which wasn't saying much), I ran to and fro, searching for the drain before the couple would appear up the road and look down at the ditch. I gasped, wondering if I was in the wrong place!

Then, in a moment of clarity, I spotted the stained ground around it. It was there! Staying as quiet as I could while moving fast as I dared, I quickly (and rather sloppily) stuffed myself into the drain once more. Strangely enough, it didn't feel quite so bad this time, although

perhaps the threat of imminent selection for the Pit again may have had something to do with preference. The fit was harder with my thicker clothing and saddlebag, but with some curling up (and a rather unpleasant form of lubrication) I squeezed myself in, turning to face out of the drain itself.

Right... safe.

The pitter patter of hooves sounded almost directly above me as the slaver pair wandered on the road above the drain.

"You sure? Get all sorts of things running about in the ruins, why, ol' Sticky Crescent said he saw a baby hellhound in here once! Dug its way right in!"

"What? Stop talking shite, you wally!"

"No, I swear!"

"This the same buck who told you he once saw Princess Luna herself flying alongside Red Eye's chariot?"

"Yeah..."

"Absolute bollocks, mate."

Good. Banter and argument meant no serious searching. I was still undetected.

A sudden pinching pain shot through my back right leg. I screamed loud in shock, bucking it backward and feeling it connect with something unpleasant; segmented, chitinous and slippery. In a blind panic, my back to an unknown threat and unable to turn to face it, I scrambled, pushed, and crawled as best I could. Feeling small bites on my back hooves, I dove from the drain and twisted to look back. Staring me in the face was a gigantic insect, a radroach, crawling out of the drainage pipe with smooth movements from its filthy hide and clacking legs. Behind it, I could see at least three more following it. I felt frozen in fear. I had been in there yesterday and not known at all.

My fear broke like a wave as I saw them advance. I turned to gallop off into the ruins; I could out-distance them without a worry. Setting off, I glanced quickly back at my legs. They bled from several small bites, nothing serious, but I'd have to get the bandages on them soon before infection set in. As if there were any infections left for me to *get*.

I came to the nearest ruined home, two stories and missing its roof entirely. Built from brick and concrete, it spoke of an old workers home, rustic and practical. A quick buck hoofed the door open before heading inside.

"I swear, you forget anything again and I'm not waiting."

My eyes flickered wide open. How could I have forgotten, they were just picking something up, of *course* they'd be back! I didn't expect it to be less than a minute, but still!

I looked back, seeing the brown and black coated slavers coming back down the road. The radroaches seemed content to have left me as they milled around in the spilled sewage, but they were hardly hidden to the slavers.

"Hey, check this mate. Roaches. What got them stirred up?"

"Could be our little runaway. What do you think? Coming or going?"

"Shackles is at the FunFarm tonight, definitely going. You ain't seriously saying we take a look are you?"

"Look, if we're being watched and Stern hears we *didn't* it'll be us getting devoured by parasprites before the morning."

"Urgh... fine."

The pair moved off the road toward the ruins. I was hidden behind the door, keeping it open only by a tiny fraction to observe them, trusting in my shaded clothes, coat, mane,

and my small size to hide me. One of them, the brown buck, stomped on each radroach in turn with a satisfying and somewhat disgusting crunch. The other, almost jet black, unicorn however, was glancing around before bending down, and suddenly looking directly at the house I was in. In shock, I backed away from the door.

“Tracks.”

Of course! I’d been in such a rush and panic to escape the radroaches I’d forgotten to watch what was coming off my hooves from the drainage. I’d led them right to me! One brave little glance confirmed he was heading this way. I didn’t have time to get out quietly.

I looked down, finding a dirtied pink matt sitting just inside the door with some writing on it (what would you write on that?), and wiped my dirty hooves on it frantically before turning.

I very quickly regretted my choice of hiding spot.

Before me were the entire family of the home, a collection of skeletons spread around the full front room and open plan kitchen. Pony-shaped sets of bones, stripped bare by balefire and weathered by time, yet still roughly posed enough to indicate they had been taking shelter as best as they could when the warnings had sounded in the city two hundred years ago. Some were smaller than the others...

A memory was unpleasantly reminding me of a certain farmhouse. I was intruding upon their memory. My hooves were locked to the floor. I could hear the slavers moving to the house, their hooves slopping around in the mud, but still I couldn’t move a muscle in my body. I almost felt like I wanted to just tip over, my hooves stuck in the air.

I shouldn’t be here.

Empty eye sockets stared in random directions, concussive force had spread some bones out. I could see a faded family photo on the wall, earth ponies all. Lovely warm coloured coats between the entire group. Pots and pans sat scattered on the kitchen top where they had been making dinner. An old work bag rested near me from being dropped after a shift.

I should have known. I couldn’t handle scenes like this, I’d never been able to! I’d just been hoping everything would be ash and gone, but the horror froze me in place as the weight of memory landed squarely on my newly opened mind.

The slavers were just outside, I could hear their breathing. If they found me, I’d perhaps join the skeletons. Would I be sent to them? Would they be unhappy with me?

The terror of the thought finally gave me purpose. I darted forward, almost prancing in circles as I searched for a hiding spot.

“Sorry, sorry... I’m so sorry!”

Muttering under my breath, I pulled open a kitchen cupboard and hid inside it after levering open a back window ever so slightly.

The slavers burst in. Their hooves knocked over the work bag and I heard the tools clatter out. Pots and pans rung as they moved around, knocking things over in their blundering check. The simplicity of my hiding spot suddenly felt all too vulnerable. If they decided to do more than just glance, I was caught. Unable to see, I could only hear them moving through the sitting room adjacent as I shook terribly. Around me were cleaning agents. At least, I thought they were. Even if I could read it was too dark to tell inside the cramped cupboard.

“Hey, back window.”

“What?”

“Whoever it was, they’re long gone. Left through the window. See? It’s unlocked.”

A clatter of something lighter. Was that bones!?

"Perhaps this lot just left it open."

"During a balefire drop?"

"Clearly a pane of glass would make *all* the difference, mate", came the reply, sarcasm dripping on every word, "Look, let's just get moving, alright? No one saw it but us, and if we're late to the Roamer it'll be our round."

The pair seemed to delay for a brief glance before moving out. I heard a horrible popping crack, a muttered curse, and finally the door slamming shut. I waited for a few minutes, just in case they doubled back, before opening the cupboard and almost bursting into tears immediately.

The slavers had, in their simple visit, destroyed what was left. The kitchen utensils were scattered all the more. The undisturbed work bag had been kicked over the floor. Worst of all, the largest skeleton's ribs had been snapped from a careless hoof.

I couldn't stand this any more, I'd bandage myself up someplace else. I had to get out of here. Moving to the back door with a resolution to stick to the outdoors until the threshing mill, I paused only to check the surroundings before creeping out into the dead gardens between the rows of houses. Sticking to the fences, ducking below lifeless branches of long dead bushes and moving only when I could see no griffons, I pressed on.

It'd been close, I was behind schedule, but I could still do this.

I knew I could...

I'd had it easy thus far, despite what it may have felt like.

I sat atop an old rickety garden shed, hidden behind a dead tree beside it as I glanced over at the threshing mill past the small wall. In days gone by, the low and long building must have been a local business to be so close to these houses. Built mostly from wood, it had been repaired by hastily bolted-on beams and sheets of rusty metal by the slaves over the past few years. As such, it bore a very patchwork appearance, oddly traditional next to the industrial nightmare surrounding it from Fillydelphia. I imagined this must be a pre-war building in the sense of existing long before the first shot of the first skirmish was fired at all.

Thick lines of slaves were being led in and out. Good, I had to go through it to reach my destination. From the helter skelter, I had seen masses of guard walkways between larger factories and warehouses around the entire area. Comparatively, going *through* the threshing mill would be safer, if only in a sense of having cover should I be spotted as opposed to a large open area watched by scoped rifles. I sat on my haunches, tapping a hoof on the shed as I contemplated my next move.

All that time I was still trying to fight off the slave in my mind. It taunted me, chided me, screamed that this was wrong, and urged me to turn around. Go back to my master, go back to the predictable life where I knew my place. Sacred Goddesses, what was I doing here, trying to escape? I was about to run under their guns in some suicidal urge to try and save my own life, that wasn't for me to decide!

I fought the tears, my head lowering. As I did so, my eyes found the PipBuck, strung to my right foreleg tightly still. I'd wanted it visible. I *needed* it visible. The Stable Dweller's inspiration was all that was keeping me going. She had escaped this place to evade death, so I could do the same. This reminder of her strapped to my leg was the symbol. She had one

as a cutie mark, now I knew why.

Somepony had proven it could be done.

Mentally bucking myself back to reality, I placed myself closer to the roof, hunkering down on all four legs as I crept to the edge. I almost squeaked as I looked over and saw a row of slaves passing by the street not twelve feet from me that I'd almost missed. Trudging and weary, they were all of a smaller stature. As I watched their despondent faces, dragging hooves like iron weights and scarred sides from the thresher machine, I began to think. Perhaps I could sneak among them. I could hide in plain sight.

Time was short. Drawing my saddlebag off, I began to wind some spare cloth around my PipBuck. It was a dead give away if unhidden. The rest could pass around the dirty slaves I hoped, but I swung my knife around to the inside of my leg instead to keep it better hidden. Checking the bandages on my legs if they were tight, I dropped with a soft *whud* from the garden shed (I never was one for landings. It was perhaps a good thing I couldn't fly) and waited for the slavers guarding the procession to look away. With practised depressive steps, I silently trotted into line, fighting down the chains binding my mind from tempting me to fall back into actually being a slave. A filthy green mare looked sideways at me as I gently shoved my way to the middle of the slave march. I tried to smile back, receiving only a scowl in return. I put my head down, glancing only briefly as I heard a little flutter from nearby, probably an old piece of cloth in the wind.

Every muscle twinged. Guards were looking at me, scanning the crowd from above and beside. Whips cracked, urging the smaller slaves into the mill's cavernous doorway after passing through the fence gates. Feeling myself being bumped from side to side by the thinning space for so many ponies to squeeze through, my concentration was entirely on staying on my hooves, to keep moving like an average slave and not draw any attention.

'Like your average slave', I thought. Looking around me, I saw ponies shuddering, crying, and fearfully looking around. I hated my fellow slaves. They would kill me as soon as look at me if they knew about my wings. But seeing them on the night of my hopeful flight from Fillydelphia, I began to feel a sadness for them that was entirely new. I'd get out of here, but these ponies were to be left to work, hurt, and die with no change brought by my leaving. There was to be no escape for them. Normality would drive them to their deaths, whether sharp and painful or slow and lingering.

With practised and weary steps, they made their way to the threshing machine. It still ran full tilt, the last shift only having just vacated. Even from the crowd, I could see the stains on the floor, red marks of long past, and the recently dried ones of the pony who had unexpectedly saved my life.

I had to stop, the trembling of a close shave with death still passing through me whenever I thought on it giving me pause to lean against a wall for a moment. Death from Fillydelphia was without favouritism. What if it had picked me for a random and messy end? What if it picked the mare? What if I returned with a team to liberate them all, and I found that she had been killed by some drunken slaver for no reason at all?

"Drop the saddlebag, slave."

I blinked my eyes open, gasping in shock as I turned my head slowly. Painful inevitability reared its ugly head as I gradually focused on the sight of a dark red and black-clad unicorn mare staring down at me. A cane hovered in her telekinesis magic field as her eyes inclined towards a storage locker.

"You won't be able to move without getting caught with that thing on, dump it in the

room. You can pick it up later once you're done."

Her colleague, an earth pony buck with an entirely shaved mane, moved up beside me.

"We'll keep it safe for you, honest. We only take ten percent of your caps, other slavers go for higher amounts. Best deal."

They had to be kidding me. Really?

"Come on, get ready, take your place. Dump those clothes and those ridiculous goggles too. Far too bulky to work under the thresher. Well, come on!"

Not good, not good, not good at all! I had hoped that I could slip right into the threshing line and make a dash for the back door the corpse had been taken to earlier. Since when did slavers start to care about safety? I glanced back and forth at the pair, searching for the words.

"I can't, um, see, this is stuff for Wicked Slit."

"Good! That bitch killed two of the slaves we lent her last week. Do you know how hard it is to find unicorns who can pick locks in this damn wasteland? C'mon, give us the stuff. You can just tell her you got mugged."

Somehow, I doubted that would work even if I wasn't lying through my teeth. This plan wasn't working! I had pictured me perhaps having to run under gunfire, overcoming fear to charge out into a free life, but this was just stupid!

"Come on! Hurry up and drop the goods, slave!"

"Please! I'll be fine," I practically begged them, lowering my head, "I... I'll take the risk with it on."

If I could just get past them then I could slip out. Other slaves were beginning to pay attention to this, some slavers casting eyes from outside the doorway into the threshing room as well.

"Oh for Luna's sake. Barehoof, just take it from him, slaves shouldn't have bags anyway."

I felt the earth pony grab hold of my saddlebag strap with his teeth from the side. Struggling, he smacked me with a hoof a couple of times as I tried to shake him off in a blind panic. Terror struck me, what if he pulled my vest off? I'd gotten lucky earlier!

"Shtay shtill!"

The buck shouted through clenched teeth. I kept moving from side to side, grabbing on to my saddlebag however I could, a fight to keep it on me quickly becoming a small scuffle that almost ended the moment that I felt his hoof attempt to beat me on my side to keep me still. A metallic clang rung through the room as he pulled back, more surprised than genuinely hurt as his hoof impacted on the metal plate I had hidden there.

"What the hell? Grab him!"

If I'd moved faster, that would have been my chance, but a momentary pause to check my fleece hadn't shifted gave Barehoof an opportunity to grab me again. I felt his front hooves wrap around my torso as he launched at me, his weight pulled me to the floor with a crash. I could smell his warm breath just above my head and feel every bit of his weight pressing down across my back. The pressure on my wings gave way to a pathetic squeal of pain, the continued rubbing as he shifted, trying to pin me down with his weight. It was like being rubbed against a grindstone to my wings. The unicorn wandered over, she would cut off my only route in a second. The slaves had parted to stay away from the confrontation. No slave wanted to be near an angry slaver like I'd just done.

"Good! Now just stay still like an obedient little slave while we get all this off you."

Thankfully, through my pain and fear, I remembered one way to get a buck off me. I

struggled up just far enough to lift my back right hoof and fire it backwards as hard as I could. My hooves were tiny, small enough to fit right into that gap with all the force focused into one little point.

“Aaiiee!”

On the crunch of contact, Barehoof’s weight entirely disappeared as his strangled cry pierced the air, hurting my ears from the proximity. I couldn’t hesitate, I needed every bit of my supplies and any delay would give time for the alarm to be raised once The Master realised I’d made a run for it. Even as Barehoof fell sideways, clutching his loins with both front hooves and crying in pain, the unicorn and other slavers looked almost too stunned (one was laughing!) to react to their comrade’s plight. Using the space, I turned and galloped as fast as I could into the mass of slaves around the machine. Behind me the shouts quickly went out, calls to stop and threats of punishment. I didn’t stop, panic and fear wouldn’t let me. I’d already gone past the point of no return now. I’d attacked a slaver and went on the run. I had no illusions about what would happen if I were caught now.

I needed to get out of here, lie low, and then move on!

Slaves dove to either side of the thin corridor between the wall and the threshing machine edge as I weaved between them. The slavers were in hot pursuit, shoving slaves brutally away as they levitated batons, knives, and whips. They were faster than me, and unfortunately, I only had a straight corridor for the huge machine to run down. They were catching up, diving and grasping at me. Beside me, the whirling blades of the thresher continued their work even as everypony stood watching the chase.

Wait...

I felt a slaver right behind me, and heard the swish of a cane. In a moment, I ducked, rolling sideways away from the cane to be under the machine once again and began to duck and shuffle for all I was worth to get away from them! I had around fifteen seconds to use!

I crawled forward, trying to get beyond a big mass of slaves nearby before the blades came back. Leftover refuse and thread built up around me as I moved in the confined space, rubbing the string above me from the saddlebag. The strands got in my mouth, eyes, and nose. I could see the slavers struggling to get past all the slaves standing at the ready line; that would slow them down! It would take them some time to force their way through the slaves in the thin gap between machine and wall.

But I could circumvent it under the machine. Ha! Who said being small was-YARGH!

Two hooves stretched out, grabbing my back leg. A slaver had crawled under the machine itself to get me. Too big to properly fit, a maniacal grin covered his face as I tried to kick at him.

Up at the top, the blades reversed, hurtling back towards us. The slavers didn’t know how short a time it was under here.

“Let go!” I screamed madly, sweating and whinnying in panic as I saw the blades coming. He didn’t even see them! Just holding on to my hoof like grim death until his comrades arrived.

I bucked, kicked, and thrashed wildly as I felt myself being pulled *back* further into the machine! It looked so close! My own dive and the slaver grabbing me must have only been a few seconds, how long did I have!?

The battle to free my hoof caused him to try and pull me harder. His head and hooves, and my back leg were becoming tangled in the thread from above. Rule one of the thresher was don’t get caught in the thread! I squealed, trying to free myself even as the slaver began

to realise his predicament. Even if I got free, there wasn't enough time to... no!

I leaned in, swinging my PipBuck as hard as I could at his head. The connection shook the bandages free as the slaver reeled from the hard metal impact. I apologised under my breath to Sundial, even as I felt my hoof freed from his grasp.

Not that it helped. The pair of us were still stuck in the thread like a spider's web.

The machine was being slowed by the tangled thread, but the blades kept advancing slowly, sorting the thread back properly. If they reached us then we'd be 'sorted' with it! The slaver was starting to panic himself, thrashing all around and making his predicament even worse while I struggled to pull my hoof free from the winding thread. I felt tears on my face, my limbs shaking as the *thum-thum-thum-thum* sound of the blades came ever nearer. Forget how handy it was, I would have given a lot to not have hearing that picked up sounds in so much detail right now!

I didn't know what the other slavers were doing. Watching, probably. Would they be trying to stop the machine? Would they leap in to try and cut their fellow slaver free?

Wait, cut free! My knife!

Twisting, I dragged the hidden blade from the inside of my leg free with my mouth. Not wasting any time, I tried to saw through the toughly strung thread, the bouncing and movement making it exceptionally difficult, even as the machine's noise grew and grew.

Thum! Thum! Thum! Thum!

Come on. Come on! A few bits of string popped free, but it was wound tight around my hoof!

Thum! Thum! THUM! THUM!

Nothing else for it! I dug the knife under the string on my hoof, yelping in pain as the desperate move let the blade cut me as I force it down to cut the whole section of thread off. It was all I could do to not drop the knife before I fell backwards with a sudden jolt. Free!

I turned, scrambling harder than ever before to escape. Rolling was impossible from the size of my saddlebag for anything more than a dive. I wasn't sure if I'd have the time, but I needn't have worried.

The slaver, yelling to the others, did have to.

I would try long and hard for some time to attempt to forget the sound the slaver made as he was 'sorted' by the machine. Both his voice and the sickening sounds of a pony being caught up fully in the industrial scale machinery assaulted every inch of innocence I liked to think I still had. I didn't look back for fear of freezing in horror, only taking the advantage of the sickened slaves and slavers who *could* see to get a few seconds head start. I saw one slave throw up on the spot, another had gone pale while one was actually *smiling*. I wondered what that slaver had done to her.

I paused only for a second to check my hoof. The cut wasn't so bad, just a shallow nick to get under the thread. Nothing to worry about. I threw my weight into the slaves as I fought to get away before the slavers regained their senses from the horror show and chased me ag

"He's getting away! Get that little murderer!"

Okay, maybe not *much* of a head start!

I ran down the linear pathway, the double doors to the back rooms before me promising hiding places and safety.

They burst open.

Two slavers came running through them, hearing the commotion. One of them had a

pistol.

I screeched to the halt right in front of them., immediately looking for somewhere else! I needed to move! I turned and ran along the side of the machine, up the stairs on to the walkway the slavers used above it. Behind me, the two new slavers finally gathered what was happening and gave pursuit. My hooves clattered on the metal as I passed above the threshers. At the far end was another stairway leading to the roof, below me I could see slavers running for the stairs at the entrance again to cut me off.

A sharp, sudden roar of automatic gunfire erupted from behind me. Sparks flew from the catwalk as the slaver unloaded his mouth-borne automatic pistol after me. The sound made me scream as I kept running, seeing holes ripped around the metal. He had missed. I presumed the slavers often didn't get a chance to try out their weapons in this place. Even I could see the recoil had caught him by surprise.

I heard him swearing as he reloaded. Slaves were screaming, diving to the ground while the slavers ran on to the catwalk after me. Pushing my little stride to its limit, I galloped for all I was worth, trying to outrun the ponies below before they got to the other side.

I realised I was still whimpering, more scared of being caught than determined to actually escape. The entire catwalk shook with the four or five slavers rushing after me, the imagery of it collapsing into the whirling machinery below scared me enough to increase my rate as much as I could. Funny, I hadn't ever seen that the entire machine was mirrored on the other side of the hall too. Another row of slaves had stopped to gaze upward at the scene.

The slavers pulled ahead on the ground. I wasn't going to make it!

Briefly, I heard the sound of a pistol being pulled and prepared to fire.

I hit the ground hard, that awful roar of rapid gunshots filling the air as rounds sprayed over my head. The deadly whizz past my ears almost led me to think I'd been hit before I saw the burst had struck a supporting girder on the roof. Along with the mass of weight and thumping hooves, I felt the entire structure tremble.

Then it began to lurch and tilt.

Ooooh, not good...

The slavers down below stopped, unwilling to run on to the slowly twisting and shuddering walkway after witnessing what had happened to their friend before. Galloping at an angle, I ran to the second stairs, diving for them just as I felt the entire walkway collapse beneath me. A shriek of tortured metal bit through the air as the entire construction bent and tore from the roof, the long walkway bending to the side and landing atop the sensitive machinery. Screams and swearing sounded behind me as the slavers tumbled down it, landing amongst the threads as the blades shattered and shuddered to a stop. Slaves ran in every direction as blades of metal flew from the ancient machine as the edges bit into the walkway and then themselves flew off. The noise was absolute, crashing mixing with screams, the thunk of metal embedding in walls crossed with the twanging of thousands of pieces of string at once being severed.

I heard the slavers cry to get outside and surround the building, another shouted to go and fetch griffons to bring me down. One bellowed to watch for me leaping off the building.

Emerging on to the roof, slanted and covered in disjointed slates, I ran away from the hole as fast as I could before—

"There!"

Once again, I heard the howl of that fiendishly quick firing pistol. Bullet holes punched

through the roof I had just thrown myself away from, one tearing close enough to glance off my side. The heavy steel plate I'd shoved in there withstood it, but the impact alone knocked me from my hooves. Tumbling toward the edge, I cried out as I slammed my hooves on the roof, only stopping as they caught a downed power cord rested over the building.

"Come on... come on, Murky!"

Panting to myself, I fought to keep myself balanced across the roof. I could hear slavers rushing out into the yard surrounding it, shouting to the guard towers behind me at the entrance. I ducked behind a set of chimneys, hidden among them from any snipers.

I *needed* a hiding spot, but they knew I was up here! How long till griffons arrived?

I couldn't stop shaking, I was scared. Oh, so scared. No, terrified! They were hunting for me, all alone with nopony to help me. I wished Number Six were here, or the Stable Dweller, they could tell me where to go, what to do. They'd find some daring thing to jump into!

Enlightened by the idea, I stuck my head out. Slavers hadn't come to this side yet over the diagonal roof. At the same time, sickening horror and a life-saving idea came to mind as I looked down.

Below me was a mass grave. Dozens of ponies, dumped in death into the old waste pit. I could even see the slave from earlier splayed across the top, the most recent corpse.

Surely the slavers wouldn't spot one more 'addition' to the pile... right?

My mind rebelled, of all things I'd hidden in, this was too far! I'd taken refuge in pigstys, rotten food cupboards, spider infested holes, drainage ducts, and musky cellars, but this was too much. I couldn't...

"Got word from Stern! She's sending a wing over to locate him!"

...I had to. This had gone too wrong already. I'd been spotted and called out as an escaping slave. I didn't have time to hang around and try for a different way, I needed to move my plan along before word got to the Wall. If they found out...

I steadied myself on my hooves and clenched my teeth. This wasn't going to be pleasant at all. Oh, how I longed for my pigsty again.

With a short canter, I dove from the roof. It was only a single storey high, but to a small pony like me, it felt so much higher as I tumbled, hooves first, towards the mass grave.

With a hard thud, I landed heavily, the air knocked right out of me as all four hooves protested at the jarring impact. My cuts stung badly at the exertion as I tried to get up. All the time, I tried to not think about what I had landed on.

It was impossible.

They *squelched* under me. A rotten stink threatened to make me vomit. Flies buzzed around my head. I had *stains* on me. Suddenly, I was very glad for my stolen pair of goggles. Their eyes stared with lidless purpose, their poses unnatural, and I could swear I recognised a couple.

"He must have leapt off where we couldn't see, come on!"

My ears twitched as I heard the shout over the screams of slavers keeping control of the terrified slaves. Looking down, I immediately regretted this idea, the mare below me had been burned to death somehow. I could see her teeth had been removed. Why would they even need them!?

But she was to be my temporary saviour.

Muttering apologies through a mouth I dared not open very far, I knelt down, fighting

the churning of my stomach as I pulled myself under a couple of the bodies and fought the urge to move as something dripped on my goggles. I needed to stop shaking!

They came around the corner. Five slavers, including the one with the auto-pistol. They galloped over. I could see them looking up at the roof, turned away from me. Could I just have slipped out in that time?

"He must have jumped."

"Are you kidding? Kid was terrified, he'd never get that far!"

"Well, he's not here now!"

"Shut up, both of you! He's gone alright, so where?"

They turned, spreading out. Some wandered to the broken fence posts. I had considered running through them, but I'd never get away from the slavers in a straight race. I needed to misdirect them first. The buck with the auto-pistol in his mouth wandered closer, his hooves coming near the mass grave's edge. He glanced over it, before turning to his comrades, spitting the pistol out. I could see it hung from his neck on a cord.

"Hey, didn't a mare and a stallion try and hide in the grave a few weeks back?"

Every effort it took to not move was strenuous, to not throw up my hooves and beg them not to shoot. By Luna, they'd shot at me! At *me!* The weight of that was just sinking in. I'd been beaten and attacked brutally before, but a gun was a whole new level. If I'd been a few more inches to the right when that bullet struck I would have been down.

"Yeah, just give it a spray and come on. The griffons will find him. Damn, Red Eye isn't going to be happy about that machine."

The buck turned, taking the pistol back in his mouth and pointing it seemingly right at my face. I closed my eyes, before praying that he didn't see that slight movement. I was only one of many. He might miss me... he might miss me...

I saw the barrel of the pistol blaze in fire as that short but intense roar blasted out of it, being swung back and forth across the grave.

I felt corpses move, kick up, shudder, and jerk under the barrage. For a second or two, it felt like they had all come to life again. Clambering, grabbing, pulling me deeper into them. I began to slip downwards as the bullets disturbed the awkward balance of the grave's contents.

I squeaked. I couldn't help it. But as I opened my eyes and saw the slavers wandering off, I felt every muscle release from the self-induced rigor mortis I'd been in out of sheer terror. The echo of the weapon still rung in my ears as I mentally checked everything.

The moment they were gone, I pulled myself free and galloped without a care for noise. It wasn't until I was past the fence and running into the outer edges of the slaver camps that I finally stopped behind a ruined sky wagon and began to clean my goggles and fleece with some spare rags.

I stopped only as my stomach twisted. Reality caught up to me, and I realised what I had done. I spent the next ten minutes getting rid of everything I had eaten lately at all before collapsing in a shuddering heap inside the sky wagon.

Ahead of me lay the end run.

Behind me, I could hear slavers and griffons searching for me.

I'd thought being shot at was the point of no return. I was wrong. This was it. If I moved

past here, I would cease to be a slave attempting to get away from a guard trying to harm them, and become a slave trying to escape entirely. There would be no warnings, no punishments, no Pit, and no hope if caught. Punishment for going into the slaver camps around the edge of the Wall was immediate death or painful death, depending on the mood of the guard who caught you.

I was stuck. Fear had taken me at every joint and muscle against moving further. The slave in my mind was begging with me, bringing thoughts of other ways to survive. Perhaps I could find enough things to convince Artery to heal me instead to live! What if I stole things to survive and just hide?

I fought them down, I knew they weren't possible. Not truly. Besides, I needed to get out to draw the picture for the mare as well. It was a tiny reason, more an excuse to tell myself to go, but it did the job.

I took the step. One hoof over the border before galloping toward the most dense concentration of tents and shacks I could see. Any cover would be needed, guard posts and rings of Red Eye's soldiers around camp fires were situated everywhere. It was a true shanty town of tight spaces and thin alleyways between encampments.

I'd told myself to dare a lot. But this... this felt like a truly daring endeavour.

I just hoped it would end with the same victory the Stable Dweller had.

One thing I quickly realised was lots of cover also meant lots of places to run into guards without meaning to. I quickly trotted backwards before slipping inside the shack, listening carefully as a huge, battle saddle-laden earth pony clomped past. Breathing a sigh of relief, I quickly turned to check the shack, only to very quickly begin making my way back out as I spotted four soldiers sleeping on makeshift bunk beds clearly taken from an old barracks somewhere in the city.

I was sweating profusely. Not just from exertion, not just from fear, but the heat reflected inwards off the massive Wall nearby noticeably made things worse under my heavy fleece. Trotting the way the guard had come, I stuck close to walls, trying to convince myself everything was fine. The Stable Dweller had done this from the Pit, right? She'd been spotted right away! I'd gotten to the camps without a single pony following me! Did that mean I was doing better?

Remembering the iconic waves of magic swirling about her as she had ascended, I quickly put my ego back in its place. She hadn't *needed* to sneak.

Ducking low, I stuck behind a shack's corrugated metal fence. I could hear guards muttering to one another on the other side as I moved hoof by hoof past them. Asphalt and hard rock made silence difficult as my hooves touched ground, dropping my speed to a painful crawl. Briefly, I realised that I should have made pads for my hooves from the rags too. Above me, a guard tower watched the area, although I couldn't see the sniper within it from this angle. Those towers were making life hell. I stuck to the edge of the fence, carefully watching it for any mo—

The tip of a barrel glinted.

As fast as I dared, I skipped to the other side of the narrow lane, hiding against the back of a tent to stay out of the line of sight. My breath was sharp and quick as I tried to not fall into the tent itself from my hasty movement.

Moving on, shacking to shack, fencepost to tent, I gradually moved my way through the thick camps. Racks of weapons attracted my attention, but all were exposed, and honestly, I had no idea how to use them with my mouth properly anyway. Ducking behind a flaming barrel, I watched a soldier wander past wearing a midrange battle saddle that bore double shotguns. I fought down the sting of jealousy. I *really* wanted one of those things. The way the mechanics worked, the angle of the springs and tiny gears into such a tiny package, the precision weights and guidance of the saddle itself to allow it all to sit properly when recoiling. If only for the amazing content, I wanted to steal it from his back.

The fact that it looked like it could turn me into a fine mist was all that stopped me from wanting to somehow find a way. That battle saddle was *gorgeous*. I knew nothing of how to actually repair or understand the mathematics behind it, I just appreciated them and their artistic beauty of design.

Behind me, I heard the stomping of somepony as they got up from their fire. Even in the heat, I shivered. They had to be coming this way, I had to move now or I'd be spotted!

As quietly as I could, I was forced to follow the soldier with the battle saddle. Creeping right behind him, I simply hoped that he would pass a turning before the one behind me turned the corner. Mere seconds before he did, I found the space to hop between two tents and crawl behind them. The tents had their backs to a fence, but with a little light hoofing the ground, I dug a hole just deep enough to allow my small size to squeeze under it, pushing my saddlebag before me.

I emerged *inside* a tent I hadn't even known was so close to the other side.

With no flooring, I clambered up without obstacle, taking it inch by painstaking inch as I saw two bucks were sleeping at the side with their weapons leaning nearby.

"Mm... mmfph!"

I froze as one shifted, hooves rubbing his eye. Carefully, I tried to move before he woke up.

With a stretch, he dumped himself right back down, still fully asleep.

"Eeh... oh Luna you naughty Princess."

I wasn't sure whether I wanted to laugh or roll my eyes. Many ponies of the wasteland didn't believe in the Goddesses any more, even if they still swore by them. But I'd been brought up by a mother who knew better.

Edging around the tent flap, I noticed it opened into a large communal area with a roaring fire at the centre. Guards surrounded it, passing plates of unidentifiable meat between one another from a grill plate over the flames. Sitting on logs, they all stared into the fire or at one another as they conversed loudly, at least four or five conversations going on all at once. I could sneak by this, I'd done harder things before in quieter areas.

It may have been loud. But it was about to get much louder.

It started slow, but with the inevitable volume carried within its wailing drone, the Fillydelphia balefire warning siren began its deathly, eerie klaxon scream. Growing in volume second by second, it roared into the Fillydelphia sky, raising hairs on everypony's backs for miles. Even now, two hundred years on, the sound struck absolute terror in many, me especially. Louder and louder, my ears began to hurt as every guard in the area shot to their hooves. The clattering of weapons, rush of action, and screams for what was going on filled the air. I felt rooted to the spot as the sound seemed to penetrate my entire body, images of skeletons in dead homes, of balefire wreathing through cities, of a world ending and the goodness of Equestria being burned out from an unstoppable and indiscriminate

wave.

Back then, it had signalled the end of the world. Today, it was the call to arms against attack, or for escaping slaves.

The Master had alerted them. The thresher slaves would have confirmed the direction.

My head start was over. They were coming for me.

I took off, stealth was pointless now. Guards would be searching *everything* with enough determination born of the screaming siren's incentive. Above me, waves of griffons took to the sky and every guard tower lit their magical energy bulbs to shine red glares upon the area near the wall. Galloping at top speed, I sped past the guards, not caring if I was spotted. I no longer had the time to worry for that, if I didn't get through the Wall before the guards atop it were settled, I'd never get a hundred feet from the borders of Fillydelphia.

"He's right here!"

"OPEN FIRE!"

Booming retorts of rifles followed by the staccato clattering of automatic weaponry sounded in my wake, stopped only by the mass of cover in the shantytown the guards lived in. Diving around a corner, I rolled as best I could to come to my hooves sideways and rushed for any small hole I could find. Sneaking was gone, but I could still evade! The wailing in the air and the screaming of guards was too much commotion for me to even think about fear as I wriggled between shacks and jumped tie-lines from tents. I spilled a crate of rifles as I crashed into it, before screaming and running inside a tent as soldiers piled into the clearing. Drawing my knife, I cut through the back of it as fast as I could, a hole so small only I could fit through. Behind me, a heavily sleeping mare was cut down by incoming rounds as they attempted to hit me through the tent's canvas.

How many times had I ran from gunfire? How many sniper shots rang out as they caught a tiny glimpse of me between buildings? How many times was I screamed at to stop?

I kept going. To stop was death. To keep going was survival! Escape!

I burst from the edge of the camp, collapsing and staggering to my hooves. Gunfire pocketed the mud around me as I weaved, dodged, and ran for all my worth.

"Fucking hit him!"

"You *seen* how small he is!?"

Guards were pouring from the camp. Sweet Celestia, how many were there!?

The ground was open in front of me all the way to the wall. A killzone. A giant killzone. My memory flashed back as a booming speaker of Red Eye's voice opened up, demanding the rogue slave to halt immediately. Standing in the road, Number Six bellowing for me to follow, stopping scared in the wake of gunfire and the demands of my Master...

No.

He was not my Master.

Not.

Any.

More!

I screamed an incoherent cry, charging forward! I could see a drain at the bottom of the wall, just like I had imagined! Gunshots fell around me, pinging from rocks and churning up mud. If I could just reach that drain, I'd be safe until the other side. I didn't stop once, running side to side and galloping until my hooves were in agony from striking rocks. The sunset passed behind the wall as I chased it, determined to view it on the other side, find out where the Stable Dweller had gone over the horizon!

I mounted the rocks, diving off them even as a rocket-propelled grenade blasted them into shrapnel. My rump stung as pieces flew into me, but I was too determined to stop now! To either side, I saw guards running for me, but even I could tell they were too far away to catch me in time. A smile crossed my face, I dodged left and right confidently, knowing all along I had been meant to do this!

Their gunfire missed me completely. Their attempts to hit a fast-moving and small target camouflaged against a night's darkness were met with failure so long as I didn't run in a straight line. Tracer fire struck the wall, shouts for bringing me down went out.

Above me I heard a flutter in the sky. Like a glass pane shattering, realisation struck me.

Hearing it once was random.

Time seemed to slow.

Hearing it twice was coincidence.

Terror began to clench my stomach as I began to turn my head to look upwards.

Three times was a definite sign I had been followed the entire time.

I saw the jet black griffon with the long-barrelled rifle hovering in the air. I tried to bend my legs, to dive out of the way, into the drain.

Until she fired.

It struck me mid-leap. The force of a sledgehammer slapping into my side, I felt the hot pain of the bullet crash through my torso and rip its way out of the other side, my armour plating completely failing to even so much as delay it.

I fell, tumbling in the air in a slow arc before landing in a heap.

All the gunfire ceased as I went down and briefly blacked out from the overwhelming force of immediate agony. Immediately, consciousness flowed back and brought with it a world of pain I had never once imagined could exist.

I screamed.

Loud, rasping, and full of hurt, I clasped my hooves to my side. I couldn't even remember if that was the entry or exit. Both sides burned with painful heat. I forgot my escape. I forgot the sunset and my freedom. All that was in my mind was panic, pain, and fear of dying ever so suddenly as reality shattered my imaginative fantasy. Thrashing in the dirt, my eyes clenched shut, I wailed for anypony, somepony, to come and help me. To save me. I cried for Number Six, I cried for the Stable Dweller, and hell, even Celestia herself to help me. My legs had gone numb. Forcing my eyes open, I almost fainted on the spot as I witnessed the pool of blood spreading from beneath me. Beside me, tauntingly, the drainage ditch sat, its Murky Number Seven-sized hole forever to tease me with untouched potential.

Oblivious to my pain and crying, the griffon landed beside me as the guards moved in, weapons pointed. Ragini! That was her name! The griffon from yesterday! Whimpering and moaning loudly, I looked up at her, my tears mixing with the mud and blood on the ground as I raised a single hoof toward her, begging for help, to not be killed on the spot.

She batted it away with her muzzle, before reaching down, her talons pulling my fleece up to examine the wound. I screamed as the wound was aggravated, and as she began to yank my clothing away.

"NO— ARRGH! PLEASE! D-don't! You'll kill me! I need to get out! I need... I need to..."

My words went unheard as she pulled it up. I cried out anew as I saw the injury myself. The exit wound caked in red. Whimpering, I looked away and shuddered. My limbs shook... I was going into shock.

The guards broke their calm as they, and Ragini, saw what lurked beneath my fleece.

"A pegasus," she said, quietly and full of immediate hate, "well, well. The rumours are true, then."

I couldn't respond. I just tried to keep my blood in, trying to hold down on my wound. Even the pain of my own hooves touching it gave way to more pain and shouting from the feigning.

"R-Ragini! Please! I... I'm sorry! Let me live... please!"

Ragini shook her head and drew the rifle, the barrel aiming directly to my head.

"Escaping slaves only get one thing."

Her eyebrow twitched. I couldn't hear anything over the sound of all the guards catching up. They shouted and demanded information. Ragini looked up sharply, away to the side as though hearing or spotting something. She hesitated, before removing the weapon.

"Guards! Take him in! And know I'll be informing Stern of your failure to stop a slave for this distance! It's embarrassing! I followed him all the way from the FunFarm, watched him outwit you all. Get him out of here!"

I cried and curled up around my wound, feeling my head get overwhelmed by dizziness. My speech felt slurred as I shouted for help. Colours washed into one another and I felt like I were seconds behind my own body's actions. Shock overwhelmed me, drove me to feeling faint. Yet I saw the upset soldiers and guards from Ragini's proclamation rush forward. They had revenge in their eyes, and I held my hooves up as they swarmed over me, tugging my wounded body amongst them. Hooves struck at me. Rifles knocked into me. The assault began, one I knew I'd never survive.

But as quickly as it started... it stopped, as I witnessed the guards cease and part. My burning throat gave way to a horrible croaking, as I struggled to open my one functioning eye from the swelling that had blinded the other one again.

The last thing I saw was a figure advancing through the crowd. Red and black. A single, baleful, glowing crimson light emerged from one eye socket. Before I could even utter the word 'Master' to beg for forgiveness, my hoof stretched out to him, I fell into the black void that awaited me... and I felt no more.

"Now listen, children.

DJ-Pon-Three's gonna have to get serious for a moment. No, really! Yeah, I know it ain't something that we like to do all too often. But I've been telling you all about this stuff for the entire day. But I've been thinking and it feels only truthful that I mention something.

You will fail.

Now, don't treat that how it sounds! What I truly mean is, nopony can expect to go out there and make it all happen on their first try. The wasteland didn't last two hundred years just because a few ponies were lazy, oooh no. To fight the good fight, we need to learn not only to stand up and try, but to know how to get back up when we're beaten. To learn from it, get stronger, and try again. I'm sure all those legends we know of thought the same. Hell, a certain mare knows that more than most. So I implore you all, my little wastelanders. If you go out to fight the good fight I keep telling you to, there will be times when it will hurt more than you can imagine. But don't give up. Don't

ever give up. The moment we do, that's when Equestria dies.

Bit of a downer note to end on, I know. But I care for you all out there, I wouldn't want to finish this day without letting you know the reality you'll be in for.

Now back to something happier, this is Sweetie Belle with a song to send us all to sleep tonight peacefully. Hush Now, wasteland, one more painful day is over.

This is DJ-Pon-Three, bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts."

I wasn't dead.

Even amongst the black abyss of pain and defeat, I could hear voices as I faded in and out. Some I knew, some I didn't recognise. They rang in my head, my ears picking them up from time to time.

The pain flared, and became worse. It threatened to overwhelm me. A sensation of drowning, of fighting to stay afloat. I was lying on something hard, yet my balance felt like I was falling again and again.

I felt somepony grab me. Hooves around my body, lifting me up desperately. Lying on my back, I opened my eyes to see nothing but darkness and one mare staring down at me. Light orange hair, streaked with red.

I tried to speak, to reach out, but I just lay silent, unable to function in my own body. Every sound began murky and muddled, as though hearing from underwater.

She spoke five words. I couldn't understand any of them, it looked like she was pleading.

What did she say?

She glowed with light, the brightness expanding before it contained my entire vision.

And I woke...

Hard metal and red haze greeted me as I awoke.

I was lying on my side, distinctly not dead but possessing a weariness that was hard to quantify to myself. Red smoke flowed from grills on the floor, searing my lungs and half-choking me. Whoever put me in here to recover clearly had little care about my ongoing health.

I twisted, checking my side. Scar tissue remained, but hairs were growing back already. It hurt badly, and I felt weak, yet my lungs felt clearer, despite the smoke in the cramped cell. Whatever they had used to heal me had affected my disease as well. It still felt present, but toned down.

In many ways, I felt healthier than I had in years, recovering wounds notwithstanding. What was going on?

I gave myself a once over. I was chained to the floor, all four hooves shackled to colossal iron rings welded to the sheet metal. All of my clothing had been stripped. Fleece, saddlebag and even my goggles. With pain, I realised that along with everything else, I had lost my PipBuck and journal. All I had left was my own skin and a cutie mark that all too harshly reminded me of where I had gone wrong...

...no.

I hadn't gone wrong. It had been a wake up call. I had failed, but somehow, I had realised

that it didn't matter. It didn't matter what they said, or what my cutie mark said. From the moment I had sallied forth under the scream of the siren, something had changed within me. I was a different pony now. Not a slave... well, kinda. I was still a slave, but the crucial difference was I no longer *wanted* to be one! I may be scared and liable to being terrified back into line, but the crucial choice had been made.

I was no longer controlled by my slave instinct, regardless of what had happened.

And I still wanted out. I still wanted to try again. That was what mattered, no matter how harsh this got.

Distantly, I heard the sound of hooves in the hallway outside the thick cell door. They grew closer, and I shrunk back as far as I could.

An authoritative, well spoken voice snapped a polite command.

"Open it, please."

Without a word or hesitation, the door hissed open, spraying steam from the complex mechanics and spraying the smoke in a whirling cloud. From within it, strode a pony.

Red and black...

Glowing crimson eye...

I shrieked, trying to run backward before the chains caught and I collapsed on the ground. Once again, I cried out as my wounds slapped the ground hard, before curling up and just shivering in the wake of *him*.

Red Eye.

"Do you know why you are still alive?"

His voice was startlingly young, incredibly well-spoken, and fluid. I shook my head. He was not my master, but this pony had the authority and ability to control a superpower in the wastes.

"Then perhaps I should regale you of the manner in which you were spared, Murky Number Seven."

He knew my name.

He strode forward, clearing through the smoke with a calm pace. He...

...was not Red Eye.

Standing before me was not an earth pony, but now a properly revealed unicorn. Younger than Red Eye, yet older than myself by a few years. A charcoal black coat with a two-tone red mane, he bore a well-kept uniform that seemed to be half-practical and half-scholar, coloured in a grey and dark red.

His left eye housed an intricate looking eyepiece. Not cybernetics, but a monocle of sorts of highly tuned technology that hung from one ear. It glowed much in the same way as Red Eye's bionic replacement in his *right* socket.

I had missed the differences in my terror and the cloying smoke. He stood with the grace and poise of an educated pony as he looked down at me. Yet somehow, he didn't look *down* at me. His eyes (well, eye) stared as though viewing an equal. Over the years, I more than anypony had learned the difference.

"I saved your life, Murky Number Seven," he began, taking a breath and lowering his head slightly towards me, "I had heard there was a rumour of a pegasus in Fillydelphia and when the escape siren sounded, well, who else would be most likely to try than a 'hated' pegasus? Naturally, I was interested, and from what you did I know I was right. You are indeed a very interesting pony."

I glanced down at my sides, those pitiful useless wings sat without comment.

"Now, it may have cost me many favours and I had to pull some strings to avoid you being shot on the spot for attempting to escape, so I do hope my... investment shall prove worthwhile. You are something of an anomaly among the higher-ranked overseers, you know?"

I shook my head again, but forced myself to lie against the wall, supporting my still healing wounds. The unicorn's horn lit with red magic, drawing a bowl of stew in from behind him to sit before me. It was warm.

"They don't often encounter pegasi, hence my interest in acquiring you here. Now. Come, eat. You are severely malnourished, Murk."

I sniffed it. Proper apple stew. I didn't wait, digging in before it was retracted. The unicorn patiently waited as I slurped it down, the first proper meal I'd had in over two months. The taste, the freshness, and oh, the warmth. I wasn't very dignified as I gulped every piece down. I even licked the bowl before sighing in relief as my stomach, for once, properly filled. He smiled, before calmly resuming.

"Now, Murky Number Seven, I am sure you have questions."

I felt given to talk. Thus far, any threat was being disarmed, but I could not prevent a wariness. Regardless of heart-warming food, he was still one of Red Eye's ponies.

"Who... who are you?"

My voice sounded rough and weak next to his strong tone. He spoke politely, intelligently, yet there was no hint of the "scholarly poshness" that I had once heard in Manehattan when a librarian from Tenpony Tower had come seeking a slave for keeping his library clean. I'm sure anypony could guess why I didn't last long in that job.

The buck smiled, a thin and deceptively friendly looking one. I kept my wits ready, that kind of smile often was not to be trusted. I knew. I had seen Red Eye once use it. In fact, this buck was reminding me a lot of him in more than just image.

"My name is Protégé, a fourth-tier ranking work leader within Master Red Eye's endeavours in Unity, Fillydelphia, and beyond. I was trained, educated, and eventually handed responsibility by his teachings and ideologies. Although too old to have had the same upbringing as he affords foals, I have integrated myself to his plans rather fully in my time under his advice and guidance."

"So," I decided to dare speaking, this buck at least seemed willing to answer questions, "basically, you're his, um, next in line? His heir?"

"I believe you mean, 'heir', Murk," he smiled almost too smoothly as he spoke, "and no, as much as I would appreciate the offer, I am not. Stern is his second-in-command. However, I have had the benefit of much contact with Master Red Eye himself, including opportunities to be taught directly, one to one. Such times when I have sat with him and listened to his wisdom and teachings have been blessings. To hear of the great Unity he intends, to hear it in his own words meant for my ears alone? He made me realise what we could accomplish to help this world. As such, some might regard me as his student, as he charts my progress week to week, via reports if not in person."

Protégé looked to the side, leaving me with only the slightly unsettling view of his eyepiece.

"Indeed, I consider myself lucky."

"Lucky to be trained to kill ponies like me?"

I couldn't conceal the question. Every ounce of me hated what he stood for. I had lived my *life* in slavery and now this clearly intelligent buck considered himself *lucky* to be taught

to make *more of it?*

"To kill you, Murk?"

"Ponies like me!" I shouted, still riding the high of knowing I had broken the slave in my mind for now, "We're out there dying every day for this place!"

"Murk, I assure you, I make no attempt to hide the casualty rates among the workers," he spoke with incredible diction, almost rehearsed, "but you must understand that this is necessary. In a hundred years, could Equestria survive when stored food runs out? When we have expended every piece of technology? No, we could not. Fillydelphia, Master Red Eye's great dream, is to build a new world for us before the chance to support it is lost forever, Murk."

His eye seemed to light with fire. He was passionate about this!

"Have you seen the foals? The fillies and colts?"

I shook my head. I hadn't seen any since I came to Fillydelphia, a slight irony in itself.

"Exactly, Murk. Master Red Eye keeps them safe from all this. All this work, this toil that we all sacrifice to, even myself, is in efforts for their safety. He protects them, heals them, educates them, and trains them for when we, those fighting to save Equestria, eventually manage to build enough industry that the world may operate once again."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"I realise this is a tough world, Murk. Some workers may not be entirely willing. But for the good of Equestria, it is the only way. For what it is worth, I am sorry that yours, that *ours*, is the generation that must go through this. But for every mill, factory, and piece of technology we create, we bring us one step closer to our goal. To give our children a better world at the price of our own lives. Is that so evil?"

I listened, I heard and yes, I was even slightly moved by his words. But... a life of slavery? A whole life? I couldn't let go of what it had done to me. To hear that Fillydelphia served a purpose other than simple greed and power was mind-boggling. Red Eye had often spoke through the loudspeakers about such things, but I had never believed it was a serious intention until now.

"I..." I couldn't quite grasp what to say for a few seconds, "I don't know."

Any reply fell away from me. I was not in a condition for an ideological debate.

"Well then," continued Protégé, "perhaps I should move on to the next obvious topic... yourself."

I perked up, but remained silent.

"You tried to escape, Murk."

He wandered from side to side, pacing as he spoke.

"However it was, to be frank, a rather unthoughtful attempt, for all your efforts. My subordinate, Ragini, had you tagged the moment you left the FunFarm, as I'm sure you know. However, I must point out that she actually saved your life."

"*She shot me!*"

"And you," he continued, without so much as a breath, "were about to crawl into a drainage tunnel filled with tainted chemicals that would have killed you in moments in a rather... distasteful way. Did you not read the sign?"

His voice dropped at the last sentence as I sighed and shook my head.

"I can't read..."

"A pity. Lucky for you that your choice in armour was fairly uninformed."

"She shot me with an anti-machine rifle, what good would any armour do?"

Protégé almost seemed to grin.

"An anti-machine rifle, Murk? She shot you with a low-calibre rifle she keeps to fire without as much recoil in flight. If she had used an anti-machine rifle... I assure you, I would have been using a mop to bring you here rather than my magic."

Somehow, I didn't find the joke funny. This entire conversation made me feel uncertain, I had thought myself free... then dead... now once again in Red Eye's stocks in a prison cell. This was too much to take in at once, really. Only Protégé's strange calmness and polite nature seemed to be holding even me together. Even so, I could not help but feel threatened; I had seen Red Eye's cruelty, despite his silver tongue.

"Now, I shan't even go into your choice to take oatmeal, which goes off in a day, or the scrap not worth more than fifty caps that weighed you down so much. Instead, I would rather denote that you owned some things of great interest that showed you were serious about escaping."

"I was." I tried to sound as stoic as I could.

"So I see. You want freedom badly, Murk. I can see it in your eyes, but I am going to tell you the reason why you failed, more than any."

That caught me by surprise. I lowered my eyebrows, trying to stand up.

"You failed, Murk, because you do not know what it is you want."

What?

"I... but I did! I was-am-dying! I have an—"

"An irradiated and marginally tainted infection, Murk. I know. My personal physician detected it when he was healing you. He could not remove it. I only have so many resources to expend, and while he is capable, he is not a surgeon-level doctor. But that is precisely the point. You tried to escape because you wanted to *live*. I will tell you, Murk. Escape from Fillydelphia is not impossible."

He had to be meaning the Stable Dweller, but hearing those words felt like a world changing revelation to me. It had seemed so impossible, especially not that he had explained I really had stood no chance.

"But you must be willing to go beyond that. To try so hard that it goes past what we can possibly predict. To push so hard that nothing could ever hold you back. But you cannot harness that, not yet anyway. You sought to live, you ran in fear. But what you say you want is *freedom*."

He lowered his eyebrows, looking almost saddened by the fact himself.

"How can you truly want freedom hard enough to escape this place, when you have no idea what freedom is yet?"

...he was right.

I had no idea what freedom entailed. I had never had it, no matter how much I said I had no master I did. No real choice or will to do as I pleased. It seemed blindingly obvious now in retrospect.

"Yes, Murk. If you want to desire freedom enough to escape, then you will have to first *taste* freedom."

I lowered my head, feeling a wave of depression seeping in. How would I ever know that?

"But thankfully for you, Murk, I am going to offer you your freedom."

My eyes almost flew off my head in how wide they became. Joy catapulted in my mind, held back only by a wariness born of a life of disappointment.

"H-how? What? I mean..."

“What I mean, is that Master Red Eye offers ways to *earn* your freedom. In this case, two years service on special operations such as exploring Stables and other similar buildings. Now Murk, I *am* a work leader who specialises in the workers who wish to attempt to find their freedom that way. Some seek only the violence it provides while others truly seek to become free through service to the cause. I have signed you to it.”

What? I had known about it, any slave could do it, but I didn't want that! It was dangerous! You had to kill Stable dwellers if you found them! I couldn't do that!

“In greater service to Master Red Eye, you are now under me. I am your new master, Murk. I hope you will show great enthusiasm. You are an interesting pony, not just for your pegasus wings either. I do hope you attain your freedom. Truly, I do.”

He looked honest. But the thought of the dangers I would have to face, for *two years*, only echoed in my head. I had sought to escape. All I had found for myself was years of work in a harsher environment, no matter how polite or... strangely *nice* this Protégé seemed!

“Now, Murk. I shall leave you to my... hm... assigned overseer, who will take you to the Mall. Four walls, a roof, and better meals than you have had. I am not a brutal leader, Murk. I seek only ponies who wish to serve Master Red Eye and help us to create something beautiful for the children of Equestria. Please, take comfort in knowing I will only permit you on tasks that truly will help us. I am not given to wasting special resources in the ponies that I locate to work for me.”

I didn't know what to feel. I just stood as he turned and walked back outside. I heard a heavy pony approaching. From Protégé's look, it was his overseer.

Heavy clumps of hooves and a large shadow mixed with a low, deep and almost uninterested voice.

“Take him straight to the Mall. Get him cleaned up and get him something to eat, then put him with the workers in the plaza. Try to keep him away from the raiders. Maybe put him in with Coral, if she's back. Nothing else.”

“Mhm. Right there, eh?”

Protégé hesitated, staring upwards, before warily leaving, and in his place walked...
...him.

“Hey there, cutie pie.”

The Master grinned wickedly as he passed his bulk through the thin doorway, backing me into the cell as he drew the key to my shackles. A deep, rumbling, and taunting laughter set my eyes to water once again as I huddled in the corner.

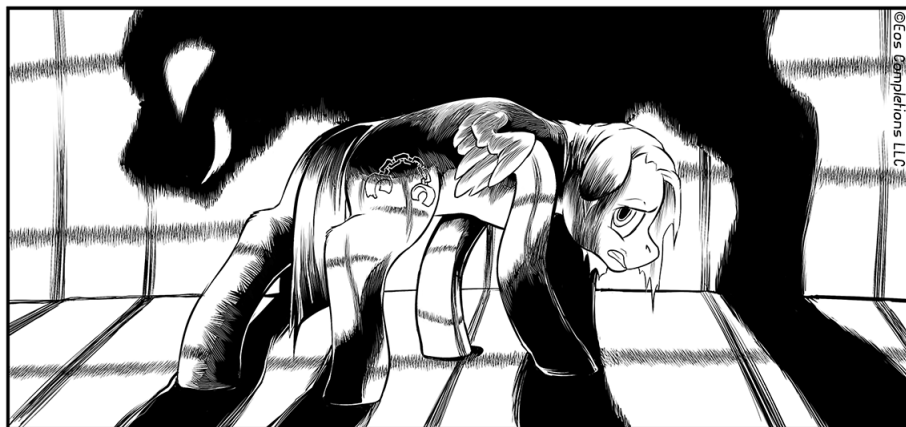
“You and I are going to get along so well, little Murky.”

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Runt of the Litter – You were never the largest, subject to a series of beatings and bullying through your life. You gain a small damage resistance bonus against non-critical unarmed attacks. Doesn't hurt any less, mind you.

Footnote: Quest Perk Attained!

Shadow Canter (Rank 1) – Whether for crime or survival, you have begun to show your ability to stick to the shadows whilst objects strangely go missing in your passing from both pockets and homes. You gain +10 to sneak and any thefts you make are twice as likely to succeed.

The Sinner

“Nervous? Don’t be ridiculous. You’re only facing a large crowd of ponies who will be watching your every move and silently judging you.”

“What is it like to be trapped?”

Like being alone, this is something I guess I didn’t properly realise until I was shown directly. In this case, my unsuccessful attempt to escape Fillydelphia.

Looking back, I made every mistake in the book by not preparing properly or knowing what to really do when I got to the Wall itself.

I was trapped, stuck in the one place where you need to know how important freedom really is to ever hope to have the sheer determination required to escape. It was a harsh lesson learned in pain and blood that I would never forget. However, my mind began to wander to the discussion with Protégé and his promises of freedom. Whether he was telling the truth or not was unknown to me. So far as I’ve known nopony had ever survived the two years of hell to earn their freedom from Red Eye. Who could? Two years of Ministry Hub exploration, Stable recovery and brutal underground skirmishes in, around, and away from a highly radioactive balefire crater? Not including, of course, any random tasks slaves might be assigned.

Not only was I trapped behind walls, I was trapped by the whims of my new master. A master who had locked me into a schedule likely to kill me, all the while talking of my service to Equestria.

I may have been further from the Wall now, but I could feel the walls of my life closing around me ever greater with every step that I took. From the Pit to, my sickness, and now to even greater odds than ever before. Indeed, I began to wonder what would kill me first. Would I die from some rogue security system in a bunker? Shot down by Stable residents defending their homes? The radiation sickness growing to harm me once again?

Or would it be the Master to break me?

Chainlink Shackles, although I could never bring myself to call him that, now had a hold on my life. Granted permission to oversee my day to day pursuits, I could not imagine a worse figure to be around. For all of Protégé's apparent calm of mind and kindness to his 'workers,' I sensed that all the wickedness he could have shown was instead communicated through the Master.

I had sought to escape the trap of everlasting chains around my throat, pulling me down and setting in concrete the rest of my life. I had overcome my fears to charge the Wall simply to escape the pain he would bring. Despite my newfound emotion and... and well, even courage, it was not enough to bring me to exist near him. He was my foil, my true Master. A living symbol of slavery.

All my efforts had been, subconscious or not, to escape either him or what he represented in Equestria. That was why I had tried.

That was why, in the aftermath of my failure, I felt trapped. Broken.

That is why I was afraid. So very afraid of what he might have done to me, the slave he had always wanted. One born to be under his control.

I... I'm so sorry... I don't mean to repeat myself over and over... I just...

He said he had raiders at his stock hall, I knew that they would kill pegasi!

I just felt lost. What do you do when you fall so hard that trying to stand again seems terrifying? When you start to get angry at yourself for what you are, and for how you failed, it's so hard. It's so hard to fail.

And it's equally hard to get back up again, and to stop blaming yourself for it.

But you have to. There no other way, when you're trapped that far down...

The water hit me like a buck to the face.

They used a seemingly unending jet stream of liquid from a hosepipe to 'clean' me. A high-pressure hose had been hooked up to blast the dirt right off me. At least, that was the theory.

Instead, it was borderline torture.

Blasted back against the old shower room wall, I struggled to breathe. If I opened my mouth it was filled with water. If I wailed they only laughed, as I staggered and fell from that brutal stream of water slapping into my body, head and legs. I was beginning to go numb, both from the ice-cold temperature and the feeling of an unending blow to my body. Flailing my hooves, I tried to signal to them. I couldn't... I couldn't breathe!

The water stopped, gurgling away through the grimy shower block into the drain that led to the basement. I presumed they had a recycling machine set up, to use this much water on just a slave...

"Get up, Number Seven."

The voice rumbled from the unlit areas near the door.

I trembled, unable to speak. Only tepid gasps left my sore throat from the feeling of every unfeeling limb beginning to freeze up. I felt swollen, like an unseen bruise. Turning my head, I tried to plead with them through sight alone. My spectators were invisible in the darkness, my vision further hampered from my dizzy head.

"Get *up*, Number Seven!"

Spraying water, I coughed and attempted to breathe normally. My body awakened with

brief spasms of activity, attempting to get a leg under me. I had not been given my clothing or any of my possessions. My wings drooped lifelessly at my side, painfully batted around by the force of the hose from where they were normally locked in place by damaged muscles. I was soaked through, dripping water even as I shook violently.

Sweet... sweet Goddesses, I couldn't even cry out in pain... the c-cold...

"Too slow. Again."

The *clack* of the hose's nozzle sounded in the darkness outside of the pale blue light of the showers before the water struck my face once more. With my tooth loosening again and feeling like I had just taken a gun stock to the head, I was whipped around before they swept me from my feet with the stream. My side and inverted wing crashed to the mossy tiles where I lay.

I had thought I could shout 'I'm clean!' or demand that it stop...

But *he* was in the darkness there, shouting commands. He would decide when.

Shaking furiously from the cold, I kept my eyes screwed shut, trying to block it all out as the water washed over my prone body. I couldn't... my knees stung from striking the hard ground so often, my teeth were chattering so much they hurt, and The Master was no idiot. The breaks to force me to stand were not for my benefit, no, they were just to ensure I didn't pass out and miss all he had planned in his sick interpretation of Protégé's instructions.

The Master knew exactly what he was doing.

The water ceased, the painful pressure on my upturned back relented, leaving behind what felt like lines of bruises and seized up muscles thick with cramps. Through clenched teeth, I lowly moaned, the most I could possibly muster to express that I couldn't handle this. I wasn't even being cleaned...

"Get up, Number Seven."

Number Seven. His new pet name for me. How overjoyed he had been to hear I had a designation to use. To demean me with and make me nothing but a statistic.

I dragged my hooves across the tiles, whimpering softly as I tried to get them beneath me... maybe if I was just fast enough I could please the Master. Maybe he might stop—

"Too slow. Again."

I didn't even get up before I was knocked head over hooves to the wall. Only a tiny degree of forethought in keeping my head forward prevented a concussion. The pressure of the water jet blasting from the darkness increased, searing across my face, filling my mouth, choking my throat, stopping my airflow...

I panicked, trying to move, but unable to breathe, unable to see and losing all balance from the roar of the water in my ears, I could do little but flounder. I... I couldn't feel my hooves any more...

"Get up, Number Seven."

"Pl... please..."

"Get *up*, Number Seven!"

"C-cold... can't feel..."

"Too slow. Again."

I was left to drip dry, standing amidst a darkened room across from the cells I had first awakened in. The slavers had told me if I moved or sat down, I would be put back in the

showers for another ‘cleaning.’

Clean was the last thing I felt. My body ached all over, yet no visible marks came through for anyone to know of The Master’s treatment of his new favoured slave. I could almost feel the sickness about to set in, for my own fatal disease to flare up any second. On top of that, I was alone.

Once I had believed I would never be alone again. The DJ would never leave me, so long as I had my PipBuck. Now that machine was long gone, taking with it the sweet voice of hope and truth. I couldn’t even see the walls, thanks to a single dim orange light above me ruining my night vision. My hooves trembled from both the cold and the exertion of standing upright in one place for... for how long? Hours? A few agonising minutes?

Time held little meaning in Fillydelphia. What felt like three days could turn out to be a few hours thanks to the red haze, the never ceasing interior workings, and the irregular shifts. I had no perspective of time even while outside. For all I knew it had only been one day since the Pit, not three. In here, however, time was like a void.

Worse, the room was soundproof. After living my life with hypersensitive hearing, dead silence other than the drip of water from my body was like being cast adrift onto the moon for a thousand years.

But at least it gave me time to think.

I wanted out. That would never change now. The Master could hurt me, break me, he could make me his obedient servant, but I would never lose track of my own fantasies. Of my wishes to someday taste the freedom Protégé had so teased me with and of my hopes to leave this whole hellhole behind. I didn’t want it in two years of destroying myself to do it... I wanted it now.

Or, well, in a bit. That sounded good... too weak right now...

...too scared.

I was still trembling. I may have *wanted* out, but all the courage and determination I’d had scant hours ago was just... gone. My failure had broken something. Was it my confidence? My spirit? I honestly couldn’t tell. All I knew was that if I could do it all again, I’d probably falter. The tearing pain in my scarred gut from Ragini’s bullet led me to quiver and shake every time I even imagined being brave again. I tried to tell myself it was only the dripping cold water making me shiver, but I knew it was terror incarnate. Both for my life... and of *him*. What was he going to do next? Brand me? Cut off my wings?

My eyes began to water. I dared not even blink lest I be accused of moving, what might he do if I shifted an inch?

The door opened.

“You are learning, Number Seven. Good... good.”

The Master strode through, squeezing his body through the narrow doorway. Even then, the segmented leather and steel plate armour he wore scraped and ground against the sides of the door as his huge frame entered the small room. I met his eyes, before lowering mine. I had seen crazed slavers, but in one brief glance I had witnessed nothing but pure, unadulterated hate.

“Now we’re going to play a little game, y’see, Number Seven?”

His voice was indeed playful, almost whimsical in his rough throat. I got a brief glance of those rotted teeth grinning at me. *That* grin... like it promised he would enact all of his life’s most sadistic desires should I try to disobey. I tried not to look at that cutie mark, the everlasting chain... I didn’t want to *ever* think about the idea of spending all my life under

him.

"It's where I try to guess things about you," he continued, circling me, "see how much I can guess just from looking at you, eh? Nod if I'm right and just answer me if I'm wrong."

I couldn't see behind me and I dared not move my head. But I could feel him, his mere presence behind me, he could be drawing anything. He had knives, a magical shock rod, whips...

"First off, your name... Number Seven, was it?"

"Murky Num— AARGGHH!"

The leather whip crashed down upon my back. Whiplash's blows were *nothing* compared to this! I screamed as loud as I possibly could as every leg collapsed beneath me from the force of the blow. I immediately wept openly as it felt like my back had been torn open entirely.

"No it's not, you stupid foal! Your name is *Number Seven!*"

I felt his head lean down to me, bellowing in my ear. He turned away, replacing the whip and lowering his voice, immediately regaining the heedless, playful, rough tone from before, as though nothing had happened. I stood up again, crying and quivering on all fours.

"So your name is Number Seven, then..."

The Master advanced, bending down to hold his lips inches from my own, gazing into my eyes. The stench made me want to heave on the spot as he spoke.

"So, you got family?"

I nodded.

"Enclave?"

"N-no..."

His hoof slapped me across the face hard enough to make me stagger to the side a good four feet. Great Luna... his hoof was almost the size of my *head!*

"No, **what?**"

"No, Master!"

"Better, so let me take a guess..."

He wandered again, before stopping. I had to fight not to cry out from a sense of violation as I felt a hoof of his run across the cutie mark of my left flank. I felt it follow the chains. Feeling his cracked and ragged hoof drifting across my own flesh made my skin crawl. It... it was wrong, I wanted to pull away... but I couldn't.

"Cutie mark of shackles, I like it. Ready to catch you if you'll ever run. Born slave, eh?"

After three seconds of trying to muster the courage, I nodded, a quick and nervous shivering nod. A whimper escaped my mouth as I felt him tap the ends of the shackles permanently etched upon me as a reminder of my lifelong contract to slavery.

"So what happened, slave? Parents from the bastards on the clouds?"

I couldn't move, I just screwed my eyes shut, trembling. I wanted him to go away... just *go away...*

"No? Well then..." he drifted off, before coming back around to face me, "what do we have here then? You an accident, Number Seven? The seventh one? Your mommy get beasted by raiders, eh? How'd you like to think about that, eh? The son of a wretched cannibal?"

I whined out loud, shaking my head, only to squeal as I was flattened to the floor by another agonising blow to the side of my face. I tried to curl up, but his hoof pressed flat on my face, making me squirm in panic.

"I said to tell me if I'm wrong, slave!"

His voice was as loud as Slit's magically enhanced shouts! The small space amplified the volume so that even this earth pony was causing me physical pain merely by talking. Gasping, I screamed out, "I think... I think my father was a slaver!"

"Oh yeah? Where was it, near Shattered Hoof? I went out there for Red Eye once long ago, you know? Got a few slaves in my room to pass the time... how'd you like it if it was *me*, eh?"

My blood *froze*. Even as his hoof lifted off, I just lay there, eyes wide open.

"One way or another, you're just a dejected little worm, you are, Number Seven. Your mother wouldn't even have wanted you if she hadn't been done up by some slaver with a mind to get some tail that night! Born to slavery, living in slavery, and going to *die* in slavery! But I like you, Number Seven... you know why?"

I didn't move, just glancing up at him, before his hoof slid down my body to prod my wing, not too gently.

"Pegasus. A real pegasus right in front of me where I can do whatever I want to him."

I tried to shift back and hide my wings, as though it would actually make a difference. I couldn't even think straight, he was in complete control here.

"You lot, you winged bastards, you've killed a lot of my partners over the years. Fancy Enclave soldiers scouting around or lone Dashites all thinking they're some hot shot in the Wastes. Never been able to get my hooves on one... until now. I was born to do this, you see? All my life, never had a pegasus slave, let alone one who looks like he was born just for me."

I couldn't contain my voice.

"I don't know any of them! I can't even fly! I... I didn't do anything—"

"QUIET, SLAVE!"

His hoof slammed down on my torso, knocking all the wind from my lungs, crushing my wing and causing racking pain through my ribs around the swollen healed flesh of the bullet wound. Concentrating on merely breathing again, I couldn't do much but listen.

"I've waited *years* for somepony like you, Number Seven. Oh how I love all the slaves, even the ones that resist... that try to beat me. They all fail, you know? But you, oh perfect you..."

He stopped pacing, his grin spreading as his whole bulk leaned down. His voice took on a predatory and sadistic tone.

"How I wish this could continue. I wanted you for myself, but Protégé got to you first. See... we're going to the Mall now, as per his orders. Pity I don't have time to deal with you one to one before you're under that little upstart's 'protection.' Don't think you're safe though, I'm *still* your overseer. Consider this a little taster of life with me had he not gotten you instead, slave. I may not have free reign, but..."

He paused as he raised up, cackling to himself.

"...who's to say we can't have a little... accident... en-route to have some more fun before it ends? After all, I am *sure* I heard Protégé say to put you in with the raiders..."

I screamed. I begged, throwing my hooves forward, reaching for his hooves.

"NO!" I wailed, shaking my head furiously. "They... they don't just kill pegasi! I heard it before! They hate... they *hate* pegasi! Think they're all to blame..."

His eyes betrayed that hate again, directed at the fact I was born with wings.

"Because you all *are*, you feathered wretch. Shackle him! Same kind as your little cutie

mark there, eh? Don't you like that? It's what you're meant for after all."

With a motion, two unicorns moved in, shackling me up by all four hooves in a complex chain that made any leg movement difficult. They also fitted a heavy rusted collar around my neck. The Master tied the chain to his armoured barding.

"Come on, little Murky," he cooed, "time to go meet the sick fucks your kind helped create. I don't suppose you'll survive them, but even if they do decide not to kill you, don't worry. I'm sure they'll make it interesting enough for me to watch."

"But... I didn't... I'm not..."

He didn't care, instead simply dragging me from the cell. Only as I emerged into greater light did I realise I hadn't a single mark or bruise on me. Despite all the agony of my preparations for Protégé's stock under The Master, there was no evidence, no proof of his abuse. The Master was, in his own sick way, a genius.

In just ten minutes he had nearly broken me. Already I could hear that familiar voice, the slave in my mind, demanding that I simply obey him and hope that he would treat me as any other slave. I knew that wouldn't happen.

But above all, one thing terrified me so much more.

The dreaded thought of what would have happened had I not attempted my escape and simply went with The Master to be entirely owned by him alone echoed in my mind. This had been nothing but a small slice of what would happen. What if Protégé wasn't there? What if he had the freedom to keep me in there and... and do whatever he wanted to me? The feeling of his hoof tracing my cutie mark made me want to throw up on the spot even through memory. I couldn't stop repeating it in my head, like the thought itself disgusted me enough to take control of my imagination. I fought back, trying to think of my conviction. Escape... escape to the world. In some way, in some small way, it was a tiny and quickly forgettable comfort to consider the outcome. To know that my failed attempt had some purpose in my life still, to have avoided his full and complete attention and be picked up by Protégé instead.

However, as I plodded along behind The Master... My Master... it helped little as I was marched outside and toward his 'accident.'

Raiders.

I felt myself simply wanting to cry as I walked, but I could not muster even the courage to do so in front of The Master for fear of being told not to.

It's true that there is a story behind every pair of wings in the wasteland.

Unfortunately, it's doubly so. For every unique story a pegasus owns, there is a single, defining and accusing one held by many of the ground's residents that pegasi are inherently to blame for the state of Equestria. My mother once told me the story. When Equestria looked set to die, Cloudsdale, the capital of the pegasi, was struck first and wiped off the map entirely. Knowing of many more Balefire spells, missiles, and bombs approaching, the pegasi shut up the sky and hid themselves from the destruction. They left a wasteland below, abandoning it to the flames and the scouring destruction while they kept their eyes pointed ever upwards. In two hundred years, they had not returned to help anypony. If it weren't for the odd tale of rare pegasi in the wastes, nopony would even know they existed at all, it seemed.

But for those of us down here unlucky enough to be born with the genes of the pegasi, long dormant in family lines, we still bore the responsibility and bigotry born of leaving earth ponies and unicorns to die alone. Whether we wanted it or not, in our wings, they saw the lack of the sun and moon to guide them. They saw dead fields bereft of weather designed to grow fresh food. They still felt the anger of those lost while the pegasi flew away from the flames into the sky.

I couldn't help but feel this was something of a metaphor for my life in reverse. I had watched the Stable Dweller leave this hellish place for somewhere better without taking me in much the same way. But I didn't hate her... much the opposite. Every time I saw her in my mind I loved everything she stood for more and more. Why couldn't the others do the same? Had the pegasi really been so selfish? Surely it was all a big mistake twisted through uncharted history?

As I was dragged outside, everypony else begged to differ.

It was a long trot to 'The Mall' and I was sure The Master made it longer. Refusing to permit me any clothing, my wings were on show for all to see. Slaves ceased their work, unattended by guards who stood and stared. Confusion gave way to disbelief which in turn became a slow building anger. Before long I was attempting to dodge tin cans and hurled rocks. Guards held slaves back—not even just them, they held their *comrades* back!

If the wastes held a distrust, slaves with no one else to see below them held a disgust.

I cantered as best I could. At first I tried to blank it out, to just close my eyes and follow the pull of The Master's leash around my neck as I was paraded like a prize for all to see.

"Fucking pegasus!"

"Why don't you just fly away, eh?"

A tin can hit my side, making me jump, in shock more than pain. But my eyes opened to see groups of slaves rushing to the side of the road, screaming insults. Not every slave did, many remained and some even looked sadly at me as the bigots of the world made their opinions known.

But it was enough... with shouts, screams, and pathetic reminders of a long gone past, they now numbered enough to force The Master to acquire an escort of griffons with a hoof signal to the sky.

"You see, Murk?"

I was shivering again, this time *definitely* from terror, as I watched a unicorn buck trying to get close enough to hurl a brick at me. The griffons warded him away with a flash of claws and the aiming of numerous high-powered rifles. I saw faces I recognised. Noose and Lemon were jeering, hurling whatever they could at me. I saw a blue earth pony with a red mane hurling something from a length of rope to build its momentum. The half-brick impacted against my side as I screamed out loud. I tried to run, but The Master pulled the chain, keeping me on my slow parade. I heard him announce to the crowds that here was the pegasus who tried to escape and leave them all behind, like all pegasi did long ago.

"You have no place in the outside world. They don't *want* your kind out in the wastes. Better to stay here, eh?"

A griffon had to dodge as some telekinesis fired a length of rebar at me. Alerted by the movement, I only barely dodged as I became tangled in all the chains tugging me along.

The noise was becoming intolerable. I heard a mare screaming of some lone 'Dashite' that murdered her family and sold her to here.

I saw Whiplash. He fixed me with a stare, that cold stare of anger he often did before

striking.

Others demanded I go back above the clouds and stop taunting them. Some begged me to fly them out of here to atone for what my kind had done in the past. I could only drag my hooves and keep walking.

"I... I'm sorry, I can't..."

"I bet you're in league with the slavers to sell us all out! That's what pegasi do!"

"But... I don't..."

"Take him to the Pit, I want to see a pegasus get clobbered!"

"I... I..."

"KILL HIM!"

"Hey look, he's crying! Bet Shackles is gonna kill him now, serves you right, you traitor!"

"Betrayer!"

"Selfish bastards!"

I backed from side to side, always and forever being dragged by the chain around my collar, trying to stay away from them as the small crowds jeered and screamed. I broke down before them all. I screamed back at them, trying to convince them. I wanted to take out my journal and show them the picture of my mother, show them that I was one of them! I screamed about my cutie mark, didn't it prove I was just a slave? I... I told them my wings didn't work.

They didn't even listen. They didn't *want* to listen.

A passing cart held Sooty Morass. His dry cackle as he witnessed me set even my emotions to anger at his arrogance and condescending tone as he reached off the cart to pat my head. From the looks of things, he was even running a few slaves ragged to pull his stocks around on a work wagon.

The Master took me through the streets, through the pens and through the industrial zones. We passed the threshing mill on the way from the old prison. We crossed the fractured main wagon roads to pass by the factories. Slaves I knew laughed at it being me, calling that they 'always knew' I was weird. I saw Wicked Slit chasing down a slave earth pony buck, throwing him to the ground with magic and resting that curved knife on his throat. She was screaming at him for not performing as well as he could.

My passing drew her attention and she even forgot about the buck to wander over next to her guards. Her eyes fell to my wings and to my chains before settling on The Master. I tried to hurry up, but The Master half-bucked me back again with savage blow to my chest. Lying on the ground, being lightly dragged, I saw Slit looking down as The Master continued to pull his prize away.

I expected her to say something. I expected her to scream.

She just grinned... as her knife pointed at me a few times before drawing itself lightly in front of her own throat. I gulped, shivering as I gathered the meaning of her gesture as she began to cackle, before eventually roaring with laughter. An evil shrieking, as I was pulled away from her factory toward the care of one even she respected and admired the teachings of. Even as she turned away and began bucking slaves and guards to get back to work, she continued laughing, only stopping as she noticed the buck hightailing it away. Her all too familiar outcry of fury and the sound of her galloping hooves was the last thing I heard before she fell out of sight.

Amidst the humiliation of being displayed to the populace of Fillydelphia as the failed escapee and being revealed as a pegasus... I guess I took some comfort in that she still didn't

know who took her goggles.

Everypony who had demanded me to do work seemed to have seen me. My heart was tight with the hate flowing freely from everypony, slaves and guards alike. The Master had planned this... he must have known it would affect me...

But as he dragged me past a forge filled with slaves, even he couldn't have planned the heartbreak he was about to cause me.

Amongst the slaves rushing to the sides to view this rare pegasus, I caught a glimpse of somepony running and pushing their way forward. Ponies made way... as *she* came to the front of the crowd. She pulled her bedraggled, yet vibrant orange mane away from her eyes, as she saw me being pulled in chains.

Never could The Master have done anything to me that hurt more than seeing all the bright hope and optimistic wishes come crashing down on her face. I gazed back, trying to not cry even as I saw her own eyes well up. She followed me, trying to keep up as best she could through the crowd. I saw her pleading look and her mouth move just enough to allow me to lip-read her words.

"I'm so sorry, Murky..."

I could feel dampness in my eyes. No! I... I wouldn't cry... not now! Not when she could see me. I had to be strong, for me... for her. I didn't want the last sight she had of me to be one of a pathetic wretch begging. I could almost hear the DJ telling me to stay strong, stand up and keep fighting. I remembered Number Six telling me to not give them the pleasure in the Pit. I stood taller, prompting an interested glance from The Master and an increase in our pace.

The mare cantered to keep up, moving up until a chain around her hindleg locked and firmly stopped her from following any more.

Scarcely believing myself—I only knew I couldn't let her spirit break, even if I had failed—I tried to think of what to shout...

"Come on, *slave!*"

I felt the tug, tripping me over the heavy chains to force me to stagger onwards.

But instead, she shouted first.

"He has a name!"

The Master stopped.

He turned.

She stood as tall as she could. Ponies split from near her, retreating quickly as The Master lowered his head and began to stomp slowly toward her. My heart skipped a beat as I saw him ready up his knife like before with a nudge of his jaw. I shook my head to the mare, wanting to scream at her to back down.

"Care to repeat that, slave?"

The Master's voice was dry, his mouth still grinning through horrid teeth as he pulled me with a tug of his hoof up beside him and forced me to the ground, one hoof resting on my back to keep me there. His little pet underneath him.

"He *has* a name."

The entire yard was suddenly silent. I wished I could move, to dive in front of the knife. I was no doubt being killed off anyway, better to die saving her. But no, his hoof held me solid on the ground, making me whimper as he placed some weight on my spine. The mare looked from me to The Master, right in the eyes. He cackled.

"Tell me, little mare, what *is* his name?"

"Murky."

"Ah, so you *do* know him, eh?"

Oh no... no no no...

"Enough to know he isn't just some cog in your machine! He deserves freedom more than any of us after how he's been treated! Look, you know he's worn out as a slave, and you must know he's badly ill! He isn't any good to Red Eye like this. Why can't you just let him go?"

"Good... good..."

The Master turned away from her, letting me up. I felt her lean forward, offering her neck and shoulders to help me stand. I wished I could just stay here with her. Forget Protégé's offer, I just wanted to be near somepony nice now. It was all I needed. Just somepony nice. Her voice whispered in my ear,

"I'm so sorry it didn't work, Murky," Her voice held a soothing tone, clearly upset for seeing me still in the city after my failure. "Please, just hang on. My buck and I... we'll try to help you if we can when we're together again. Shackles... he won't make it fast, I'm so... so sorry... but please, don't give up. There *is* a bright future. You will find your courage, Murky. We'll come for you. We'll come."

Those words... like last time, filled with promise, hope and ever-comforting assurance. I wanted to reply, but I dared not raise my voice, she couldn't hear like I could. Softly resting her head against mine for just a second, I took comfort in feeling another pony so close and caring. A blissful moment, frozen in time for the half second it lasted, before the mare then turned back to The Master. He was grinning maliciously, his head held high.

"Hah, isn't that cute, then?"

"He's been in slavery all his life. Does he *really* deserve this?"

The massive earth pony turned away from the smaller unicorn once again, as though having to decide. Without warning he spun back, faster than I ever believed he could move.

"*Yes!*"

His hoof *fired* out, striking her so hard that she hurtled over six feet away. With a crash, she hit three other slaves, knocking them all clean over a pile of wooden stands ready for tools. Clutching her side with a gasp of pain, she still managed to look up from the wreckage as he reattached his knife to the belt, apparently deciding not to use it.

"But I'm going to let your insolence go, little mare," he casually intoned, "because he clearly means something to you. It'll be all the better for you to know he's got a date with the raiders. You can lie around, nursing those ribs, and just imagine the things they'll be doing to him... far away where you can't ask them politely to stop, eh? That ever worked?"

I tried to run to her side, but my own chains caught as The Master stomped on them before I could reach her. The mare looked breathless, unable to talk. I saw a couple of other mares rush over to her, helping her onto her side. At least she had some allies.

"Perhaps once I'm done with him, I'll come looking for you too. I don't imagine he'll last too long, after all... hehehe..."

The look in her eyes as The Master dragged me away gave rise to a new hatred, one of my captor and my overseer. He would... I don't know... pay? What could I do?

The most I could for now was try to assure her not to worry as best I could through trying to not cry as I once again left her behind. I tried to walk as tall as I could even as the jeering resumed, only looking back to try and mouth that it'd be okay.

She nodded sadly in return, briefly placing her hoof on her heart.

Then, as I was tugged harshly around a corner, she was, once more, gone.

The Mall.

Finally and mercifully the crowds ended. My ears ached from the hateful words and screams that had been directed at me, simply because I had two extra appendages on my torso. But here we were. The Mall, Protégé's 'worker camp,' rose from behind a wagon park like a giant that had fallen on its front. A massive shopping centre of old Fillydelphia, it looked like it hadn't shattered like other buildings on account of its massive size. Multiple storeys tall, its roof was too low to be seen over the factories and their towering areas but was well over fifty feet in height. Angular, strange geometry covered most of it in diagonal triangles or designed scaffolding to hold it all together like some giant metal and very angular flower facing to the sun. The large glass dome in the middle of the roof acting as the centre, with metal plates and angles floating out in all directions to form petals. Despite the horrid makeshift walkways leading from upper floors to nearby manufacturing factories and scrap watchtowers, it must have looked incredible from the sky. I tried to remember the flowers my mother had showed me in books...

The main entrance loomed before me. Covered in razor wire and barricades, it sealed access with multiple guards under the looming triangle of skeletal metal designs. I couldn't read the name, but I could see all of the letters of the middle word had fallen off so I presumed the two remaining ones left spelt out what I had heard.

The Mall

I felt his front leg descend around me, as though hugging me with one arm. He stank of vile sweat, grime, and... and things I didn't want to think about. His other hoof nudged the bottom of my chin up to keep me fixated on the building.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

I agreed, it was a marvel of construction, and tragic to see lying blasted and weathered from megaspells and two hundred years of improvised repair. But as much as the artist in me wanted to linger on the details, I could barely think about the building. I could feel his barding leaning against me... sweet Goddesses, I could feel the warmth of his body. This was too close, I didn't like my personal space being invaded. It took every ounce of restraint and fear to not flick a hoof backwards like before.

It got worse as I felt his head move down, inches from my ear. I could feel that hot sticky breath of his crawl over the sensitive edges of my ear...

"Home to the slaves who don't know any better and just want to kill things. Now, it's home to you as well. Protégé may say it's all for the cause but I know the truth, slave... I know ponies only come here who are too afraid to survive the lifestyle and want out. Them and the ones who don't know anything but violence. Four walls and multiple levels of slaves too desperate, violent, or deluded to go anywhere else. Think you'll survive it? Think you'll be able to resist taking a plunge to the bitter end from the rooftops?"

I shook my head by less than an inch, closing my eyes. I didn't want to risk my ear coming any closer to that mouth. For a moment, my mind panicked that he knew, somehow, about my... my... insanity on the control tower. What had I been thinking? But then, was it really so bad compared to what staying alive had brought me?

With relief, I felt him move away and reattach the chain to his barding, before striding

forward.

“Good... because you won’t. Oh and by the way...”

His face became deadly serious, the hilt of the huge knife tapping me across each cheek as he spoke.

“If you so much as hint to Protégé about our little time together, I promise you... that mare will be getting a ‘visit’ earlier than you might think. Slaves disappear so often in Fillydelpia... hehe.”

The chain pulled me before I could even stand back up. I pulled back, prompting a sharp look from the big earth pony. He had just threatened the one mare I knew I wanted to protect. The surprise made him cease pulling as I stood up of my own accord. I was a coward, yes... no doubt I would beg once we were inside.

But as I trotted on my own without him pulling, I wanted him to see that of all the things he had broken in me... of my lost confidence and lack of drive to dare do anything brave anymore, I still had one thing. He hadn’t broken my link with her to take comfort and strength in her example to stand up to him.

Raiders.

The scourge of the wasteland.

Gangs were bad. They took over areas, attacked other ponies, killed merchants, stole goods, and generally made life a misery. Keen to be better and bigger, they made examples of those who crossed them and attempted to wrest control of areas from civilised ponies.

But raiders...

There were beyond sanity. Savage, ruthless, and powered by a drive to simply ruin the lives of everypony they met, they sought nothing more than just enough to see them through to the next day. They had no mercy, little things you could bargain with, and did not hesitate to take what they wanted... I had once been in a caravan attacked by a small band of them between slave camps. The guards had fought them off, but only at terrible cost. Raiders had slaughtered my master’s mistress, not even waiting till the firefight was done to explode her body with a grenade.

They were living symbols of freedom taken in the wrong direction. Their sick dreams had been realised by the lawlessness of the wastes, able to act out mentalities that had no place in pony society. Those that had fallen to insanity, or to realising that nopony was there to stop them.

Now, I was meeting them.

The Master dragged me through the Mall’s corridors before emerging into the main hall. I had seen factories before and their cavern-like interiors, but something about the high glass skylight (how had it survived?) and curved surfaces designed to please struck me. They had been ruined, worn away and replaced by crude imitations and flakboard, surrounded by bars of metal and wire to hold together guard posts overlooking the shopping area, but they still held a timeless strength.

The layout was, simply, impressive. A giant balcony with no railings (*why!?*) lay before The Master and fell away twenty feet below into an area closed off by heavy scrap walls. Two levels of shops made up the outer edges, reachable by stairwells at either side near the back. Along each wall were repurposed small shops, each custom-designed to have a cage wall and

door across the front for containment of slaves in smaller groups. Right now they all lay open, allowing slaves to wander amongst a common area around an old fountain still filled, somehow, with water, tepid and dark as it was. It was a shopping plaza, open and long, turned into a prison.

I tried to discern the old style, but the smooth rock design was so worn that I gave up at 'creamish if you screwed up your eyes and pretended really hard.' Rotten banners hung on all sides, bearing six mares of various colours, two of each type of pony. I recognised the yellow and pink pegasus from the poster and my lost saddlebag as she smiled an impossibly peaceful and honestly quite relaxing message of love to all looking upon here. There was also...

...oh no... oh *please no!*

She was *here* too. 'Pinkie!' Even now, her banner fluttered in a draft to turn and look at me briefly. I had to cut my own temptation to mutter under my breath for her to leave me alone just for once. The pony was as maddeningly whimsical as ever, hanging upside down on her own banner. Slogans embellished on the fabric were a mystery to me. Probably advertisements for the damn FunFarm...

I felt a weight release as magic gripped my shackles, unlocking and pulling them from me along with the collar. I shook, groaning as sore muscles gave their offended verdict at the unwanted movement. The Master's cronies trotted away from us into the irregular ranks of slavers who looked, if anything, like smaller and less imposing versions of The Master. His personal group, no doubt.

The Master chatted to his slavers briefly, informing them of some "fun" that had to remain a 'surprise.' No doubt code to not let this slip to Protégé. Briefly I wondered what Pinkie would think of this type of surprise fun... her broadcasts in the FunFarm mentioned it often enough.

Blowing about in the draft (where was it even coming from?) the banner of her briefly fluttered out of sight.

"Raiders of the Mall!"

The Master's voice bellowed around the huge area of the Mall. It must have housed almost a hundred slaves with the amount of shops in the market area the cages were set into.

"Get out here! Get out where I can see your filthy hides!"

There was a commotion down below. I heard swearing and muttering before *they* emerged.

They came slowly at first. Emerging from the ground floor in ones and twos. Groups followed, before the upper floor began to fill, too.

There were *dozens* of them! I counted at least thirty raiders, as my heart began to beat far faster than it had any right to. Yet, I didn't properly sweat with terror until I actually looked at them.

Terrifying... foul... wretched. Mangy hides covered in scars and disgusting piercings. Some had scrap shoved through their flesh, others had *bones*. I prayed they were not from ponies, but they looked all too likely to be just that. Dyed and braided manes fell in greasy clumps around faces filled with the hate of the wasteland. Some looked so savage they barely seemed sane, snarling and howling up at even my small head poking over the edge. I saw two bump into each other before launching immediately into a snapping and brutal fight.

Even the saner ones seemed to lick their lips with some sickened mentality as they angrily saw what had disturbed them from their rest... or whatever else they were doing. Blood

streaked the floors in places to give indications of past involvements and brawls. I saw non-raiders cowering at the back, presumably only alive due to the presence of the guards. There were far more of them than the raiders, however they clearly lived in terror of them. Despite that, they seemed unharmed. But then, none of them were pegasi...

Many raiders wore ruined pieces of torn cloth and barding. Some had face masks or wrapped scarves around their head. As they clumped together, their noise increased, as though in a greater mass they fed off of one another's energy to act up and cause commotion.

"Raiders!"

The Master shouted down to them, prompting them to scream back a mass of insults that he only smiled at.

"You have shown great fury in your work in the last Stable! The dwellers stood no chance against your frenzied assault!"

A huge chorus of screaming and bellowing emerged from the raiders. Some brandished trophies... I saw one with a thread of ears around his neck. Suddenly my own mismatched and tainted ears felt a lot less repulsive, and more like a prize...

"As such!"

They began to quieten down.

"I have brought you a gift, for your entertainment!"

Their stomping and howling returned, even louder than before as they saw my scared face. Thirty or more raiders all glared at me with enough lust and sick wanting to make me shrink back from their horrid laughter. I could hear them begin to call for me to be sent down, for 'another toy.'

It dawned that I was not the first.

The Master held up a hoof. He clearly controlled them like this, offering sick rewards in return for owning a powerful workforce of brutal raiders adept at slaughtering anything in their path.

"...and it's a pegasus!"

A deafening explosion of screams, cheering, howls, and curses swarmed up and around the entire area. Even as I winced, I felt The Master's unicorns telekinetically shove me forward onto the balcony before The Master, my whole body on show to the raiders. Suddenly I felt very exposed...

Like an announcer, one hoof holding me in place, The Master crowed to them as though teasing a new item for sale.

"You want him?"

"YES!"

"You want him!?"

"YES!"

"Have him!"

I quickly turned to face The Master, kneeling, placing my head to his hooves. I hadn't even noticed my instinctual tears any more. I... I couldn't go down there. The thought of all the things they might do to me...

"Please, Master, please! I'll... I'll do anything!"

He looked down at me, wearing that malicious grin only he could pull off.

"Really, Number Seven?"

"YES!" I screamed, **"ANYTHING!"**

"Well... there's just one problem with that."

I trotted back from him, shaking my head. "No... please..."

"I already promised them their prize, Seven. Hah! ENJOY!"

He twisted, turning, and bucked me hard enough to catapult me off the balcony. A horrible explosion of pain along my side gave way to an oddly calm and pregnant moment of terror as I felt weightless.

Briefly, I wished that I could only open my wings and fly away from all this. I tried... but they just didn't move. Instead, I hugged myself as tightly as I could, praying the fall would kill me. In that oddly long moment while tumbling, I wished to the Goddesses... please... make it quick.

They did not smile upon me. I landed in the fountain. I didn't even have time to scream after I felt my front right shoulder strike the marble wall when I ploughed into the surprisingly deep water. All sound deadened as the harsh *slap* of the surface knocked me senseless. My shoulder was wracked with pain, I wanted to cry out, but my mouth only filled with disgusting and filthy water. Alone in the brief quiet of the dark water, I didn't even know which way was up!

I... I realised I couldn't swim...

Not that I needed to. Masses of hooves reached in; I felt mouths biting, hooves wrapping around me, and a huge strength pulling me out. The muffled silence of the water ended as my head broke the surface, gasping for air and trying to cry out at the same time as I saw dozens of frantic and frenzied raiders grabbing hold of every part of me they could to pull me out.

I pleaded with them, they only laughed.

Hurling me over the side, my shoulder rattled off the ground. It felt loose, like my leg wasn't entirely in its socket. I'd dislocated it!

They were fighting each other over me, I saw snarling bites and bucks as scarred and pierced ponies of foul appearance and savage looks clawed at me with their hooves. Despite my protests, I was pulled to my hooves and shoved around between them, much to their amusement. Efforts to keep my shoulder protected were pointless as was struck again and again, the loose joint sickeningly moving around the socket. One bit my ear until he fell away from the crowd pushing him. I felt hooves bash my wings, knocking me to and fro. Unicorn magic lifted me up, the raiders leaping after me as the unicorn tried to bring me to him.

My senses spun. The crush of bodies, the stench of blood and filth, and the sound of them braying reminded that their argument was my only reason to be alive.

It wouldn't last long. A larger earth pony dove up, grabbing one of my wings in his teeth to drag me back down. Bucking another raider unconscious, he dragged me to a clearer area beside the fountain as the raiders prowled in a circle, ready to try and get the prize back.

"I got him! *I* got him! It's my choice! Back off, you fucks!"

His hooves pinned me to the ground. I heard the others cease their arguments to instead shout at him what they each wanted. I heard many things. Some called to bash my head off the marble until it broke. Others wanted my teeth. One screamed to break my legs (one quarter there already...) and was shouted down as 'boring.'

But I whimpered and whinnied as I heard the overwhelmingly popular choice.

"Rip his wings off!"

The earth pony brayed into the air, stomping with a hoof on my head to hold me down.

Without hesitation or anything like Moose or Lemon's posturing or taunts, he simply reached down and grabbed my right wing in his teeth before pulling sharply upward with all his might.

Before my eyes instinctively clenched shut, I saw The Master far above, standing with that grin...

My wing stretched, underdeveloped muscle and broken bone structure bending, and being yanked out of place as it extended this far for the first time since I was a colt. A sudden release of tension slapped it back to my side as I felt something pull free. Daring to open my eyes... I saw a few feathers in his mouth. Spitting them out, the crowd fought over them. A sickening sense of loss prompted a muffled and strangled cry from me. He reached down again, grabbing the stem itself tightly in his teeth, determined to get the full thing this time. With an almighty yank, it began. The pain was unbearable. My head thrashed, my hooves kicked, but they held me down, chanting.

"Pull it off! Pull it off! Pull it off!"

I felt the muscles stretching... they... they weren't listening to me.

"Pull it off! Pull it off! Pull it off!"

My entire torso side felt ready to rip off with it... oh Goddesses... *please!*

"Pull it off! Pull it off! Pull it off! Pull it o—"

Every bit of tension disappeared at once with a snap, and I felt my torso fall to the ground again. Time was crawling as I opened my eyes... I saw blood...

I turned...

My wing...

...was intact.

The sound had come from above me, in the quarter second of realisation since the noise, I saw my tormentor's face *deformed* around a colossal hoof driven by immeasurable force.

The flow of time returned.

As did Number Six.

Driven by a gallop and dive over the fountain, his momentum carried him into the raiders like a dark crimson cannonball he landed amongst them. The raider atop me fell, utterly lifeless as the massive stallion carried past and thundered into their ranks with the bone-crunching sound of harsh impact. Six raiders alone were crushed under his sheer size and huge bony hooves powering on through the crowd. Flung aside like skittles, they rolled on the ground holding wrecked limbs and battered ribs.

But the rest were not cowardly Pit guards; they swarmed, pressing their sheer numbers in a frenzied counter-charge. The stallion whirled on the spot, teeth clenched as he bucked, swung, and threw his weight around with wild abandon. Raiders fell, receiving sickening stamps to their chests as they lay. I saw him grab one by their leather jerkin in his teeth, and spin so hard he actually threw them with his *mouth* across the room into another two that had been trying to catch him from behind.

Their great mass broken, Number Six went to work on the individuals. A dull thud sounded as his forehead collided with a unicorn, horn or not, putting him unconscious on the spot. A full buck sent another flying into the cage door used to access this area via normal means.

It bent.

Three raiders galloped and leapt, landing on his back or dragging his sides. I saw him snarl as one bit into the back of his neck before he reared up and allowed himself to fall

backward. The screaming raider, unable to let go, found himself crushed under the entirety of Six's considerable weight. The other two ran across, hurling rocks with magic, making him back off to cover his face before charging them. Shocked by the speed of such a huge pony, they were caught and brutally disabled as he reared up and lashed his front hooves out to slam their heads together. The sound was like two stones colliding.

The remainder of the group, well over half of the raiders, swarmed.

Number Six growled, turning to face them, standing between them and myself.

A gunshot rang out from above. Groaning as the adrenaline faded, and the pain began to return from my reverie watching the massive stallion at work, I saw The Master spit a rifle back to a subordinate.

"Enough! I give you lot a prize and all you do is fight over it like foals! Get back in your damn cages before you put us out of work for a month, you wretches!"

The raiders hesitated, they glared at Number Six, pounding the ground with their hooves and snarling. He matched them, his own hoof pound drowning the rest of them out.

"I said ENOUGH!"

The raiders began to reluctantly disperse, one by one in the same fashion as they had arrived, only now with furious disappointment in their bloodshot and yellowed eyes. On the floor lay half a dozen raiders that needed dragging off. Some just were not conscious at all. I had a nasty feeling the one on top of me had been killed instantly.

Gradually, they cleared the floor, other than the pony over me. Number Six simply watched them, snorting at any that got too close to us. Robbed of their fight, the raiders threw insults in their wake.

"Keep him for yourself then!"

"What you trying to do, get a little family, eh?"

"Can't hide our prizes from us forever, traitor!"

"Just you wait, betraying bastard!"

Number Six did not even reply. After they had gone, he cast a glance upward.

I saw the two largest, strongest, and most terrifying ponies I knew in all of Equestria lock eyes. Even from here, not knowing much about either of them, I could see every ounce of wishful violence between them. With a snort, The Master departed, moving out of sight, his fun spoiled.

Without a word, I saw Number Six turn and stare directly at me. In the odd silence, despite The Master leaving, I did not feel particularly safe. Not with a colossal pony I had witnessed take on an entire gang of raiders—and win—moving toward me. Immobile and lying down, my perspective of him was all the worse to look at. Frightening tribal dyed hair on his coat mixed with lavish scars of gunshots, blade wounds, and everything else across his almost grotesquely powerful body. I couldn't help but look at the flapping bit of skin remaining on his left ear. Those mismatching, one-half bloodshot eyes stared down at me as though contemplating something.

He pulled the dead raider from me, dumping him at the side before leaning down. I closed my eyes, squeaking loudly in fear as he came closer...

...and lifted me onto his back. Groaning in pain from my shoulder, even through my fear and abject disbelief, I felt myself slung over him (higher than I had ever stood) as he turned and began to trot back the way he had come toward a shop's open cage door.

I was naked... bereft of everything I had ever made for myself. I wanted my journal so badly, to look upon the comforting images. Crushing desire to once again hear the radio clenched my heart. A guilt that I had lost Sundial's only message to the future began to creep in even as my drifting thoughts wandered from hardship to hardship while in the thrall of near unconsciousness from pain and adrenaline.

Once again, luck had thrown me a small bone to just barely keep me alive. But they had never lasted in the past, why would this earth pony be any different? He had abandoned me before, why come back now? Why was he in here?

Somehow, I couldn't quite feel the elation I wanted to be able to. I just wanted my things and a cosy pigsty until I could figure out another escape plan... one that would work this time, taking the mare and her buck with me.

The huge stallion lowered me down onto a rough bed made of multiple layers of damp cardboard, inside the shop. The movement gave me enough of a shock to open my eyes once again before squeaking in terror, pressing back against the wall. The squeak only heightened as the movement dislodged my right shoulder again. Staring with wide eyes, I dared not shift as I gazed upward at the colossal earth pony whose immense shape blocked all light coming into the shop through the door. He had yet to lean back, his gruff and ugly face staring directly at me for a few more seconds before standing taller (and taller) once more.

"D-don't hurt me... I'm sorry, really!"

"Why?"

I curled up, trying to protect my head, for all the good it would do. Why should he not hurt me? I had ignored his help before and now I was his prize as much as anypony's.

"I'm a born slave... I could help you. You can have my food! I'll watch your stuff! Just please, I don't want any more pain."

I felt myself choking up.

"Everypony already hates me and wants me dead because of these two stupid things on my body. Please, Number Six, please..."

His head tilted to the side, the bloodshot eye narrowing in minor confusion. In the back light from outside, he was little more than an imposing sentinel of imminent violence. Even I could tell eyes that had seen too much blood and death. Only now I could get a better look, I saw that he was a good bit older than I'd thought. I'd thought him an adult, but his face bore a weathered look of a stallion long past his prime. Maybe fifty? Or more? I wasn't exactly going to ask.

I tried to remember him from before, when he had apologised, saying I didn't deserve death. I hoped that still held true... or did he want a 'prize' just as much?

"Number Six?" His voice rumbled, repeating my words carefully.

Of course... I had gotten so used to thinking him by that name. I had just blurted it out.

"My name," he continued, a slow drawl, "is not Number Six. Nor do I want to harm you, pegasus."

I simply stared upward in near shock, elation and hope beginning to spring in my heart until it was beaten down by the reminder that nothing that I ever did turned out quite right... why should this be any different?

"Then what is your name?" I inquired quietly, desperately trying not to step on any thin ice.

He didn't reply immediately, glancing to the side before closing his eyes. Was that an

element of sadness I saw briefly?

“Brim.”

I blinked, watching his mouth slowly roll the single syllable out. He paused, before continuing.

“Brimstone Blitz.”

“Murky Number Seven. Pleased to... uh... meet you. Thank you, for saving me, I mean. I... I just...”

I tried to stand so I could kneel to show my thanks. It was how I had treated every master when they had fed me, it was the only way I knew how to show a reverent gratitude. But the moment I moved, harsh pain wracked my shoulder, making me stumble and fall again. Breathing hard, hissing through clenched teeth, I whined into my other leg while cradling it.

“Lie back.”

Brimstone Blitz sat down beside me. It did nothing to reduce the impact of his height at all. His massive hooves reached out, taking my injured leg with an odd care.

“Where does it hurt?”

I was shivering, but the threat of his terrifying presence and size was enough to prevent me from resisting.

“M-my shoulder, please... don’t...”

I felt his hoof brush around the area. I could hear raiders wandering the common area snickering at my rather pathetic little yelps and whines as he rolled a hoof over the joint.

“Aye, it’s merely dislocated.”

I gaped. *Merely?*

Brimstone examined it, before nodding slowly. “Hold still, Murky Number Seven, I can reset it.”

“I... I’m not sure... please, I need a doctor... Protégé has—”

“Shut up and bite the cardboard below you. On three.”

“I... no, I...”

“One.”

“Can I—”

There was a sudden pop.

“Yeearrghh!” I yelled out loud, pulling my hoof back from his grip.

Brimstone seemed to grin with only one side of his mouth. I could hear shrieks of laughter about the ‘filly whine’ I had made from the raiders outside.

“You said on three!” I protested in a high strung voice, rubbing my shoulder.

Brimstone huffed gently. “Stopped your whining, didn’t it?”

I tested my leg: it moved again, if it was incredibly painful and stiff to do so. I didn’t want to imagine how it might have gotten if I had left it longer. My head fell, resting on the cardboard as sweat dripped off me.

“Th-thanks, though. I wasn’t whining... I was just complaining...”

“Sure.”

Brimstone moved away, sitting against an old counter and watching the door. Only now did I get a good look around at the area he had clearly made his home. Most merchandise had gone, but a few old posters showed images of various forms of clothing. I saw dresses on pretty unicorn mares, tall and strong bucks wearing suits, and other, more casual, attire. I imagined the empty stands crammed in the corner had once held the stock.

A great many posters in one corner, though faded and wrinkled, showed nice-looking mares wearing socks. I had to fight down the urge to want to try drawing one of them, to refocus again on the important matters at hand. Besides, my journal was gone.

There wasn't a huge amount else behind the cage door that still stood open to the common area. The counter covered the front quarter to the side of the doorway, bereft of any cash machine. Behind it, I saw a door leading, presumably, to a stock room. Despite the fuzzy-headedness, I could swear Brimstone was sitting as though guarding the doorway.

He looked back at me. I shrank back out of sheer habit.

"You didn't deserve what they would have done to you, Murk."

"That's not what everypony else thinks... why do you not hate pegasi?"

Brimstone blinked, sitting back before giving out a long sigh that ended in a snort.

"I *do* hate the pegasi. Those feathered bastards sit up there on their clouds, taunting us all by refusing anything to make things right. Live long enough, you gradually spot traces of em. But you? You're wasteland-born, clearly."

He inclined his head toward the raiders mostly clustered on the opposite side of the Mall.

"Besides, I'm not in a position to judge anypony else, so I couldn't sit by and watch them do what they were about to."

I shivered, curling up a little more tightly with one hoof rested over my wing. The sight of lost feathers, of the pain that still burned in my side... they had been about to... to...

The pulling. The feeling of it beginning to tear away. I hated my wings, but they were *my* wings. The shock of the entire traumatic day began to land home. Hundreds of slaves and guards all knew what I was now. All my things were taken. The Master had... oh Luna, he had hurt me so much.

I couldn't... I...

Regardless of the embarrassment, I simply began to cry in front of him. Shuddering and sniffing, I tried to look away. Brimstone followed my gaze before simply shaking his head.

"Too weak. I don't know how you survived this long if all you do is start crying at everything."

Through wet eyes, I turned to him.

"I don't know how to be strong. I tried to escape... and now it's worse than ever."

Brimstone Blitz furrowed his brow, snorting loudly.

"Why?"

Sniffing, I couldn't look him in the eyes. "Because... because now they know I'm a pegasus. Not they know I'm one ponies are supposed to hate..."

He looked at me with confusion.

"You sound like you feel guilty for being a pegasus. Like you're believing the hatred saying you bear the sins of the past done by completely different generations. Why do that? You can ignore it or avoid it, it's not yours to feel the guilt. But be careful who you tell that to, especially to those who can't push off the guilt to dead ponies."

Brimstone grumbled, tapping a hoof on the counter hard enough to make it shake.

"Some things, you will learn, you cannot simply turn a blind eye to like that."

Trying to calm my breath, I sat up, wiping my eyes with a filthy hoof and wincing as the rad-sores on my muzzle stung from the contact. Gulping, I opened my mouth to speak.

"What do you mean? What did you do?"

His front hoof went from tapping to a stomp hard loud enough to make me squeal in shock, holding my ears. Opening my eyes a little, I saw his teeth clenched as he swept away

from me, each step of a hoof coming down far harder than it needed to.

"You make it sound like it was one thing, one little thing that was wrong, Murk. No, it was a lifetime. There are gangs, ghouls, and taint, and then there are ponies like me."

Something clicked into my mind. The raiders, they had called him 'traitor.'

"You... you were one of them... you're an ex-raider!"

One of those giant hooves reached forward, closing the cage door over far harder than was needed. The loud *clang* made me jump up from the floor. With a shake, he hung his head, before turning and marching toward me with what amounted to fury in his eyes. The dyed hair tattoos rippled. The scars shifted. I began to back away before discovering the wall disappointingly close behind.

"No. I am not an *ex-raider*."

Before I even knew what was happening, the massive pony had swept me from my feet with his hooves around my body, holding me in the air against the wall with one foreleg pressed against my neck. I tried to scream, instead spluttering out a choked gasp from the pressure. My struggles were pointless as I felt my hind legs dangle helplessly a good two feet from the floor. My eyes locked on his as I heard the growl of unhinged madness and anger. Staring into his gaze, I could see the years of borderline insanity still in there, furious that I had suggested anything other than the harsh truth.

"I *am* a raider," he intoned with barely suppressed anger. "A life, longer than many in the wasteland, dedicated to the pursuit of brutality to get by! You sat in your guarded little pens, while I stormed the wastes. Had I met you, Murk, I would have crushed you like those wretches just tried to. Aye, I would have plucked those wee wings myself. I have killed, razed, and broken anypony and anywhere that wasn't in my clan for longer than you've been alive. I've thrown ponies like you to the vicious, sadistic ones like them before as a *gift* for them."

Fear clenched my gut as I stared toward the massive raider. Those eyes... he was telling the truth. He was angry, whether at me or himself I couldn't tell. I felt him draw a long breath before lowering me to the floor and looking the other way from me. He shook his head, but I couldn't see his face to read his expression. His voice however, didn't seem to be angry at me. Almost as though he regretted what he'd just done.

"You don't simply turn your back on so much agony caused to others, on so much fucked up stuff like that, and say 'that's it, I'm an ex-raider now' and say it's all good now. It doesn't work like that!"

I was almost hyperventilating. My mind kept imagining myself as that poor buck. This was a raider. One even bigger than the psychopaths outside. Despite the Pit, despite him saving me, I was in the thrall of a *raider*. I prayed that I was right in my assumption that he was implying he sought to avoid falling to the madness any more.

"So... so why did you stop?"

His eyes closed as he took a breath, seeking to calm himself, apparently. I could see the thin line between now and the fury of the raider fought back down. Did he have that voice in his head? The raider in his mind? Just like I had a slave?

"The Goddesses are forever watching us, Murk. Do you believe in them?"

His voice had dropped, was he embarrassed at his outburst? I nodded shakily, thankful to see his face slightly relax from the rage that had overcome it.

"You might say that Fillydelphia gave me some perspective. To see what it was like from the other side. It's a good place for ponies like me, out of the way, forced to work to do

something greater in the place of ponies more innocent. Like you. But I don't labour just to rebuild Equestria... no."

He fixed me with a stare. He was deadly serious.

"I accept my slavery. Only through this place could I ever hope to even begin to atone for the sins I've done in the eyes of the two Goddesses. That was half the way to making me see past the insane rage... the other half..."

Brimstone lowered his head, looking outside at the other raiders milling around. I could see them still snapping at one another with pent up and yet to be vented aggression from earlier. Eventually, he turned sharply.

"Perhaps you should see for yourself. Can you stand?"

"I... I think so..."

I was wobbly, but the motion back in my leg felt better than locking solid in pain. Brimstone nodded to the door, but immediately stopped me with a hoof. It was like walking into a brick wall.

"I will warn you. If you try *anything* I will kill you where you stand. Understood?"

I nodded briefly, trying not to shake my head and back away. I'd faced the Wall. I could obey this command. Lowering the hoof, he led me into the back of the shop. I tried not to think too hard as I saw that it was very dark...

The sound of the raiders quietened through the walls. Free from their sick taunts and shouts at one another, I found a measure of peace in the surprisingly warm and still back room of the shop. I couldn't see further in for Brimstone Blitz's massive bulk in front of me, but a small light shone past him from the far end of the room.

He stopped. I only discovered this by walking right into the back of his leg before staggering backwards with a sore muzzle and limping on my front right leg. Brimstone merely turned, almost seeming to smirk at my staggering about.

"Would you have run into the Wall that blindly?"

"I'm just tired," I muttered. "Being unconscious through a medical procedure from a gunshot was the closest thing to proper sleep I've had in a long time."

"You can rest in a moment, then. We won't be needed for any jobs for a little while."

He moved to the side, lifting a hoof. I saw the look in his eyes, watching me very carefully.

"Now... the other reason why I put away the life of the raider?"

I followed where his hoof pointed in the dark. I could see stock shelves and an old sofa near the one magically enchanted gemstone light that flickered with a dull orange. On the sofa, however, lay a mare

I don't know what I expected, it to be *the* mare? But no, that mare I had met before was the same age as me. Although this one was a unicorn too, she looked older than myself by perhaps six or seven years.

She was asleep, lying covered in a cloth blanket stitched together from every colour imaginable. I found myself trotting forward out of curiosity, what about her was special? But a look from Brimstone made me immediately stop in my tracks. Ok, ok! Not trying anything! Really! Look at me here not doing anything! Not even moving, not even breath—

The mare coughed, shivering, despite her covering.

She was sick. Her pearl white coat seemed slick with sweat while her short and thick two-tone pink mane fell tangled around her head. Around her lay, presumably, her and Brimstone's possessions. Not much, but a small case filled with little twinkling and sparkling orbs drew my eyes for just a second. The mare shifted, groaning, as my eyes flickered back to her, I saw her awaken rather lethargically.

"B-Brim...?"

The voice was weak, and stammering with fever. I recognised these symptoms all too well as acute radiation poisoning. Brimstone advanced slightly before kneeling down beside her with shocking gentleness.

"I'm here, Glimmer." His voice was softer than I'd ever heard it. "Just keep resting."

She didn't. Instead I saw her eyes casting about in the darkness, apparently missing me for a second before they refocused and settled upon my presence in the gloom.

"Who..."

Her eyes blinked, showing a surprisingly bright azure sparkle to them. Even while sick, I could see a spark of energy and life to this mare.

"Come here... don't be... scared..."

Her hoof inclined me to move closer. I looked to Brimstone, who stood and trotted backward with a small nod. Even now, I could see the look. 'One wrong move and you won't leave this cell alive.'

Limping, I trotted over as quietly as I could, head low, into the light.

"Oh... a little earth pony, aren't you... cute..."

She exhaled with great effort, before trying to smile through the clearly harsh fever affecting her. I presumed she didn't see my wings camouflaged by my dark green coat and feathers against my body in this gloom.

"I'm, uh... Murky. Sorry... Murky Number Seven."

"Gli—"

She shivered so hard that her words failed amidst a harsh gasping shudder.

"Glimmerlight, pleased..to... urgh..."

The unicorn seemed to sag, the conversation alone exhausting her. But even so, she extended one hoof, gently moving my head to the side with great care to see something along my side. I closed my eyes, figuring it was the wings.

"What a beautiful cutie mark..."

Her voice was but a whisper, smiling before murmuring with dizziness and lying down again. I heard Brimstone trot up behind me with his slow, heavy steps.

"Rest, Glimmer. Save your strength. Murk? Back outside."

I found it hard to move. What had she meant by *beautiful* cutie mark!? This gnashing and savage shackle on either flank was an insult to my wishes to be free! I wanted to reach forward, wake her up to ask... but somehow I couldn't quite bring up the courage to do so. I guessed it was the fever, she had probably seen something else. She hadn't even spotted my wings. Besides, why would I want to hear any comments on my damned mark anyway? I knew what it meant and I was going to prove it wrong some day.

Of course, having a colossal raider behind you who promised to liquefy your head should you make a wrong move was a pretty big deal breaker in not inquiring further as well...

Back in the front of the shop, I turned to Brimstone Blitz the moment he followed me. Glimmerlight intrigued me; just what did she mean to him? I stood up straight as I could on three functioning legs (why always the legs?) and followed Brimstone with my head as he moved to plant himself down at the counter again.

"So... you and her... I mean... are you two... uh..."

"Are we what?"

"You know... together? Is that why you stopped raiding?"

He laughed. A deep, rumbling, and somewhat disturbing noise before shaking his head.

"Kid, I'm a good few years older than her, where'd you get your relationship theories?"

I felt my face flush. Okay, that was a good point. But the level of care he showed her...

Brimstone coughed into his hoof, continuing even as he leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling. I could swear his voice changed, becoming less rough and more of a melancholy tone. I hadn't given the big brute enough credit as I once again saw that little light of civilised intelligence form from his words. That tone that gave me hope that the pony I was looking at was more than the brutes outside.

"When I was brought to Fillydelphia, I got thrown on the hard work. Huge load carrying, powering gears and servos, that kind of stuff. I got properly into it, from being brought down a peg or two myself, the idea of somewhere I could work off my sins in the eyes of the Goddesses was... appealing. Only reason they kept me around is I was worth more as a prize to Red Eye to have in here for how I acted though. I bullied others, harassed them, and when guards attempted to prod me around too much, killed them."

The way he said that, so simple. Like it was just any other action.

"Eventually, I met Glimmer after my second Pit victory as punishment for murder. Three of the raiders just outside were trying to drag her off between shifts, steal her stuff, the usual. I intervened, crushing them all. But even as I held one down, my hoof ready to split his skull... she begged me to not do it. I found Glimmer pleading with me to spare those who would have hurt her with no remorse or regret. That... had never happened to me before. After they had left, I knew I had to protect her. As I got older, I'd already been thinking a lot about life. Somepony in the clan, before we got caught, had already spoke about... hmm... nah."

He cut off that last sentence, making me wonder who he meant. All the same, the real trigger for him was Glimmerlight. I could see him glancing back at the door, as though hurting over her sickness, something he couldn't stop with all his monstrous strength.

"Glimmerlight is something unique in the wasteland, Murk, at least as far as I have witnessed. She can forgive. Her home was destroyed by raiders, those she regarded close enough to be family raped and murdered before her eyes. Glimmer herself was taken prisoner, and eventually sold into slavery with Fillydelphia. She had her whole life ruined, everything she'd clawed out of those wastes stripped from her."

I whinnied softly, lying down as I felt a couple of slow tears trickle on to my face. But she looked so full of life in those bright, if sickly looking, eyes...

Brimstone sighed, before doing something I did not expect.

He smiled.

"But she doesn't hate any of them. I don't think she's capable of it. After the pain passed, all she wanted to do was make the best of things and forget the bad times as quickly as possible. Somehow she still thinks that the world can be better, that someday she'll get out of here and go back to a good life, like nothing had ever happened. That's why I have to

take care of her. Glimmer is a better pony than I ever could be any more. She deserves my protection until she either completes her plan to escape or passes the two year work mark. It's like a duty sent to me by the Goddesses. As though she was sent to be my moral compass to salvation. There are nice things in the world, Murk, yes. But..."

Was... was that a dampness in *his* eye? He turned away too quickly, walking to the cage door, placing a hoof on it even as he gazed upwards at the glass dome far above in the Mall. I looked up myself from the cardboard bed, glancing across at the big earth pony standing with a mixture of sadness and happiness etched on his big worn face, lit by the dull yellowed streams of light from the skylight. Slowly, he turned back to me with that same sad smile.

"The wasteland took everything from Glimmer, Murk. It destroyed her... and she forgave it for what it had done. Can you honestly think of anything more beautiful than that?"

I had been without my journal before. I had been without my... I mean, Sundial's PipBuck before.

This was the first time I didn't have either while waiting for the world to move on and for something to happen. However I was not without things to consider during the long times that Brimstone spent checking in on Glimmerlight, most especially the peculiar tale and somewhat tragic reality of this strange pairing of ponies. Brimstone was not what I had expected in either direction of thought. A raider by trade and filled with a thirst for violence held back only by the curious search for redemption, and a sick mare that had touched even his heart.

Try as I might, the thought of somepony like that sort of touched mine as well.

However, despite the obvious wonderment of their incredibly rare companionship, one thing he'd said was all I could think about.

Glimmerlight had a plan to escape Fillydelphia.

Since I had been shot at the Wall, my entire mindset had been turned on its head. Broken by The Master and condemned to servitude for two years, it seemed as though my efforts had only rewarded me with a greater burden of slavery. I had been ready to collapse into the routine and accept the horror if I couldn't find a lifeline. But out of nowhere, there was one last little hope. That mare in the back, Glimmerlight. Brimstone had said she had a plan.

It wasn't much. I knew nothing about her or this plan. Perhaps she wouldn't want me along.

No matter! I had to try! There was nothing else left, only my wavering confidence driving me to stay alive. I couldn't get out alone now, so Glimmerlight was hopefully going to be what I needed to get back on my hooves properly. I had to help her somehow, to help Brimstone save her life. Whatever it took, like it or not, an unknown sick mare was the only path I saw open to me in discovering another way out of Fillydelphia.

Brimstone had left me in the front of the shop, citing that I was a distraction encouraging Glimmer to exert herself to speak to me instead of resting. I had thought to ask what was precisely wrong with her, but frankly, that was just an excuse to get a conversation. Since his admission, Brimstone had been oddly morose, as though ashamed that he had spoken so openly to me at all in the first place. The truth was, however, I knew what was wrong with her anyway, and what she needed. After all, I had the exact same thing, right? Radiation sickness. Mine was a little unique in that it stemmed from an irradiated lung infection, but

the theory was the same. Rad-sickness needed RadAway. Not exactly a common substance to slaves in Fillydelphia, as I had found out the hard way.

I shivered, curling up on Brimstone's cardboard bed and rubbing my shoulder. Things hadn't settled in yet about my relocation. Too much all at once, too many emotions. I was afraid, an understatement, yes, but what else was there for it? Fillydelphia detested me before as the runt, the weakling who made mistakes and got everypony else in trouble. But now I was hated. The pegasus prize of Fillydelphia, a beacon to which they could all come together in unity and despise. Everypony who saw me would call me out or turn me over if I tried anything. How could somepony like me escape anyway? Not when it felt like everypony in the city wanted me dead just because I had wings.

Why me? *Why did it have to be me they hated?* I didn't want to be hated...

That thought hurt. It hurt bad. To look outside and realise that all it took was a few choice words to an uneducated mass to swing them to call for the death of one little buck like me who had never done anything to anypony in his life.

What if *Glimmerlight* was the same? What if Brimstone was subjective or exaggerating because he didn't know anypony better? What if she saw my wings and refused to help me?

Try as I might, the fear of rejection was in my mind. I needed to fight it down.

"Get your flanks back down to the storage rooms for the meeting! Move!"

That voice rang around the Mall's main shopping level as I heard some slavers jump to their hooves and gallop off.

The Master.

Even now I was still struggling to grasp his threat. The horrible way in that his influence wasn't over me by the fear of pain or punishment, but by the fear of realising that he was the pony who deserved me as a slave by dint of destiny. The unsettling way he knew just how to get into my head and hurt me, often without needing to lift a hoof in anger was, if anything, proof that he was born to command me and understand what made me tick. Try as I might, I couldn't shake the harsh fact that he had brought the slave back to me. I had tried to escape him and, when under the presence of the mare, I had even stood up to show I wasn't afraid. But leave me alone with him and... and...

... your name is Number Seven...

...cutie mark of shackles, I like it. Ready to catch you if you'll ever run...

...you an accident, Number Seven? The seventh one? Your mommy get beasted by raiders, eh?

...how'd you like it if it was me, eh?

Born to slavery, living in slavery, and going to die in slavery!

I couldn't help but bury my head in my hooves. Where did I go now? What would happen? I wanted to help this mare, but it might all just go wrong again.

A familiar fluttering sound made the hairs on the back of my neck crawl. Instinctively, I jumped on the spot, squeaking and clutching my scarred side. With a clatter of talons on hard concrete, Ragini landed heavily outside Brimstone's cage, magical rifle drawn and glancing warily at the raiders wandering back and forth. With a snap, her beaked head swivelled toward me. I had an uncomfortable feeling like I was being targeted again.

"Murky Number Seven?"

I nodded, hoping for Brimstone to re-emerge at any point right now.

"The Master requests your presence in his office. Alone."

Every muscle tightened. I wanted to run. But where could I go? We were locked inside this Mall.

"Don't make me have to carry you, flightless."

I caught her smirk and the look in her eye. She nodded her head toward the cage door leading out of the plaza.

"I'll... I'll come..."

I felt a part of me yelling that I should be trying to delay her until Brimstone got back out. If Whiplash or Slit had been demanding me, perhaps I might have. But The Master was different.

"*Today*, Murk!"

The taloned foot stamped into the shop, her voice of authority springing dormant instincts I thought I'd beaten into inaction. The Master had beaten me in more ways than physically. I was beginning to feel like I had before the Pit.

"I'm sorry, right away."

Meekly, I got up and limped out toward the cage door. Ragini kept her magical energy rifle held ready, the low power sniper rifle that had almost taken my life slung across her back. Looking up at the griffon standing on her hind legs, a new wave of sheer envy crossed me in terms of size. Why did everything have to be bigger than me? Oh Stable Dweller, where are you, to be someone who understands what it's like to be a midget?

"Follow me, flightless. Make a move and I'll not miss your face next time."

Again with the nickname. 'Flightless?' That was just mean.

As I followed the black griffon, I saw one of the raiders waving to me. Stopping only partially, he held up three of my feathers tauntingly before laughing hysterically. Shuddering and trying to control my emotions, I kept close to the griffon. Only as I saw the cage door swing open did it really hit me that I was due for more treatment from The Master. The thin hallways gave way to a guard area made out of the old mall security rooms and eventually stairs to the management and storage rooms on the upper floors. With every step I found myself becoming slower and more reluctant. We passed from the staircase into an old staff canteen, where I was lethargic enough that Ragini clipped me across the head with her rifle barrel to get me moving. The sting of the tap gave me a reason to move, but when we finally arrived down the dismal corridors at the thick oaken door, realisation struck. This was an old manager's office. We were here. My legs jammed up, every instinct not wanting to go near him again. I couldn't face him again... not again... not again...

"Ragini—"

"Don't use my name."

"Sorry," I whispered, not quite sure what to use "You... you don't have to do this, please?"

Ragini whipped around, talons extended before grabbing me by the throat. The sudden change of mood caught me before I could even shout.

"Get in, he is expecting you."

"Please!" I pleaded, finding myself dropped only to try persuading her with tears in my eyes and terror on my face. "I can't take any more..."

"*Get in!*"

Ragini threw open the door, virtually hurling me inside before slamming it shut. I curled up on the floor as I heard hoofsteps nearby turn to face me before advancing steadily. Eyes shut, I wondered if I could just blank it all... ignore everything and use my imagination... like the helter skelter... right? Imagination canvas, ignore the pain... ignore the pain...

"Murk, I must question why you cower. I assure you, I will not harm you."

That voice...

I opened my eyes, rubbing tears away to look up and see the master that Ragini had meant.

Protégé stood before me, holding a couple of books in his telekinesis with a genuinely curious look. That curiosity turned to slight confusion as I almost passed out on the spot with relief.

"I wanted another chance to speak with you, Murk. I regret that we did not have much of an opportunity last time. Although I had hoped that after being cleaned up and fed, your condition may have improved..."

I sat on the floor before his desk, atop an old red carpet that perhaps once was thick, but was now faded and thin. Protégé's office was, simply put, something clearly different from anywhere else I had ever seen in Fillydelphia. The old room had been renovated with either high condition or even newly remade objects, including a thick and ornate pre-war study table and large wooden bookcases; each crammed with a mixture of old frayed tomes and freshly printed thin books from Red Eye's industry. High quality gem lighting gave an amber radiance to the entire area, while the large window had been reinforced and replaced to overlook the corrupted majesty of Fillydelphia's industry. Between a couple of bookcases, a thick safe was embedded in the wall. I could see attached rooms, their flapping doors open, that led to an attached bathroom and two bedrooms. I couldn't see much, but one was clearly his own, and the other a much smaller one converted from a big cupboard. As polite as he was, even I could tell that big chart on the wall was the schedule for sending us all to our deaths in Stables and irradiated bunkers.

That, and it was all a bit of a mess.

Books lay strewn everywhere; over his desk, on chairs near the door and even on the windowsill. I could see some even sitting on his bed through the doorway. The bulky terminal on his desk (another book resting on top of it, naturally) also seemed to be peppered with small sticky notes to remind him of things.

"Yes, this is indeed my home, Murk." He spoke with a thin smile, watching my head pan around. "Ragini is a top rate associate and bodyguard, but she isn't tasked to keeping many things in line. I do apologise for the mess."

This nice talk wasn't sitting well with me. The black unicorn had passed back to the desk, sitting and leafing something in front of him, the pages completely hidden behind a stack of papers near the front. Between sentences, I could see his visible eye scanning each page for a few seconds before turning to the next.

"What did you want me for?" I spoke with deliberate wish to break through the nicety.

Protégé raised an eyebrow, looking up from the book of interest.

"No 'master,' for me? How unusual amongst slaves, usually they would be afraid of being punished for ignorance. But then, you are unusual to begin with, Murk, in more than one way as well. The pegasus who tried to get over the Wall to win the freedom he was denied by birth... there is a certain romanticism to it, don't you agree?"

Technically I planned to go under the Wall, but I didn't figure pointing this out would win me many points here. Try as I might, though, all I could remember was fear, pain, and blood. Nothing 'romantic' came out of lying in your own gore screaming for mercy from a

griffon who had shot you.

"I failed, you know this..."

"Yes, Murk. But clearly I am not alone in how I feel, despite what you think."

His horn sparkled red, lifting what he had been looking at. I almost rushed his desk on the spot. My journal! I could see the last image I had drawn, that of a pegasus flying free above the Wall. Witnessing my clamouring excitement to get it back, Protégé held up a hoof.

"Worry not, I intend to return it to you before you leave today. However, I have spent the last hour or so going through it. Images... drawings... it's such an interesting and alternative way of interpreting life compared to the words that I love so much. You seem to sketch from the heart, judging by the emotional nature of some of these..."

The pages flickered, revealing the last picture I drew from my subconscious before the Pit, lying before my killer. Lowering the journal, he continued to flip and glance as he went backward through my life as told by pictures. I was somewhat glad he had hidden it. I didn't want to see what I'd drawn while under the influence of slave indoctrination.

"You also seem to have a certain appreciation of shape and form as well, particularly with regards to ponies... you seem to be rather observant of all angles on them..."

He'd been flicking through *all* my pictures?

Protégé looked up. Was that a knowing smirk, or just normal for him? "Murk? Why are you blushing?"

"Um... I'm not! No reason... just, um... nervous, new place... and stuff..."

"I see..."

Not letting the smirk die, he sat the journal down before crossing his hooves on the desk. I tried not to headbutt the floor in an attempt to feel less embarrassed.

"Well, judging by your environmental pieces, you've been around a few places before here. A slave all your life... it's not fun, is it?"

I shot him a look, shaking away the blush (I really needed a second sketchbook just for myself...) and gave him my best 'What could you possibly know?' look that I could. If he cared, he didn't show it.

Instead he smiled, returning to his own books. They were picked up in his magic, before settling down, changing subject with little warning, he beckoned me closer to his desk. I sat before it, like I did with Wicked Slit.

"I must admit, I was rather disappointed to hear that you had been denied the opportunity to learn reading or writing skills. Almost tragic really."

He held up an old red tome. I did my best not to look annoyed at my illiteracy being pointed out once more.

"The history of Equestria prior to the war, a very old volume. The ability to sit down, read and study what things were like before it all happened. If only more ponies would take the time then perhaps most of this unfortunate business need not happen. I do feel sorry for ponies like you, forced into such lives."

He must have caught my disbelieving look.

"Truly, I do. That is partly why I expended so many favours to track you down and get Stern to let you live. You interest me, Murk. In a way, we are not so different. I know how you feel through all this, you know? If I may say, bringing you here, I do perhaps have higher aims for you than simple freedom."

What did he mean by that? Nerves began to fray as I heard that last sentence. Higher

aims? My heart was still beating faster than normal. Better than The Master or not, he was still my more 'official' master. Still a slave driver, no matter how often he said 'worker' instead, and still liable to use me as a resource rather than another pony. I looked to the side, unsure, biting my lip.

"Murk?"

Protégé stood, moving toward me. Something clicked in my head, that red eye advancing on me... I recalled lying dying under the Wall... or The Master advancing on me in that cell to... to...

I shrank back, hooves skittering as I backed away from Protégé. Hearing a slight whimper from me, he stopped, mouth half open in surprise. To his credit, he backed up and gave me a little personal space.

"Are you alright?"

Alright? *Alright!?*

"N-no!"

I managed to get back to my hooves, favouring my injured shoulder.

"Of course I'm not! I'm... I'm a slave! How could I be alright? You're just... just another one of them, no matter what you say! I want out of this city, now! But I can't! Ponies like you stand in my way! How can I be..." I shuddered, losing my momentum from a slight tremble and a sob, "...al..alright?"

Protégé paused, not interrupting, before slowing his pace. He spoke quietly and carefully.

"Murk, I am trying to assure you that you are safer now. I had you healed, cleaned and fed before being brought here. I offer you the return of your artbook. Does that not say something?"

I just lay down against the wall, sniffing and trying to catch myself before I entered another crying fit. This was horrible. All these 'nice' things were nothing more than a façade to placate me into slavery! I knew it! I wanted out, but I just didn't have the confidence in myself after failing so badly any more. I couldn't control it, sniffing and wiping my eyes as I tried to avoid him noticing my reaction.

Instead, I heard Protégé sigh, before a slight click sounded in my ears. Looking up, I saw his magic remove the eyepiece and set it upon the desk, before glancing back across to me with both eyes. Despite his youth, I could immediately see a slight pain to his expression now. Somehow, despite not understanding why, it defused how I saw him. As though I was no longer looking at a slaver...

"Murk..." he spoke quietly, trotting around the other side of the desk and taking a stuffed bag from a clothes hanger nearby. I could see battle barding bearing Red Eye's mark upon the stand, beside a holster containing what looked like a scoped revolver. They shook as Protégé removed the bag. "Are you afraid of something?"

Despite myself, I nodded.

"What I had requested. To be cleaned and fed... that didn't happen, did it? Please... answer me. Did Chainlink Shackles harm you?"

Protégé would have had to be an idiot to not spot the sudden widening of my eyes. I had to almost shove a hoof in my mouth. I wanted to spill it all, to cry and beg Protégé to help me. Surely he had some sort of way to stop The Master? But what if The Master's cronies were to carry out the threat on the mare in his absence? What if her slave master was in on it? What if he slipped a word to the raiders to kill me for talking?

"Murk?"

Protégé actually lay down on all fours near me. He genuinely did look concerned, so much so that I wondered if he had suspected The Master for some time now. I wanted so badly to just grab his hooves and tell him everything...

"No... I just... sorry. The raiders..."

Well, it wasn't a lie. Protégé nodded slowly,

"Yes... I did hear about that 'accident' on your allotment." He lowered his head. "I am truly sorry, Murk, for what happened. Perhaps I should have accompanied you myself. However, I hear our resident warlord has taken you under his protection."

That got my attention. Gasping light, I looked up at him sharply.

"W-warlord?"

"Yes. If I'm not mistaken, Brimstone Blitz was the pony who saved you?"

I shuffled up, sitting properly. My eyes were wet, but this genuinely intrigued me, what did he mean by 'warlord'?

"I suppose being a slave all your life, you wouldn't have had opportunity to know, but our Brimstone is not your average raider."

Given the way he took an entire swarm of them apart, I had that sussed already; but I didn't imagine Protégé was talking about just his combat skills.

"Brimstone wasn't just a tough raider, Murk. He actually led one of the largest raider clans in the entire Equestrian Wasteland. The Great Raider Warlord. The Dragon. Brimstone Blitz. For the last forty years, he and his group, or clan as he says, laid waste to a significant portion of settlements. They were something of a thorn in the side of even the larger factions, Master Red Eye included, as well as other raiders. He would discover them and often challenge their leader to one on one combat for leadership of the tribe. He never lost once, and believe me Murk, his ferocity was legendary amongst those savages. But, at least to me, his most heinous act was the destruction of Ponyville."

He turned to a large and frayed map on the wall near the window. His magic levitated a feather to point to a small town near a large forest.

"Settlers had finally began to restore that place into a little haven when his clan descended. Such a pity. It has such historical significance, that little town. The megaspells and poison were bad enough, but if you go there now all you'll find is devastation and whatever raiders are left over from his clan's passing."

I wasn't really listening too closely. All I could think of was that massive earth pony and seeing him at the head of frothing and screaming raiders as they descended on a settlement. How could such a beast become what I had just witnessed?

"How he changed is rather interesting, albeit unknown to me. After Master Red Eye captured him as an example to the wasteland, he seemed to be rehabilitated by the work here. Possibly the only pony I've seen that happen to, actually. It's a great pity he refuses to tell me of why or how. Not that I'm complaining of course," Protégé let out a small laugh. "I am rather glad of his presence to help keep those raiders with him under control, if only by fear. He is an exemplary worker, probably my best."

I glanced back at Protégé's bright red eyes sadly. That word, 'worker', still stung badly. Was that what I was now? An enforced worker? All the same, I felt calmer for the discussion. Protégé was speaking to me as though we were equal. Despite myself, I couldn't help taking at least a little comfort in it. He got up, trotting backward.

"I should stick close to him if I were you, his protection, even in passing, will aid you on your quest significantly."

"My *what?*"

Seemingly pleased whenever I actually engaged in conversation, Protégé nodded.

"Your journey, Murk. Two years stand before you filled with tasks to overcome in service to Master Red Eye. You can earn your freedom, improve yourself as a pony, and help Equestria all at the same time."

His eyes narrowed, the smirk turned to a proper smile.

"Isn't that what you want to do, Murk? Isn't that what *she* would want of you?"

She. Okay... that was it. He could act all intelligent in front of the dumb and uneducated slave, but that was where I drew the *line*. I proudly brought myself up to be standing as high as I could and stared him sternly in the... neck.

One little sigh of exasperation later, I stepped back with a muttered curse about my height ruining moments when I was *trying* to be confident, and looked him in the eyes. My voice wasn't designed to sound big and imposing, but Luna damn it I was going to try! He wanted me to talk as an equal about what inspired me to run at the Wall? Well fine, he'd get it!

"The Stable Dweller would not want me working for you or Red Eye! You saw it, didn't you? How she broke free right in front of him and saved herself and another zebra too! She showed everypony there that there is something better to fight for than helping some mad pony!"

To his credit, Protégé did not reel or act offended with my little outburst. Stepping to the side to lean on a table, his reply was calm, but held a certain passion.

"The Stable Dweller, hmm? So... you were inspired by her? I suppose I should have guessed, you wore that PipBuck on your right forehoof, just like her. Only Master Red Eye does the same, and I doubt you were taking his example. The numerous images in your sketchbook were also hints to this end, I suppose. But Murk, can you not see? Master Red Eye is saving Equestria, I mentioned this to you before. If I were permitted, I would show you the children, safe and in a state of education just waiting for a better world to inhabit. They are well fed, fit, healthy, and have never been forced to kill anypony or consume meat just to survive. They truly are innocent, Murk, and we only have our Master to thank. Can you not see the need for ponies like you and I to give all we can? Was generosity not one of the sacred elements of old Equestria?"

Last time, I had been caught unawares after my failure. This time, however, he wouldn't go without a response from me.

"She has another way! I... I heard it on the PipBuck! She's out there, saving ponies and helping places to survive. If we all just helped each other rather than fighting all the time then we wouldn't need to use slaves and... and... take children away!"

He listened. He never interrupted, keeping his voice level and trotting around to face me directly again.

"Murk... you say that if we didn't fight, but you use her as an example? She has killed more ponies in less than two months out of her Stable than I have in my entire life in the wasteland. How can this truly be the way to help Equestria? To keep shooting the bad ponies until none are left? Isn't that how we *got* in this mess in the first place? By starting shooting? Here in Fillydelphia we take the raiders away from those they could hurt and set them to tasks that help everypony."

"But... but you have thousands of ponies who just wanted to be nice and live their lives. There are good ponies in here! There are good ponies *dying* in here! I've seen the executions,

I've been beaten, whipped, fed almost nothing for months, and the work is killing everypony slowly and painfully. You know about my sickness! I've seen ponies taken and tortured or raped by slavers just for their fun!"

Protégé sighed, for a second I saw him have to think. In that moment I found a sense of triumph in my side of the argument.

"There are... not as many good ponies as there used to be, Murk. To have this work, we need the skills of anypony who can manage it. I don't particularly like having Shackles around, but he is a necessary evil to keep the raiders in line. We must sacrifice things if we are to save Equestria. Better us than the next generation of foals."

"What if the Stable Dweller is right?"

"Then she is right."

That caught me off guard. I had thought Red Eye and his little student Protégé would be insistent on their viewpoint. Weren't they evil?

"Master Red Eye possesses, and has taught me to have, humility. If she is right and we are wrong, we will gladly aid her cause. Interestingly, Littlepip and Master Red Eye do share one common goal as of the moment, you know."

Wait... wait... who was this Little—

I remembered her size, she had been about the same height as me, if slightly better fed. She had a PipBuck as a cutie mark. Even my uneducated brain could piece that one together.

"Littlepip? Her name is Littlepip?"

"Indeed so, Murk. I felt that, given your obvious inspiration from her, you would appreciate knowing her name."

His smile caught me unawares. Hadn't we just been arguing?

"I do want to help you, Murk. That is why I have brought you here. You may not agree, but I promise you, I do genuinely wish to see you attain that freedom you want so badly."

Bittersweet care... I shook my head sadly, probably looking a little dejected, but he was my master, it sort of came with the expectation. I couldn't keep the saddened plead from my voice.

"Then why can't you just... let me go? I'm useless to you..."

"Useless?" He laughed. "Please, Murk, you do injustice to yourself. I am sure that you have it in you to overcome the odds when given a little encouragement. I have confidence that you will be a good worker for me. Do not feel I am unapproachable should you have any problems, I wish the same for all those under my roster. To be able to help Master Red Eye save Equestria... and then be on their way, hopefully a better pony than when they came in."

Despite myself, I couldn't help but be swayed a little by his words. What if Red Eye was truly wanting to just help? What if this student of his and his more progressive attitude was a better system? Would more ponies succeeding convince Red Eye to abandon the brutal slave routine?

No! I batted my head with a hoof (no doubt Protégé was becoming slightly perplexed by the expressions I had evolved from a lonely life...) and tried to remember Littlepip. The DJ had spoken highly of her, about helping everyone! About fighting the good fight! Just believe in the goodness of others and try to do so yourself while staying free! Regardless of how Protégé talked it up, this was still slavery, ponies like The Master were still abusing and torturing others like me and the conditions of living were lower than anywhere I had ever

been a slave before!

Protégé could see I wasn't in agreement with him. With a sigh he turned and trotted backward, lifting that bag from before.

"I can see we share differing values, Murk. I respect your wish, but I must deny it. However, I must say I have enjoyed an opportunity to talk to you properly. You are an interesting pony, Murk, I hope we can talk again in the future. If you are not required for work, feel free to come to me any time. For now, however..."

The eyepiece floated back to his face, clipping around his ear once again. The student of Red Eye was back. I lowered my head.

"You are assigned under me. You will begin work on the next available assignment for those who have selected or been chosen for two years of high value target clearance and retrieval. I wish you luck, it is not easy and indeed can be very lethal. However..."

The bag floated over to me, before opening and gently tipping the contents out. I gasped as I looked down.

"...perhaps these may help your mood for now to overcome the shock and help protect you from those who would judge you for your wings."

My customised fleece, Slit's goggles, saddlebag and PipBuck.

Regardless of Protégé standing watching, I immediately began throwing on my jerkin, almost rolling on the floor in an effort to pull it over and cover those blasted feathers as fast as I could. Protégé seemed to let his eyes linger on my wings before they disappeared from view.

"Interesting, really. A pegasus... simple family genes and random chance or is there something more to you, I wonder?"

Feeling warmer and safe within my fleece, I reattached the PipBuck to my right foreleg with the leather cord before snapping the goggles onto my head and finally throwing on the saddlebag. It had been emptied... but in it I found three RadAways. Surprised, I turned back to Protégé with an open mouth ready to ask. He simply held a hoof to his mouth.

"Consider it my apology for the way Ragini treated you, Murk. Good day."

He turned to his desk and picked up his quill and parchment again. Clearly, that was my signal to leave.

As I closed the door to his office, I couldn't help wondering about him. Was he really as nice as he seemed? Everypony else seemed out to get me or use me for something. Not to mention he was Red Eye's personal student.

As I trotted off down the corridor, following the waiting Ragini, I heard him speaking quietly to himself after he *thought* I was out of earshot.

"To my Master Red Eye... I feel I have an interesting report of what I have learned for you this week regarding the feelings of those who we rely on to rebuild Equestria..."

The moment I was past the cage door I galloped for Brimstone's cell. It hurt my shoulder terribly, but I knew exactly what was going to happen.

"Heeeey pegasuuuus!"

I heard clattering hooves from behind me as the raiders cantered out into the light from the shops near the entrance. I didn't even look back.

"Come on out and play, don't you even want those feathers back?"

They lightly chased me close to Brimstone's area, only after I had ducked in did I look back. The ragged leader was wearing my feathers around a band on his head! The small group of them clamoured around near the fountain, wearing clothing I could only hoped only looked like skin.

Brimstone was waiting inside. With a few stomps he made his way to the entrance, glaring back at the raiders through the cage.

"You can't keep our prize away from us forever, traitor! Not both of them!"

With a shake of his mane, Brimstone gave little heed to them, merely ushering me further inside while he watched the raiders back off. Not for the first time, I began to hate my sensitive hearing, as I picked up the remainder of the raiders laughing in their own spots. Alongside them, I could hear the groans of those slaves not lucky enough to enjoy the big warlord's protection.

"Try not to entice them, Murk," Brimstone's voice was as rough as ever, like gravel. "The guards, Shackles, and I keep them in line as best we can. But they are just waiting to let all that aggression out on somepony. You can't pen raiders up..."

"But I didn't-"

"You appeared. For them, that's good enough reason."

Really, I didn't know what to say, but I got the hint. Stay hidden, stay low. I'd heard too many tales of what raiders would do. Torture, rape, cannibalism, and everything in between. I'd almost been their toy earlier.

"Look, Brimstone... I got something for her."

I tapped my saddlebag, attracting Brimstone's attention more properly. Without a word more, he encouraged me into the back of the shop.

"Useless."

I slumped down on my haunches with a sigh, as Brimstone gently nudged the RadAway. There had never been any question that I would give it to her instead of using it to fight off my own disease. Already I could feel my lungs beginning to clam up a little more after the healing from Protégé's doctor some hours ago. I'd been where she was, I didn't wish it on anypony.

"Useless?"

"It's simple really," Brimstone turned back to her, resting silently for now. "I could have got some from the slave markets... but Glimmer can't take RadAway. Something in it sets off an allergic reaction."

"Oh... I'm sorry..."

"No matter, just means the first plan still has to go ahead, find the alternative."

Brimstone clearly went into deep thought as he began piecing together his plan. Hesitantly, I sat and watched Glimmerlight. Her chest was moving so little, while she was sweating and quivering under her blanket. A bucket for rad-induced vomiting sat nearby. I could have sworn it had been red when I'd trotted by it.

But I didn't simply see a mare who was sick. Past my natural distrust of all ponies I hadn't met, I saw in her one last chance. Alone, I didn't have a hope. I was weak, scared, uneducated, and utterly naïve of the world around me that wasn't a slaver demanding I work. (And I wasn't even very good at that work either.) By all my heart, I wanted out. The

sketches of freedom I had left in my journal and on Whiplash's proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt. But since my failure, the thought of running at that Wall again felt like madness. Once again I arrived at the same horrid feeling.

I was exactly what I had been like before the Pit again, too afraid of repercussions and punishment to have the courage to do it. Whatever had driven me before was beginning to fade fast.

But that was where Glimmerlight came in.

By Brimstone's story of her life, she sounded like my best chance to find somepony who wanted the same thing as me. Who wouldn't judge me and would be willing to maybe, just maybe, help me. The unknown mare had shown me that ponies could be nice, now I had to trust in her belief about there being other good ponies in Fillydelphia besides her.

If I ever wanted out of here, I'd need them. Right now I had no direction, and no drive pushing me to do something before an event happened like before. My life had been thrown into the grind of slavery once again. If I were to just let it happen, I knew I would be lost forever to the slave in my mind.

Glimmerlight might be my last hope. She could very well be the first step to doing *something* to build toward an escape attempt again! No matter what, I couldn't let her die, or I might see all my chances go with her.

Taking a deep breath, I looked up at the big raider. "So... what do we do?"

Brimstone looked sideways at me with a severe expression.

"We?"

Truth be told, I hadn't properly thought this through, but I knew I wanted to.

"Look... you say she wants out. So do I, right? But I tried to escape and failed badly, Brimstone. I... I'm scared of doing anything, even if it helps me in the end. *Really* scared! Protégé seems okay but... but The Master..."

I lost my train of thought, the feeling of him beating me to the ground, the harsh sensation of his cracked hoof playing along my cutie mark. Shifting back into the dark of the gloomy back room, I heard Brimstone glower a little at my natural habit to seek a dark hidden place to hide in. Even the big raider could see the pain in my eyes.

"He hurt you."

"Yes..." Little more than a tiny whimper. "Water... and hitting me... I... I thought he was going to break me..."

Brimstone's expression didn't change much, but I know he'd seen The Master buck me to the raiders. I tried to dry my eyes, moving out and standing up before Brimstone to attempt an appeal to his respect of bravery.

"But from the kind of pony you said she is... then I know I need to save her, Brimstone, just as much as you need to. That and... I've been where Glimmerlight is now. That's why I wanted to give my RadAway to you. I knew I'd want someone to do it for me."

Still that stone faced expression didn't move. For a good half minute he simply stared at me, before shaking his head.

"I must be getting too much of a softie these days... alright. You could come in handy anyways. If you could get to the Wall, you can clearly stick to the shadows. But know this. Like before, if I feel you are ever threatening the success of this then you can trot home and explain to Protégé yourself. Understood?"

I gulped, wondering just what I'd gotten into...

"Okay... so... what are we doing?"

His plan was remarkably simple, yet fraught with intense levels of danger.

There was a renovated hospital near the Fillydelphia crater edge, just outside of the exclusion zone. Due to the ambient radiation however, it was often more used for important slave workers, rather than any of Red Eye's group. As such, it was a lot less defended or guarded and held overall less medical supplies than those closer to the hub of the city. Brimstone explained the name to recognise it as the 'Hearts and Hooves Hospital.' Of course, I'd never be able to identify it by words alone, so he had said he'd simply point it out instead. I had asked why Protégé hadn't gotten any for her, but the answer was simple. Glimmerlight didn't qualify for rare stocks, even with Protégé's influence. As such, Brimstone was aiming to find and simply take whatever stock they kept.

How we got there was most interesting. The cell had a backdoor that was jammed shut. It led to the outside, an old delivery door apparently. Protégé and the slavers believed it unusable because of the thickly rusted hinges, but Brimstone had a theory that it was simply blocked on the other side. With a little clearing and his strength to push it, the door might open. The problem was clearing it. He was heavily guarded whenever taken for a work detail, due to killing guards in the past. As such, my part of his plan was to crawl through the air ducts and drop off outside, then clear the doorway. As a pair, we would make our way to the hospital around the edge of the crater away from attention, Brimstone would get me past whatever guard existed at the supply door and I would sneak in to find the medicine. Hopefully, I might be able to steal some RadAway, too, to help with my disease.

I didn't particularly like my roles, if I was honest. Sneaking through cramped air ducts in pitch blackness, skirting a balefire crater and sneaking into a place I didn't know to find something I probably couldn't read the name of didn't feel too reliable.

Of course there was another problem. Me.

Today had not been easy. I was still partially a nervous wreck, held together only by a mission to achieve and the fact that I possessed my journal and PipBuck again. But even with my fleece again, I had a horrible feeling that everypony would still recognise me and know I had wings. Even as I sat flicking through my journal, waiting for Brimstone to give the go, I gazed almost longingly at the sketches I'd done of myself *without* wings.

I was tired... oh so tired. If I closed my eyes I began to sweat in a fear that The Master would be the one waking me up. Sometimes, if I saw Brimstone in the darkness of the store's back rooms I would yelp in fear and turn to run before I remembered it wasn't the horrifying form of The Master. The closest I took to solace was glancing at Glimmerlight. Even while sick, she looked somewhat peaceful. Her white coat would have shone had it not been coated in the dust and dirt of slavery. But her short, two tone pink mane still held so much colour. Briefly, I felt regret at only having charcoal and not coloured chalk to draw with.

Really, I was only seeking distractions from the real problems.

How could I do this? What had I agreed to? Brimstone had let it known that if I wasn't up to it, I was getting left behind. My shoulder ached, I was sure I'd caught something from the freezing water of the hose, and my mind was a mess trying to stop the indoctrination of the slave from controlling everything I did again.

Only my drawing was keeping me ready to do this at the minute. I sat in a corner of the

back room, using the flickering light from my PipBuck to lighten up my journal. Muttering my mantra in my head, (Lines became curves...) I sketched out the first thing that came to mind. Imposing and terrifying, Brimstone Blitz stood over the weakened form of Glimmerlight, steadfastly protecting her against anything and everything that dared come his way. Even as I drew it, an envy crept in. I found myself wishing I had somepony so determined to help me as that. Somepony to watch over me.

Well, there was the mare, but destiny seemed determined to separate our paths at every turn.

I flipped away from the image, going back a few pages. Quite by accident, I landed on the one of just myself in the bottom left of the page, the rest left completely empty. Looking at my smiling face, I tapped a hoof against the paper, almost pathetically really. I just wished I could be that pony, the one who seemed to be laughing through that big grinning smile, his wings spread proudly either side of his body, worn openly.

Who was I kidding? Dreams and fantasies, that's all I drew. I was no free pony, just a pegasus too scared to show his wings for the judgemental hate he would receive. I was even afraid of ponies on *my* side.

"Murk."

The rough voice was spoken just loud enough not to wake Glimmerlight. I saw Brimstone looming in the darkness.

"It's time."

I'd been in the Mall less than a couple hours, and already I was about ready to sneak back out of it. Despite my fear, some part of me congratulated myself for not having lost all of my momentum, even if I still wasn't mentally ready to start preparing another full escape attempt.

But if this all worked out, perhaps I wouldn't be alone in that endeavour.

The ventilation was located near the back of the slave area in the Mall, just off one of the staircases leading to the upper level of slave cells. Brimstone settled down low enough that I could clamber onto his back and reach the ventilation shaft. A little dexterous hoof and mouth work with a steel bar and I had prised the mesh cover free just enough to slip in. Tall and wide enough to permit me to at least turn and moderately sit up, it was almost a perfect fit for me, even if I knew it would cause a stooping pain by the end of the run. Even so, compared to the filthy drain pipe I'd inhabited before, it was wondrously dry and surprisingly cool against the humid heat of Fillydelphia. Momentarily, I kept it in mind as a possible hiding spot, where nopony else could reach me, safe in its hidden, sheltered tunnels.

I turned back to Brimstone to pull the mesh shut, seeing his beady and mismatching eyes staring up at me. Holding it up for me, he paused before it closed over.

"You alright finding your way, Murk?"

"I think so... just keep heading toward the walls until I find somewhere I can prise though, right?"

Brimstone nodded. I'd hoped for a smile at least, but he just remained grim. "Aye, that's right. Knock four times on the shop's back door when it's clear and I'll buck it open. Just make sure you stand back. Remember, **four** times, or I won't open. Got everything you

need?"

I checked myself over. My now unarmoured fleece, goggles and PipBuck stayed with me, in addition to a length of rope Brimstone had within his own possessions in the cell. While waiting, I had cut my fleece down a little. Fillydelphia's atmosphere and temperature was far too high for a fully covering tight thermal fleece like I had designed for the wastes outside. Now, it only went down to just before my cutie mark. It left my hind legs uncovered to fight the heat while still having enough leeway to hide my wings rather reliably. A noticeable absence of my inventory was my butterfly yellow saddlebag and journal.

"Don't you worry your head about that book, it's safer with Glimmer right now than clogging you up in the tunnels."

Was my face really *that* transparent of what I was thinking about? Celestia help me if I ever got a marefriend in my life...

I pulled the mesh back over with my mouth and slipped my goggles over my eyes, pausing only for a second more.

"B-Brimstone?"

"Aye?"

I bit my lip, talking to this 'warlord' had always been somewhat awkward, even when he opened up a little...

"Thank you. I mean, really... for helping me. I hope I don't let you down. I'm not too reliable at succeeding at anything in life. Even... even aside from that, Glimmerlight is the only hope I've got to find somepony to help me right now, I just don't want to fail you."

Brimstone looked almost confused why I'd even spoken, *I* was confused about what I'd said. But the big raider just tapped the mesh lightly. To my surprise, he smiled.

"Do this for me, Murk," he whispered, "and you'll have at least a modicum of my trust. She means everything to me, Murk... *everything*. Not many ponies would even try to help the way you're doing."

"I... I'll try..."

"Good. I'll wait in the shop. Try not to get bucked off another balcony without me around to raise some hell for you, okay?"

I could swear he was grinning as he turned and trotted away from me. Taking a deep breath I turned and crawled away into the vent systems. The thick darkness ahead of me made my skin crawl... but I couldn't help but feel I wasn't quite out of the saddle yet for finding a way out of this nightmare.

Time to go save a life... a life who could possibly end up saving mine in return.

There were many ponies I had to thank in my life. The Stable Dweller. Brimstone. The mare. My mother. The DJ. Even Glimmerlight already, for having smiled at me, and being a goal to me in these times when I feared I might lack a direction.

But right now, Sundial was the one directing light into my life, quite literally.

His PipBuck's flickering and half broken torchlight was about the only thing keeping me away from a panicked state of claustrophobia. Sometimes I wondered, did that word mean I had a phobia? I hoped not. How were you meant to tell? How would I ever tell? I was scared of my own—

"ARGH!"

I dived away, rolling and curling up as I saw the shadow of somepony else crawl... oh. Well, didn't I feel like an idiot.

What could I do? I was nervous, trotting along a hoof at a time in almost pitch black. Of course I was jumpy! I honestly didn't have a clue where I was. On rare occasions, I had passed a vent going downwards, sometimes with faded light drifting in from the room below, but I didn't recognise them.

The creaking and often haphazardly bending air ducts seemed to threaten a collapse any time; and worst of all, I heard things. Skittering noises, and clicking from down other tunnels. After the drainpipe before, I didn't dare imagine what little horrors lurked around in the darkness waiting for an almost blind pony to stumble across their lairs. Often, I'd had to turn back from a route after the duct had gotten so thin I could barely crawl under it. Why were some bits pony sized and some not? Didn't they think of tiny escaping pegasus when they designed it? Why think of a glass roof to resist a *Balefire Megaspell* and nothing to let somepony get back out again? What kind of builder made this place?

Every tunnel felt like an inaccessible wall of black. I wasn't making any progress in a quiet and terrifying environment like this. Reluctantly, I reached to my PipBuck and flipped the radio on a low volume. Technically a bad idea, but I wasn't getting anywhere without some moral encouragement.

Now... what was the DJ's station position on the dial again?

Click.

kkkzzzzzzzhzzz...

Click.

...remind every worker of Fillydelphia, you have given again and again for our great cause. Fear not for the future, for you are ensuring i-

Click.

...fffzzzzzaaaaffff...

Click.

You gotta shaaa—

CLICK!

-many times do I need to tell you, wastelanders? Ghouls are ponies too!"

With a relieved sigh, I relaxed as that soothing voice came to my ears for the first time since my escape attempt. Something about that familiarity, that informal intimacy of just me and his messages helped give me a better feeling that I wasn't alone in this dark and dreary place.

"Hasn't our resident muffin lovin' trader shown you all something? Well let me set the record straight once and for all. A ghoul is just a pony without the hair and skin with the added ability of being more or less immortal so far as we know.

Making better progress with the comfort of sound to only my ears, I felt happier about this mission. I could see a small bit of light up ahead, perhaps some place to get my bearings.

"They feel, they care and they hurt just like any of us. So next time you see one, do ol'Pon-Three a favour, will ya? Give em a little smile, just to remind them that not everypony out there is a judgemental old relic of the past, eh?"

Stopping for just a second, I sighed. Ghouls I was alright with, one of my masters had been one and I hadn't ever judged him for his skin... or lack of it. Okay, I *did* once call him "rotten corpse" in my head once, but only because he had hit me first! But, I wasn't hearing

any big calls for an ease up on pegasi any time soon...

"Of course, zombie ponies? Yeah, give them the fast track to a little peace at last, everyone. Just learn to tell the difference. It's no fun living in a world where everypony else wants to shoot you for just looking a little more varied than your average pony we see every day."

Lying down on all fours, I gradually scooted up to the vent the light was peering from. I could hear voices...

"Now, in further news... how about those events over near the old Sweet Apple Ac—"

"Master, why didn't you let us finish off the basta—"

"Silence. You know why."

Click!

I felt a chill pass through me. That voice, even just the one word, *silence*, made me freeze on the spot and not dare make a sound lest I be punished for speaking out of turn. I tried to remind myself I was only staying quiet to remain undetected.

I wished that were the only reason. Peeping down, I saw a filthy room with an old metal table, racks of slaver tools like whips, knives, and magical shock rods and a single bed more filthy than most ones I'd seen exposed to the *outside*. Against the wall, there was a single door to some retrofitted cupboard. I couldn't see much more, although it seemed relatively cluttered with random bits and bobs, but I had a single chilling thought as I looked in from the vent above the bed.

This was *his* room.

I could see The Master standing behind the metal desk, while the raider he was talking to was out of sight. I was shaking so much I could feel my loose tooth rattling. Part of me began to worry it'd fall out and give me away.

"That pegasus bastard can offer much more than just one quick event to me, raider. I'm a *slaver*, I don't make my life by killing those I have control over."

"Not how *we* do things." The voice was uppity.

The Master cut him off with a growl. "Get used to it. How you do things doesn't matter in here to me. I have plans for him the moment Protégé isn't around to do his 'best little student' act. That little green buck is *mine*. You just keep me informed, that is all."

I was shaking. Part of me wanted to drop down... give myself up. The slave spying on his Master was wrong! Disgusted that my mind even still responded to him, I cursed my indoctrination and tried to fight the urge. Thoughts of a dying unicorn on a sofa were enough to solidify my thoughts for now. Concentrate on the goal, not on the slavery. Instead, I reached out, stretching over the vent to try and get a look at who the informant was...

"When we were out there with Brimstone Blitz we—"

"Raider, I don't care."

The Master's voice had dropped. I still couldn't see the raider. I stretched out just a little more, pushing my hoof forward to balance myself on the other side.

"You are not 'out there' any more! I keep you from the worst of things because you are useful to me. You keep the various packs of your kind down there in line, now that their old leader is under some 'repentance' crusade. Now get out of here and return to your cell. I'm not in the mood for you."

"Just one thing..."

He must have been right at the doorway, trotting away just as I thought I was about to

find out. Dammit! Sweating, I brought my whole body weight forward over the vent to try and glance right down through the grill from the opposite side. I could feel my aching shoulder beginning to shake.

“What?”

His voice slapped into every instinct of mine to perk up. I faltered, jerking and struggling to stay upright. Oh, this was a bad idea, a *very* bad idea. I could feel my hoof slipping.

“What do you want with him, anyway? If it’s pain you want... we could arrange that.”

Oh Goddesses help me and give me the strength to not slip...

The Master chuckled lowly, a sick sound promising all of his sadistic nature.

“I’m a born slaver, raider. I simply want him to be commanded. To do everything I tell him. He is a born *slave*, you know? Everything I could want, a pegasus and a weak little slave in one. I don’t want to *kill* him, oh no... No... I would rather he be worn down... day by day. I’m not a simplistic sadist brute like yourself, raider. I don’t want his death. I want his *life*. He dropped into Fillydelphia so perfectly. It could only have been better if he had dropped right into my *room*.”

My hoof slipped.

I felt my entire body weight collapse downwards toward the vent cover before jamming to a halt just as quickly with a painfully loud squeal. My PipBuck! The edge and the tough leather had caught on the gap between vent and mesh! Praying for it not to break, I pulled my weight back up. With a leap as silent as I could, I dove over the vent with a dull thud and turned off the light.

“The *fuck* was that!?” The raider cried out.

I curled up in a ball, afraid to move. The Master’s hoof must have come crashing down, for I heard a painful smack of hoof to skull.

“**Don’t you step toward me in my room!**”

Okay, that was pretty hair triggered. I might have thought more on why he had been so suddenly angry, but I was too concentrated on trying to make no noise.

“Okay, *okay!*”

Another harsh cracking sound and a dull cry of pain.

“**I don’t like your tone one bit, raider! You are the slave! *I am The Master!***”

“Yes, Master!”

Despite the beating, I could still hear resistance in the voice. I imagined raiders used to independence were more resilient to The Master’s beatings and overbearing nature than I was. Really, was I that pathetic? The imagery of the everlasting chain in my mind begged to differ. The Master was right, I was meant to be his.

But he wasn’t going to get me... not forever. I couldn’t bear the nightmare, to have him control my entire life. I had to escape him.

I had to...

Even as I heard The Master throw the raider out and return to sit upon his bed, muttering about radroaches in the ducts, I lay right above him, silently willing myself out of a frozen state of terror. Even without seeing me, he could still hurt me.

I had to escape him. I *had* to, before he dug his chains in any deeper to my life.

Remaining still until The Master had left, my continuation through the ducts was hesitant

and without the illumination of my PipBuck light. After one near miss, I didn't dare turn it on again. At first the cloying darkness had led to near disaster by almost falling down a thinner shaft. My heart still raced as I imagined the implications. To be stuck, unable to move and wedged in a thin shaft, vertically, with nopony ever able to respond to my screams...

But since, my eyesight had begun to adjust a little as I got used to it. There was actually some light from occasional grates, so staying only on natural sight allowed me to stay unseen and focus on direction. It had taken me some wandering, but eventually I was certain that I had to be near the outer rooms of the Mall, and chose a vent to exit from.

Bucking the vent off the wall, I dropped into the darkened room. Dust swirled around my hooves, making me choke and cough as I found my chosen room to be seemingly untouched since, presumably, before the megaspells.

Before the end... I didn't want to spend much time here. I *didn't do* pre-war investigation.

Coughing into my hoof every few steps and rolling my sore shoulder out from the scamper through the air ducts, I made my way through the preserved space. It looked like an old janitorial station, thick with centuries of dirt and dust, and occupied by creepy thick webs covering the roof, furniture and corners. They caught on my hooves and dragged behind me everywhere. I could see two doors barred and locked from the inside with thick metal bars; while masses of empty food, drink packagings, and a ton of used RadAway sachets littered the space. Most was situated around a central desk that held various terminal monitors that flickered and fizzed eternally from some error. One of them was flashing a message on screen, on and off, a large red word seemed like a warning while scrolling text ran over and over beneath it.

Somepony had barred themselves in here to survive. But if there were barred doors, then where were they?

A little hunting for a way to unlock the doors later, I found him.

An old buck, preserved even in death. He was lying on a small makeshift bed in the cleaning cupboard, and around his bed's side lay dozens upon dozens of inhalers. The smell was not fresh, but a sweet, musty and sickly defilement that had lain here for generations. My heart began to tighten at my imagination beginning to take off.

Imagery and visualisation... it was doing it again, piecing it all together, working out the last moments, the reasons why, and the visual memory of what had happened here when the spells detonated across Fillydelphia. Had I missed photos? Did he have family? What did he hear? What was that little glint coming from his saddlebag? What was it like living alone in one room until you slowly died...

"No!"

I literally slapped myself across the face with a hoof, throwing cobweb into my face. I couldn't afford another breakdown of sadness about the past; Brimstone and Glimmerlight were relying on me now! I turned and ran from the cupboard, leaning against the monitors to catch my now rasping breath. Taking a few seconds to compose myself, I moved to the door with an exit symbol above it and shoved the crates out of the way to reveal the lock.

I knew where I'd seen the key. Of course it had been on him.

I knew I had to hurry, but I had to take a few moments to rest. My shoulder ached and throbbed; while the stiffness from The Master's treatments and raider beating were coming back to haunt me.

"Okay... okay... just a corpse... just a fresh looking corpse... you've been in sewage..."

I continued my mantra until I was back in the cupboard. Shaking, I lowered my head to the saddlebag and bit the thin loop of string that held the key. There... nothing... nothing to it.

My imagination was hard to turn off. This felt *wrong*. I was disturbing the gentle sleep of the long dead. This poor stallion had died alone in his probably workplace, desperately trying to stave off sickness and radiation, and now I was stealing from him? Was I really that kind of thief already?

The key came loose, and the saddlebag dropped to the floor; the long worn canvas loops simply falling apart at a mere touch. The body shifted as it lost the extra weight, gurgling from expelled air. I fought the urge not to be sick, and desperately tried not to breathe through my nose. Carefully, so as not to disturb his long rest further, I stepped back with my eyes closed in respect and looped the key around my neck on the string.

"Please forgive me, it's for a good cause... I promise. Goddesses let you rest..."

I opened my eyes.

And found his face staring back at mine from less than an inch away, eyes open.

For a second or two, it stared, twitching and making small clicking sounds.

And then, it howled.

There was dry intake of air, before an unholy screech of corrupt and petrified vocal chords filled the room, echoed in my ears, and froze every muscle in my body through a terror I had never known in my life. The corpse's mouth distended, opening far more than a pony's mouth had any right to be. Lacking control, I felt myself collapse before it, mouth open, unable to scream at all, as my eyes watered and yet dared not blink.

The corpse began to thrash with spasms, with old muscles long underused coming back to life in necromantic horror. I began to scream as it clawed its way across the bed toward me on broken and limp legs. Survival instinct kicked in, and I began pulling myself from the room. I begged my body to work well enough to stand! I... I couldn't. Paralysing fear filled me, freezing my every motion. Behind me, it screamed again, yanking itself across the covers furiously enough to make the bed slam into the wall behind it.

Falling against the desk, the monitors fell from the table, smashing and fizzing as I used the table's edge to get to my hooves. Shifting and flopping, it fell from the bed; a ruined body animated even after all this time! Finding my hooves, I galloped for the door and began fumbling, trying to get the key in my mouth.

The thing howled, wailed, and screamed as it pulled itself on one good front hoof after me across the janitor's office. Its mouth waggled loosely, and it began to claw and tug my way with a frenzy that seemed beyond anything I had seen any raider do.

"Come on... come on, please please *please!*"

I almost dropped the key before working it into the lock and turning it. The door refused to move. Was this the wrong key? I could hear it just a few feet away behind me, but I couldn't look! The sound came closer... closer! Nothing else to do, I bashed and pushed against the door, begging at the top of my voice for it to open, praying to the Goddesses while trapped in this tiny space with... with whatever that was!

Ramming my whole weight into the door, it finally began to budge... by an inch.

"*Come on! Help! Somepony!*"

Ramming myself against it again and again, I didn't even notice that it was my injured shoulder bashing on the hard metal outer door, such was the terror that propelled me as I turned and saw the... the... ghoul? Was it a zombie ghoul? It was flopping over the

monitors, hooves outstretched to drag me in. On my fourth strike it was close enough to rub my back hooves with its front ones as I felt cold dead flesh drift over me.

Screaming, I pushed myself through the gap, kicking backward and struggling on the other side to shove the door shut. With a final wail, I slammed the door shut, hearing it screaming after me from the inside, dulled by the doorway. Slight thumps impacted against the door as the beast rattled itself against it in an effort to get at me. Sitting with my back to it until the thumping stopped, I listened to the groaning shifts from the ghoul pulling itself away inside to... to do whatever it did when alone again. Before me sat the open nightmare of Fillydelphia, and a vista of the Balefire crater. Below the security walls surrounding it, it glowed an unearthly red in the haze of the smog covering this city. That scar on the world that had caused such abominations as the kind that now were me through this door. It was unnatural, like a hazy that grew and fell like some open wound upon Equestria that pulsed, never closing.

I might have thought that despite that sight, the open world was simply the most beautiful sight I had ever seen out of nothing but relief to be of the claustrophobic ducts and deadly abandoned halls.

But I was too busy laying down on the catwalk fire escape and crying to even care.

“Hey, buddy?”

I sniffed and kept trotting slowly around the Mall.

“Hey! Hey buck! Buddy! You alright?”

Raising my head, I wiped my eyes to look at the speaker. Another slave, a bright young earth pony buck of cold blue and a fiery red mane. I could see radsors like mine on his flank, actually damaging his cutie mark of a bouncing ball. He was cantering across from a small group that were passing by toward the industrial lines. The rest didn’t stop.

“What’s wrong? I’ve seen upset slaves... then there’s you.”

He seemed to have been on his way to some workplace judging by the slip tucked into his clothing. Some slavers gave them to slaves to deliver to new work masters with instructions. He kept trying to walk in front of me as I plodded along, looking for the doorway to release Brimstone.

“I’m fine...”

“Forgive me, buddy. You don’t look it.”

I cast him a stronger look. Not that it said much for me. He seemed nice, but I was just too tired and fragile at the moment.

“Hey, sorry... just asking...”

Stopping and sitting down, I rubbed my eyes and sighed. Perhaps I’d been too harsh on him, how often did a slave ask to help anyway?

“No, no. Sorry... hard day, more than most.”

Accepting this, he settled and nodded, wandering around to face me.

“I hear ya. What’s your name?”

“Murky.” I muttered it, fearing if I spoke too loudly, the crack in my voice would be too obvious.

“Flippy Bit, glad to meet you. Could swear we’ve been near each other on shifts, y’know. I’d remember a pony as small as you...”

Gee, thanks. He was right though, I didn't tend to remember faces. Before I'd been woken up by the Stable Dweller, I had simply existed as an ongoing bad dream, not paying much attention to anything. That said, the bright blue face of this pony did ring a bell.

He didn't miss a beat, filling in as I stayed quiet.

"Us slaves, y'know? We need to stick together, buddy. Support one another to get through this as best we can."

After the horrid encounter minutes ago, the sound of somepony saying things I could agree with was an unimaginably thankful thing to hear. Almost surprised at myself, I allowed my head to turn to him with a smile.

"Yeah... slavery isn't great. I've only gotten this far because of the help others gave me, Flippy. Gonna get out one day though, I gotta..."

"Hah! High order for yourself, Murk. Gonna take all us with you?"

"If I could!"

After a wary moment, I caught his smile grow bigger. He giggled, and I felt compelled to do the same. Before I knew it, we were laughing. There was something simple here, a genuine little acknowledgement of a shared hardship that I rarely received. The mare was so... so different and determined for her place in life to change. Brimstone was... well, Brimstone. But this 'Flippy Bit'? He was just... just normal and friendly.

"You know Murk, I know I recognise you from somewhere. You ever work the Parasprites? Wait, wait, southern wall reinforcement?"

"Nope, sorry."

"Then where in the hell do I recognise you from, buddy? The riots? Aah, nevermind. Hey, your fleece... what's it made of? Cotton?"

His voice changed. That last question had been rushed. I'd heard his train of thought change mid-sentence. Why was that? Feeling a little unnerved, I spoke quietly.

"Yeah, kinda... acquired it... from the thresher."

"I see... seriously nice fleece though..."

He reached out, stroking it with a hoof. I made to stand up and move away, but with a sudden movement, he pulled it up even against my offended shout. A second later, he was on his hooves. The friendly smirk was gone, as my wing was on full display.

"*I knew it!* I knew I recognised you! You're that pegasus!"

My mouth hung open. I wanted to just plead. Please just forget about them, we'd been getting on! We could have been friends! The scowl came back to his face. I recognised him at last. He had flung the half brick at me in the parade off of the lasso.

"You don't have to hate me..."

"You? It's not you, it's *all* of you! What do you think you're doing down here taunting us all with your wings! Why don't you just fly away? I bet that's what the PipBuck is! It's for spying, isn't it! I can't fucking believe I was being nice to you!"

He reached into a small pouch, and to my horror he drew a craft knife.

I began to back away, my heart thumping hard. A spike of adrenaline at the danger made me shiver. I couldn't handle this. Not today.

"You've got all the food up there, don't you? My nana told us the stories! You left us to starve! She told us how they tore up her hilltop home! They shot her husband for going to pick flowers from the summit!"

"FLIPPY! PLEASE! I'm not from there! I... I can't fly!"

"You're just lying! Stop it! If I know one thing from growing up it's that pegasi are all the

same! They all act shift, don't they? That's what everyone says! I knew if I ever met one that my momma and papa would be right!"

Taking the knife in his mouth he flew at me. Squeaking, I fell backward and rolled, narrowly missing the slash from his mouth held weapon. I had just faced a zombie, I wasn't going to freeze here! With a scrambling of hooves I upped and galloped off, hearing him chasing me with the knife swinging around his neck on a small leather line. Diving over a heap of scrap, I used it as a barrier.

"We're not all the same! It's just how I was born, I didn't ask for them!"

"STOP LYING!"

He galloped and dove over the scrap. I screamed over my back while I galloped myself as fast as I could. But I was limping every few steps, losing ground. I tried to convince him, but it fell on deaf ears. What was wrong with this world, when ponies were being born and cast as slaves, raiders, and bred into hate because of the sins of some past generation?

The chase continued around the back of the Mall. Only one thing came to my mind; find the door and get back inside with Brimstone, he would frighten Flippy off! Spotting the door, I began to gallop for it.

Or I did, until my injured limb gave out with a sharp jabbing pain.

Rolling on to my back, I saw the knife descend and, even while shouting in panic, got my PipBuck in the way of the blade itself. The jarring impact knocked both of us flat to the ground where hooves began flailing. Hoof to hoof combat was never a particularly clean affair, given more to throwing yourself in with luck and guts. I apparently had neither, but it was enough to find one of my hooves connect with his mouth and knock the knife out. In return, I felt him pound on my chest, driving the wind from me.

Scrambling, we separated even as I dived back at him again. I couldn't give him time to retrieve that knife in his mouth that hung around his neck. Rearing up, I tried to emulate what I had seen Brimstone do and use my front hooves to slash and strike. Flippy was faster, diving forward into my midsection and taking us both down again. Rolling, I swung him off to one side by tucking my side in to stop him getting a grip. Hearing him curse about my lack of size to get a hold of, I took the opportunity to limp as fast as I could for the door.

My heart leapt as I saw it was only kept in place by a few metal pipes that had fallen from the overhang above. Although enough to stop it opening, they shouldn't prove much of an obstacle to shift. Simply barging into one and yelping at the shocking impact down my back it fell to the side. The second fell away with it! Putting my back to the third I began to push even as Flippy caught up with a stinging blow to the shoulder. Crying out, I went down.

"Damn it... why couldn't you just stay away from us all? Your kind chose to save yourselves at the cost of betraying all of us. You brought this on yourselves!"

Struggling, trying to shift back while keeping my hooves raised, I shook my head. "Flippy... why do you have to do this? I... argh... I don't want to even know you never mind harm you! I'm not a cloudborn peg—"

His eyes were wide, but his pupils small. He shook with bitterness and psychotic outrage.

"All I know is my old folks were never wrong! You all gave us this waste!"

"BUT I DIDN'T!"

"I DON'T CARE! YOU'RE ONE OF THEM!"

I... I didn't understand. How did a couple of wings make such a difference? It didn't change who you were.

I saw him raising the knife even as I pushed the third pipe away with my front hooves and desperately rolled to the side as the knife clattered off the ground and away from his mouth. I leapt for the door, hammering it so hard my hoof stung. How many times was it? Three? Yes, it was three! One, two, three!

The moment I was done I felt Flippy dive for me a second time, his front hooves grabbing me to try and bring my neck up to slit. A horrid moment passed as I felt the cold metal slide lightly against my neck. Why wasn't the door opening!?

We struggled, thumping into the door one more time before I finally was thrown to the ground painfully, mewling in pain as he stamped a hoof on my shoulder to keep me there.

Lying at the side of the doorway on my back, I felt Flippy round off and take the knife in his mouth. He walked in front of the door toward me, a baleful look in his eye.

Brimstone bucked the door open with a force that defied belief.

Trotting out, the massive earth pony looked around before settling on me.

"Murk? What happene-"

"BRIM! BEHIND YOU!"

My warning seemed to fall on deaf ears as the raider warlord turned nonchalantly. Nothing happened. With an annoyed glance that told me to stop shouting he closed the door again.

Only then did the lifeless body of Flippy Bit fall to the ground, his neck broken from being struck by the door.

Hate. I'd been disliked and mistreated all too often, but I'd never experienced 'hate' until I came to this city.

He hadn't just hated *me*. Or my wings. He had shown a real, underlying, and educated hate against anything I stood for, miniscule or otherwise. So many ponies had done the same this morning while they pelted me on my parade from The Master. He hated pegasi, too, to the point he wanted to ruin my life. The raiders had wanted to pull my wings off. Ragini had called me "flightless." Even Brimstone admitted he hated the pegasi...

Out in the wastes the distrust was bad enough.

In here, where pegasi were seen as a convenient target for hurt slaves to take out their frustrations on, it was terrible.

I'd been running ever since the Pit. From my slave life, from death, from The Master, and from the opinion everypony had of me, just because I had feathers. But the truth was, I had been running all my life time and again from master to master, fellow slave to fellow slave. Even while covered I knew I couldn't get too close to most ponies. I hadn't been exiled from the clouds, but their deeds still cast down upon me in the hell beneath them. I was no Dashite, but I was an outcast all the same.

No longer could I handle it.

These wings had been useless to me. They had hurt me, taunted me with their inability to even *move* or spread out, and now all day they'd brought nothing but pain.

Rolling up my fleece, I gently pulled one of my stiff and painful wings around in my hooves. The wing stem felt limp, and the feathers still on it were caked in dirt and unkept. An embarrassment of a wing.

"I wish I never had these things." I found myself muttering quietly, almost forcing it away

from me. The hatred for my own body felt uncomfortable and hollow. It felt wrong, but undeniable.

As I lay shuddering, trying to make sense of what my screwed-up mental state was thinking, I heard Brimstone advance on me. With a sigh and a glance at the direction we should have headed in, he stared down at me looking at my frayed wings.

"You helped get that door open, so I'll give you a little respect, kid. What do those things mean to you? What do they tell you?"

I sniffed, trying to hide soft sobs as I avoided his piercing gaze.

"That I'm to blame for a lot of bad things that the pegasi did. That there are some sins that ponies haven't forgiven them for yet, and these wings put them on my shoulders, too."

The massive raider grumbled, his old face wrinkling and staring into nothingness with a surprisingly weary look.

"Did you do any of it?"

I shook my head. "No! How could I? It was hundreds of years ago!"

"Then why are you wishing to be punished for it? Picture yourself taking that pony's knife, and cutting them off. Just imagine walking away and leaving your wings lying there in a heap. Forever lost. Do you want that?"

That gave me pause, and for a moment, I actually imagined doing that to myself.

I suddenly felt ashamed for even having thought it, like someone had dumped cold water over my thoughts. The imagery was uncomfortable; unspeakable.

No, I didn't want it. Gently, I hugged my own body, protecting them. I was just hurt, and in the pain I was lashing out at myself.

The same way others had at me.

Brimstone Blitz seemed to not need an answer. He sat up again and turned away, as though about to leave. I thought he was done talking, until he stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"You're a pegasus, Murk. Wings alone don't change that, and they aren't all that defines what being a pegasus or any other kind of pony means. You'll always be one, even if you didn't have them. Something inside you; your soul, magic centre or whatever. It's always going to be that of a pegasus. Born for the clouds, bound to the open sky, and all that other airy nonsense. It's who you are."

I could have sworn I saw a knowing rise of an eyebrow.

"You don't just turn your back on stuff like that. It doesn't work that way."

I stared back, before daring to rise to my hooves and lowering my head.

"I'm just afraid. That buck wanted to be my friend until he saw them."

"Not all ponies are like that. You met many, but not all are. Glimmerlight wouldn't care if you were a winged *zebra*. What do you think I go through? I'm the raider who many ponies can say killed someone they knew through commands to my clan. So from experience, you learn to live with it. You learn to understand the good it's given you. For me, it's the reminders that keep me on the path I'm on. For you? Well, maybe it's already done more good for you than you've realised yet."

I had to admit, after this day of hell, that last line gave me a small warmth of hope to cling on to. I'd been pushed into action by watching someone fly. I always looked to the sky above the walls.

Brimstone glanced away again and started trotting forward.

"Now come on, I'm no good with this youthful cheering up crap. Once we're moving

you'll have more things to consider than depressive escapism. Not like I could cut off my clan markings."

I followed behind him. After all this, I'd need time to think. I still hadn't quite come to terms with the thought that not a day ago I had been close to hurling myself from a tower, but Brimstone's words had struck deep, and for the first time since I felt anything other than numb about who I was. He was truly an unusual pony.

I needed time. Time to let it all out and to speak to someone about it all. Maybe Protégé would listen...

As I saw Brimstone start to trot off, I cantered after him, limping badly and pushing everything I could to the back of my mind. I didn't quite manage it, but the action of starting this small dangerous journey galvanised my mind to think more actively and stay in the moment.

"Wait, wait, Brimstone! What about Glimmerlight?"

"She'll be safe, aye, safer than us. The raiders think I'm sleeping in there guarding her, they won't come near to her or your little mare book."

That caught me off guard enough to splutter and blush. Why did this always happen to me?

"Y-you looked at my journal?"

Brimstone actually grinned as he looked back and down at me.

"Told you before, patience isn't my strong point. Seems you have some interesting tastes..."

My mouth just hung open as I stumbled on limp legs and fell, covering my face with my hooves in embarrassment. Her was exaggerating about it. I knew he was, but it didn't make it feel any better.

"Oh come on, Murk. It's not like I'm going to judge you..."

Looking up, I saw his dry grin. True to his word at least, he seemed to have at least a small degree of tolerance for me after helping him to get out of the Mall.

He terrified me. He had often spoken of how he would leave me behind or kill me if I caused him problems. In Fillydelphia, one's own needs often came above temporary companions.

But right now, he was my ally and I had attained a certain level of trust from him in this task to save his friend; to save the mare that promised him salvation, and me a step toward escaping.

As the pair of us prepared to canter into the red haze of Fillydelphia, I flipped down my goggles, shuffled to get my wings comfortable in my fleece and tightened the strap on my damaged PipBuck before standing as tall as I could. I had faltered. I had failed and been hurt by it, but so long as I had a direction, some goal and something to hope for, I was not about to stop yet.

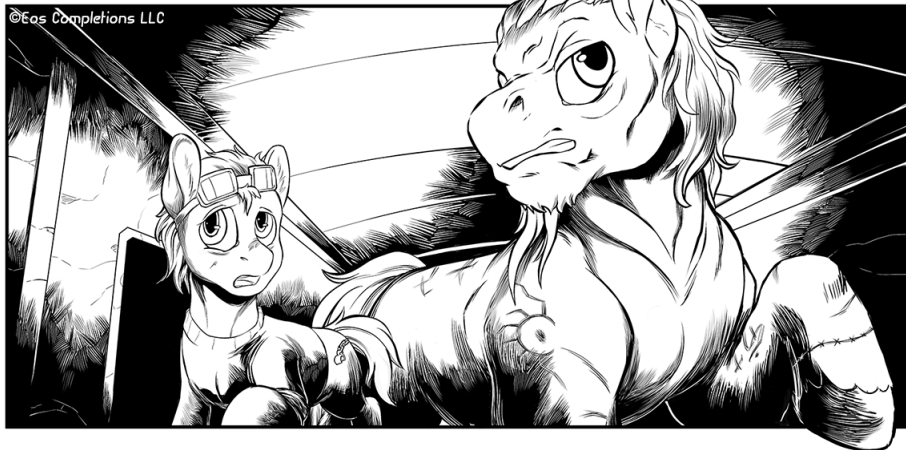
I'd failed, but I'd try again to reach the sky beyond.

I'll follow you out of here yet, Littlepip. Just you wait and see.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Luna's Moonlight – After some time to get used to the dark surrounding you, things have began to seem much clearer now. Your eyes now adapt well to low light conditions, who says the night need last forever?

Blessing of the Stripes



“Is it... zombies!?”

“What was it like to now have a goal in life?”

It’s all too easy to talk about having something to shoot for. Something to aim at and hope beyond all wishes to attain. But the more I thought about it, the more I began to realise just how long that path was going to have to be.

Did I want my freedom? Of course, but I wasn’t sure anymore on exactly how, not after speaking with Protégé about what I truly understood or not about the risks. That great outside world, if I went out into it with the same naivety I had shown, could have had a very short and brutal end for all I knew.

Did I just want to escape the pain? My mindset had led me to consider this route in the wrong way one too many times before, and the risk of falling into that again never really went away. When no exit was given, I found myself more and more beginning to turn to options that I would normally never consider. Some risky, some very final. I had come too close to that once already.

Was it to discover those who would care for me as much as I wanted to care in return? But then, who truly would? Pegasi were hated in Fillydelphia, and I certainly wasn’t the most charismatic and confident pony who ever lived. If asked my name by someone I didn’t know, chances are I’d just squeak and avoid eye contact.

I didn’t know what I really wanted, but the thought of going beyond the wall was the sole remaining thing that kept me from going mad with grief at the situation I had been dealt now.

But after meeting Brimstone, Glimmerlight, and Protégé, things had been changed.

Now, I had been given two paths to trot down. One a lifeline, tenuous and vague but a desperate hope all the same. To save Glimmerlight and pray that she agreed to help me in the escape. Her brief words gave me reason to believe that this was worth trying for at the

very least. It was a risky endeavor, but the chance to attain the aid of somepony else would go a long way towards a successful attempt.

On the other hoof, there was Protégé's offer. Two years service and danger in exchange for my eventual freedom. The callousness he showed to even smile as he signed me on to this "operation" spoke volumes of the reasons behind my shaky trust of that pony. Good intentions and a supposedly caring mindset mattered little when he was still the pony holding me against my will and forcing me into dangerous situations. All the same, somehow I couldn't shake the feeling that he understood me better than anypony else. If Brimstone and Glimmerlight cast me out, he would be my only vague ally left in the nightmare that was Fillydelphia.

The momentum from seeing the Stable Dweller's escape was beginning to falter over time. I desperately needed a figurehead, somepony to give me a reason. Perhaps that's why I was following a raider, who had once abused ponies like me for fun, in an effort to just be doing something, anything at all to chase *some* way to get my escape back on track. Was it because I craved to break the loneliness? Or was it just because he had the authority that I couldn't say no to? My duality of personality was still a tough obstacle in my head, dredged up all over again after The Master had set himself upon me.

I really wished I had something better to hang on to. I only had to take care of myself in the past. To survive. To get my journal back. To attempt escape. I'd gained a certain confidence that The Master had broken once more.

I needed it back, I needed something to prove to myself that I could still do this sort of thing and not go back to being the mindless slave I once was.

I needed to save Glimmerlight, not just for her life, not just for the vague wish that she would become an ally, but also to give me something to cling to; something that I could use to remind myself that I was not beaten yet.

It wasn't much of a goal...

But for now, as I set myself upon the longer road, it was enough to get started.

Hearts and Hooves Hospital had clearly seen better days.

The building was old, sandstone and brickwork mismatched from different generations of renovation, and surrounded by a ripped and wrecked barbed fence of the war era. On top of it all, wasteland-style scrap and rough repair jobs had further broken the balance of visual appeal. It offended every artistic sense I had to merely even look at the sprawling complex's low buildings that seemed to expand outward rather than upwards around the higher central wards. Old wagons lay on their side, their pink and yellow design marred and dust-covered. I could see at least a dozen of them, prompting me to wonder why they hadn't been renovated for use by Red Eye. A closer look explained why. They were sky wagons. Without pegasi, they were useless to him. But even they had been stripped of anything useful, owing to Red Eye's insistence to use anything and everything. I had occasionally seen griffons with similar carts, but these were much too small for those towering mercenaries.

That same ruthless mindset had created Fillydelphia and repaired much of what it could do. Before me sat another element of proof to that claim. The hospital was not exactly bustling, but I could see lights inside, slaves on watch duty outside (I presumed a medical area dedicated to more important slaves didn't warrant a full guard routine), and even I

could hear the hum of arcane science from healers doing their work within.

Brimstone and I had been holed up within a warehouse across from the hospital for an uncomfortably long time now already. I had taken to looking around with observation to try and stop my mind from wandering to the recent events with The Master.

For some time, I did take to trying to guess the ages of the houses around us. Some were similar to one another and made of what looked like modular components. They were almost bare, but for identical fences. Or at least where identical fences would have been. The wood had either rotted away, or been taken off by the industry.

Yet others, as I looked closer, broke the monotony. Broken timber and fine brickwork had become stained, but I saw brighter colours dashed away here and there. Porches hung over verandas, rather than the flat doors the newer buildings had. Carvings and elaborate shapes gave them life and personality.

They were all different. It occurred to me that I was seeing the divide between wartime and pre-war in the very houses that ponies lived in. As I looked closer, I could see the newer ones were often wedged between older ones, as though cramming more ponies into the same city space.

Unfortunately, as much as the history from observation occupied my mind, it didn't really hold my attention for long from the limited amount I could see from my hiding spot. Dropping from the ledge with a sigh, I found my companion not faring any better. The big stallion was pacing and tapping rocks incessantly. He had said patience wasn't his strong point and this was only proving it.

As such, I'd decided to try conversation and found myself met with a surprisingly amiable response on various topics. For example, now I knew the best way to break a pony's leg was to buck it just *above* the kneecap, and that apparently swearing was a subject that I was most uneducated in.

"So what you're telling me," rumbled Brimstone, "is that you've never said 'fuck' in your life? Never?"

He seemed almost shocked to meet somepony who just didn't swear. Brimstone scared the life out of me with almost every movement he made, and social interaction on a conversational level was clearly about as new to him as it was to me in many ways. Throughout speaking, I had always seen that glint in his eye whenever I'd began saying anything that offended his 'survival of the fittest' mindset.

"Well, I've *thought* it a few times..."

"But never just shouted it? What plane of innocence are you from that you've never given out a right good swear? Aye, we're going to change that. Go on."

I sat up. What was he asking me? I blurted out an answer without too much thought.

"Go on? I... what? I don't get you."

Brimstone sighed and shifted his weight to lie on the other side in our secluded little hiding spot I'd found. I'd felt so proud when he'd nodded in appreciation at it.

"Say it! Can't have a midget like you unable to swear properly when the world decides to fuck him up."

I rubbed my hooves against one another. "I'm not sure I really want to."

"Try."

"Please I..."

"Just give it a go. We're bored here anyway. Amuse me."

My jaw was hanging open. I'd always felt nervous when I'd even thought of the word! Or

any swear word for that matter! My mother had always taught me not to, that to swear or curse in the Goddesses' name was bad. Over time, I'd broken the second one a few times (sorry, sorry, please don't send me to the moon!), but always kept control of my voice. But then, perhaps I'd fit in better if I talked like them?

"Um, ok. I'll try."

"Aye."

"Alright. What about?"

Brimstone rolled his eyes, muttering something about 'bloody sunlickers' and shrugged.

"Anything, something you don't feel good about. Who do you really, really not feel safe around?"

My first thought was 'You!' but I doubted it would help my present situation of being on the better side of this massive and potentially dangerous pony. I still remembered him choking me against a wall for daring suggest the wrong thing about him.

But who did I hate? Wicked Slit was a particularly loathsome presence in Fillydelphia, as was Sooty Morass, and of course Noose. I hated Protégé for his insistence to not let me go. I hated Red Eye for buying me in the first place and putting me into this nightmare.

But really, there was always going to be one answer.

"I... really hate The Master."

"Shackles? Pisspot of nasty, that bastard is. See? Now you try. Say you fucking hate him or something."

I sat up and took a deep breath, closing my eyes. I was actually shivering. What if he heard me? What if word got back to him? What if Celestia and Luna heard me? What if Brimstone laughed at how bad I was at proper swearing?

Really, they paled in comparison to the real worry.

What if somepony told my mother?

"I..."

I could do this, I could rebel a little! Show The Master he couldn't take my freedom of voice!

"I really... really f—"

I felt my face screw up and the word fall flat suddenly. Brimstone just shook his head.

"What is wrong with you? It's just a wee word, nothing to get worried over. Try again."

"I... I really f—"

No! I wasn't gonna give up, I'm doing it now!

"I really *fudging* hate him!"

There was a dull 'thunk' as Brimstone facehoofed. Hard.

"This could take some time. Couldn't it?"

I just nodded meekly, muttering small apologies under my breath. However, my ears perked up as I heard a sound from outside. The sound we'd been waiting for. Noticing me perk up, Brimstone peered above the ruined windowsill.

"Looks like a bit of waiting paid off. Guard change. New ones won't be as keen to do the night shift, so getting past them shouldn't be too hard. You distract one and I'll take him out."

"Wait, you're going to kill a slave!?"

"Yes. And?"

His eyes glanced over at little me, the small pony so pathetic that he couldn't even swear, as though asking wordlessly whether I really was as useless to him as I was seeming. But it

slammed home again. He might act nicer sometimes, but when it came to saving the one he cared about, he would become the raider all over again to make it happen. Eventually, as I stared with a horrified look, he seemed to deflate slightly and shake his head.

"You look like her when you stare like that, y'know? Fine, I'll *try* not to do it."

As we climbed down, I heard him muttering to himself about going far too soft around mares and little bucks. I clambered down as best as I could on my injured shoulder before we began to creep toward the hospital itself.

I wanted to help save a life with this, not end others. The slaves hated me for my wings, but I would be damned if I was going to hate them back for the same stupid reason.

"Ergh. I hadn't counted on them nailing the guards to the wall."

Brimstone had spotted something I had overlooked. The slaves were chained to the wall beside the door. Any knocked-out or dead body would be out in the open and easily spotted, while they could never leave their posts no matter what happened. I wondered if The Master had come up with that one for Red Eye, it had his horrific practicality all over the concept. As such, the plan to use me to distract one before knocking them out had been thrown completely out the window now that the guards could not leave their highly visible locations where a body would be noticed within minutes. As we advanced and crouched behind the outer wall, we both looked around the corner (Brimstone normally, me crouched beneath him) and hunted for ways in. Brimstone Blitz nodded suddenly and lowered his voice.

"Got a way in."

"Where?"

"First floor. Pull across a wagon, I'll stand on it, then you stand on my back. You'll have to do it alone, now. But it's better than leaving an unconscious guard where they'll find it immediately. Just don't get stepped on."

My heart skipped a beat as the meaning of his words drove home. I'd have to sneak through a slave hospital run by... well, the slavers, and steal medicine with no back-up inside? Also, what was with all the shortness quips? I wasn't *that* small. Nopony messed with Littlepip. I had heard so on the radio and she was about the same height as me!

"I don't know if I can do this Brim. How will I even know the medicine?"

"It's called RadPurge. Some rare knockoff brand, but it's safe for Glimmer to use to avoid the ingredients in RadAway that she's allergic to. Just look for that."

"But I..."

I backed off, looking off to the side with a sigh. I really hated admitting this.

"...I can't read."

"Are you kidding me? Seriously, Murk, are you kidding me? You're *how* old?"

I didn't quite know actually, only a rough estimate. I didn't even know my birthday, not that anypony truly knew dates outside of fancier settlements. Even then they differed. I just hung my head in embarrassment as Brimstone groaned and shook his head.

"Damn it all. Look, it's like RadAway. You know what that looks like?"

I nodded.

"Right, good. It's like that but a much darker orange. Almost a brown. Alright?"

Okay, that I could do. I nodded before glancing back round again. The sky wagon he intended to push up was nicely out of sight, but my nerves were still shot. Alone in vents was one thing. Creeping past slavers? That hadn't ended well last time.

"Come along, Murk. Just get started and you'll figure it out."

"But I—"

"Wheesht."

"Huh? What does that—"

"It means 'shut up'! Now come on."

His voice held a tone of authority. I'd forgotten he had led others. I felt the slave in my mind bidden to obey the command as I trotted quietly after the big earth pony toward the wagon, wondering if I really was making this choice on my own or if it was only because he was telling me to help him.

Some days, I wished I could tell the difference of choice from obedience.

Inside I didn't find much I hadn't expected. There were wards with little cleanliness and rather disturbing traces of red stained into the floor. Slaves groaned from open wounds while anypony with a degree of medical ability was moving around, checking the patients. Too many times I saw them sigh dejectedly and move on.

Thankfully, nopony seemed to mind me being there amidst the strangely slow-paced yet chaotic scene of pain and half-hearted healing that took place around me. Even so, I quickly snatched some bandages from an empty bedside and used them to cover my PipBuck. It mostly looked like scrap, but there was no sense in taking the chance. Perhaps they might think I was injured and had a right to be here.

The thought quickly occurred that I *was* injured. Just I wasn't considered valuable enough to send to this place for treatment. I guess Protégé's admittedly appreciated efforts to protect me didn't extend to getting me on to the list of "valued" slaves. Perhaps they just didn't like pegasi.

The corridors were of an old wooden construction, clearly very old. I could feel them creaking under my hooves. Indeed, some areas looked about ready to give way and fall. Whatever renovation efforts Red Eye had made were clearly minimal in priority. How could slave marketeers like Sooty and Artery get away with having so much stock and yet there was never enough for those here? It just wasn't fair.

I passed a young earth pony buck about my age. Teal and white, he whimpered on an old mouldy mattress in the nearest ward. His two front legs were just gone. Had he stepped on a mine? I found myself standing and watching him for a second, just lying there crying into the mattress and trying to move limbs that weren't there. Now he'd never walk again.

The fate of the one poor slave that lost a leg to the thresher came back to my mind.

Shuddering, I found myself forced to move on. There had to be a medicine cupboard somewhere.

A sudden door banging and agonised screaming dragged me from my thoughts as I saw a stretcher magically pulled before me. Ducking into the ward to let them by, I squeaked and hid as I saw Whiplash following it at top speed.

"Don't you dare let her die! She's one of my best workers! Slit will have my ear if I can't get her on shifts in future!"

"Yes, master! Bloodbank, get to the stash and bring a brace with a syringe of Med-X!"

"Yes, doctor!"

Peeking out from the ward, I saw a light pink mare thrashing in pain on the stretcher as two unicorns desperately tried to hold her down. I saw a red pony in a bloodstained overall

gallop off down the hall even as the stretcher and Whiplash disappeared around the corner. After all I'd been through, he really didn't seem too much of a threat these days.

At a canter, I followed Bloodbank as the procession disappeared through another set of doors. Even further away, I could still pick up her squealing in the distance. The sound made my stomach churn as it heightened when they undoubtedly began work to fix whatever had happened to her.

Bloodbank moved fast, charging around to a doorway. The fact he stopped to get a key was the only real reason I even caught up without moving too fast to seem overly suspicious. Even so, I nearly ran into a couple of orderlies magically carrying trays of implements, prompting some shouting to watch where the hell I was going even as I hopped and wobbled out of their way. By the time I found him, he was coming out of the room again and locking it once more. I felt the urge to say the word Brimstone had wanted, but at least I now knew where the medicine was kept.

Waiting for Bloodbank to leave, I crept up the door, watching left and right for anypony coming. This was a more deserted area of the hospital, clearly to keep the chems away from those who might seek to acquire them from their beds. To an extent, I had to marvel at the organisation for how little they had. These ponies were trying to help those brought to them. Bloodbank *had* looked concerned. Not for the first time, I wondered if casting Red Eye and his forces as absolute monsters was a truly accurate conclusion. Perhaps The Master was just the exception? The others were harsh, yes, but...

Shaking my head, I pushed on. This was no place to get involved with inner thoughts. I tried adjoining rooms, finding only some old bathrooms (why I still felt guilty for glancing into the mare's room by accident I had no idea) and eventually, a less vital storage cupboard. With any luck, this might have what I needed.

Stepping fully inside it and pulling the closed behind me, I began to hunt around its contents from within. Metal boxes of the ever-rich designer were mixed with piles of old medical robes. Judging by the dust on it all, this hadn't been touched in quite a while. In fact, if I had been in this place more permanently, I may have made a hidey hole in here. The last item was a small toolbox. Out of curiosity, I opened it. Perhaps it'd have something to get that lock open?

A hammer, small saw, nuts, bolts, metal ruler (truly a lethal weapon), wonderglue, a screwdriver, and some bobby pins.

Nothing that could be used to pick a lock. I stifled a curse, or what amounted to a curse by my standards, and took just the ruler. It'd help me make straight lines on my drawings at least. I stuffed it into the pouch I'd sewn on the bottom of my fleece and sat back against the wall to think.

This just wasn't my area. Sure I was a little thief, that I'd come to accept, but getting through obstacles was just beyond me. The mare would probably have known how, she seemed intelligent. Brimstone would probably just knock and the door would open from sheer terror of the alternative. Protégé... well, he would just use the key.

But for a little thief like Murky Number Seven, like me, what could I do?

Tossing ideas around, I gave up somewhere around hoping I had an undiscovered talent for making explosives out of wonderglue and lint before realising the obvious.

I was a thief. There was a key.

Well, duh.

It took a few minutes to relocate Bloodbank as I followed the same wailing that still sounded through the hospital. I trotted through a cloth hung above the corridor and stopped. All this walking and running was not doing my shoulder any good at all. I wondered if they had anymore Med-X in that cupboard, that had worked last time pretty nicely.

Bloodbank was standing outside a room separated by a clear perspex viewing window. Behind it, I could see the mare thrashing as a unicorn tried to get the syringe of Med-X into her. I dared not look too closely, I didn't particularly want to see some gruesome injury to keep me up at night. Bloodbank's key was rather convenient, hanging from his side lapel for easy access with magic. However, even as I began to slowly approach, I could see how reflective the perspex was. Any attempt to sneak up and lift it would be spotted instantly.

I tapped the goggles on my head while thinking. Bloodbank had acknowledged my presence with a brief glance, but seeing the bandage just grunted and looked back into what I guessed was the operating theatre.

"If you're a visitor for Pettle Leaf here, you'll have to wait."

I spotted a quick chance and an idea. I couldn't sneak up to him, so I'd do the next best thing.

"Pettle Leaf!? Sweet Celestia, is she alright? Please! I have to see her!"

I threw on my most dramatic and pained voice, letting my pitch go almost to breaking point as I galloped forward toward the window. Bloodbank sighed, turning to block my way.

"I said I am sorry but you cannot—"

I 'tripped.' Slamming into Bloodbank, the pair of us tumbled to the floor. I was given an unexpected lesson in swearing as he rose to his hooves and battered me around the head once or twice for acting so clumsy in a hospital. Shooing me out, I pretended to struggle and whine as I was almost thrown through the curtain again. With a final scream to never get in the way again, I was painfully half-bucked across the floor. Groaning, clutching my side, I cowered into the corner of the reception as everypony else stared.

But at least I had the key, hidden in my mouth from one pickpocketing little swipe.

I was feeling at least moderately proud. I'd gotten in without harming anypony, and I could just leave the key behind the unlocked door when I left so the doctor's would still be able to access it and treat others. We'd save a life without hurting anypony!

Well, almost. Flippy Bit's hatred still resounded in my mind. But that had been an accident, right? Brimstone would have let him go if he hadn't died on the doorway, right? Right?

I knew I was wrong, but right now I needed to stay as optimistic as I could. I was trying to build confidence to pursue something bigger again. I couldn't afford to always second guess myself.

I was moving back toward the medicine cupboard again when I spotted another doctor leaving the room once more. I had to fight to not gasp as I galloped back to the last corner and hid behind it while he passed by. He was carrying just what I needed! Elation filled me

as he left and I galloped back to the door, unlocked it and triumphantly ran in. This place definitely had the right stuff!

It didn't.

The shelves were stocked with pretty basic medicine in small doses. I guessed it was for quickly grabbing the amount they needed, separated into the smaller amounts. I saw watered down healing potions glittering with varied colours in the dark, and packs of tablets piled haphazardly together. An unusually large quantity of what looked like mouthwash was piled in a box on the floor, letting my stand on them to reach the higher shelves. The my disappointment, there was only a smattering of higher end chems and medical supplies. Med-X was stored in yellow locked boxes with clear plastic covers, while scant few packs of blood were held in a freezer unit running off a wire through the wall.

Unfortunately, there was a clear gap beside the RadAway shelf where only one of the orange packets remained. Truth be told, I'd been planning to steal some more. They'd get restocked right? But seeing the pitiful amounts, and remembering the suffering of slaves all around me, I couldn't. It would be as bad as becoming a slaver myself.

The words of the first Doctor came back to me. '*The*' medicine cupboard. Singular. This was the only one.

There was no RadPurge left.

I'd failed Glimmerlight.

I collapsed onto my knees in the middle of the cupboard, remembering her wonderfully peaceful and energetic look even through her sickness. I realised just how much I'd wanted to meet this wonderful mare who Brim had claimed didn't care what type of pony I was. But now she wasn't going to survive because I couldn't figure out a damned lock fast enough to beat the last of the stock being taken.

Unless...

I turned back to the entranceway and hobbled out as fast as I could. There was one more of them in the building, and I was going to get it no matter what! She deserved life! She didn't hate me! That Rad-whatever belonged to her!

It had taken some searching, but eventually, I located it. This run around the hospital had been beginning to annoy me, and a few orderlies were starting to get suspicious as well. I had tried the 'messenger' trick again, but even then most of them kept glancing as I moved past. I avoided whoever I could, but nopony could truly hide in those well lit corridors.

It didn't matter. I had found the patient the medicine had been taken to. A nurse had been about to connect it, but one quick crazed shouting from me later, they had galloped off thinking they were urgently needed for an emergency.

Now there was just me and the RadPurge. That sickly brownish stuff lay on the side table, unconnected and fresh. All it would take is for one quick snatch, shove it in my pouch, and then make my way to the entrance and trot out. Nopony would question somepony *leaving*! I felt my heart lift, I had done it! Reaching forward, I bit down on the RadPurge.

"Mm? Who... who's there?"

I yelped and hopped back, holding the RadPurge in my mouth as I stared at the source of the noise. On the bed lay a mare covered by a thin blanket. She turned to me, eyes still closed from weakness.

A sense of déjà vu flowed over me. The symptoms were precisely the same. The illness the same.

This mare was suffering the exact same problem. She lay there, pale grey with a wondrously coloured blue, black, and white long mane tied into a ponytail, with two braided strands across her face. True to form, she was also a unicorn who looked a good bit older than me, like she could have been my mother.

She was also very, very sick.

“Did... did you find some?”

I glanced at the mare, then down my own muzzle at the RadPurge. They would get more, right? They would restock! I could just turn and walk away, be a good little thief...

Glimmerlight deserved it more than...

...anypony?

She looked so weak. My head lowered, feeling a shuddering start throughout my body already. Too late, I noticed my ears warning my off somepony approaching.

“What are you doing!?”

Shocked, I squealed out loud and dropped the sachet before stumbling back and falling against the side of the bed, startling the mare. The nurse had returned and stood directly in the doorway, quite out of breath. Her coat and mane were blazing yellow and red, and her eyes wide with surprise.

“Were... were you?”

Her eyes fell to the RadPurge before falling back to me. Having it all laid before me, I realised what I had truly been reduced to. To stealing from a critically injured pony with no proof of them being good or bad to help somepony else. To simply take the easy way out, and lose all morals and ethics in the process. Not once had I even stopped to *think* and realise the path I had been walking down. Who was I to judge life against life?

It quickly overcame me, as I imagined my mother, the DJ, the mare, and even Littlepip looking down upon me disapprovingly. I collapsed to the floor in tears.

“I’m sorry! I... I didn’t... I needed—I...”

Words came with great difficulty as I cried my heart out. Partially because the overwhelming guilt, and partially from the terrifying thought that Fillydelphia was slowly but surely beginning to push me to do this sort of thing.

Yet no matter how hard the world said I had to push to make it out of here, no matter how Protégé’s told that I had to be willing to do anything to get out of here, no matter how much this city spoke of sacrifice for freedom, I knew something else. That even if it made it harder, I still had my own way, my way, that mattered to me.

And this was not it.

The nurse picked the sachet from the floor with her telekinesis, placing it beside the bed of the frankly stunned mare. The sick patient wasn’t sitting up to look down at me, being too weak. But the nurse advanced across to me. Her expression seemed to have softened.

“You were going to take it, but this patient will die by tomorrow without this last sachet. She has an—”

“An-an allergy! I know,” I sniffed, “but somepony else does too, but I—hnk—I don’t think she’s able to come here. I just wanted to help her...”

Her face dropped any remaining sternness it had possessed as she drew breath lightly. Her horn flickered over me.

“I can see you have an irradiated lung infection, a serious one. This isn’t for that? Look

me in the eyes and tell me.”

Opening my soaking wet eyes fully, I quivered as I looked up at her.

“I would never have! It’s for someone else who—who means a lot to... a friend. She is in the exact same position as...”

I raised my hoof to point at the patient. The nurse was quiet, before dropping a small cloth for me and kneeling down. Her voice remained stern, but I could sense a gentle nature behind it.

“Dry your tears. I can see you’re honest. This was wrong, but your heart was in the right place at least. Enough that you say what you were doing. I wouldn’t be a nurse if I couldn’t respect that to some degree. Even if I work for Red Eye, that doesn’t mean I don’t follow the same code that Doctor Weathervane taught us, he’s pretty intense about that stuff. Look, I’d give you some, but we have none spare. Well...”

Well? Well what? As I got up slowly, I could see the mare had seemingly fallen into a restless sleep even with us two talking. She really was in a bad way. Why hadn’t I seen that?

“There might be some in the basement. But that’s dangerous, you see. When the megaspells hit, it was flooded from a waterline that came from the impact site. The water is long gone, but the radiation is intense down there. It would badly affect your lung if you were to try, but there is an old supply room that we’ve been unable to reach. Usually Doctor Weathervane brings enough that we don’t need to bother even considering going down, but if you really are willing to go to these lengths...”

I didn’t even need to think. If anything, I now realised more what drove Brimstone Blitz. I had damaged my own innocent nature here. If I had to risk life and limb to get that medicine to make up for almost doing the wrong thing to attain my own goals, so be it.

That is, what life and limb I had left.

The nurse had taken me to a back door, letting me out. As I wandered around the hospital grounds to try and find this basement entrance, I began to feel the poisoned air doing its work again the moment the cleaner hospital environment ended. My throat was dry from the air around the crimson hell of Fillydelphia the moment I stepped outside. Very hastily, I regretted not stashing away one of my RadAways that Protégé had given to help me stay healthy.

At least my shoulder, while aching terribly, still was mostly functional. My stomach, however, was tightening itself and growling. Shivers crawled up through my body from lack of sustenance or any form of proper nutrition. The last thing I had eaten was the apple stew given to me by Protégé. In my still recovering state, it just wasn’t enough.

If only I found fresh food and RadAway as much as I found ponies I left without knowing the names of.

Very quickly, I wondered why my cutie mark talent was to be a good little slave and not one of finding mysteriously strange unicorn mares. Furthermore, while I was hardly ‘looking’ given my present situation, why was my luck in meeting mares who actually talked to me only finding those too old for me, already taken, or sick? Well, there was one, but she was a wasteland legend whom I’d never have a chance with in my entire life, no matter how simply awesome she was.

I stopped briefly. I’d shoved those thoughts aside before, but they did keep coming back. I

remembered Sundial's words about the mare he liked, Skydancer. Sure, I appreciated the look of a mare as much as the next buck, (especially if they were actually the same size as me) but did I really think of Littlepip like that? Was it just misplaced pining for the dream of being alongside a hero? I'd only seen her briefly and never even talked to her.

No. No, not the time for those thoughts, I warned myself. 'Dangerous irradiated area ahead, Murky. Concentrate!'

All the same, they might have been confusing, but I could admit to somewhat enjoying the feeling of perhaps a little crush.

Maybe it was just silly fantasy, but one way or the other, it gave me something nice to dream of to help keep my mind from feeling too guilty from my nearly horribly wrong thievery earlier.

It was the small things that kept you going in this city.

Brimstone found me spluttering and coughing through a bank of contaminated dust blown in from the nearby crater. Dropping on my side near him for a breather, I reflected that I should probably have asked for something to fight the radiation while inside, especially given where I was about to go. Unfortunately, I presumed they likely had strict orders.

I looked up at the muscular form of Brimstone peering down at me.

"You don't have it."

The words held a lot of potential for violent anger at my coming out empty-hoofed. Perhaps it would be best he didn't know that I had turned down some.

"No, but I know where now."

I pointed a hoof toward a swing door that led to the basement. It was locked as well, but that wouldn't prove any real obstacle to Brim. I explained about the radiation, but as I had guessed, he didn't care in the slightest. One slap with those 'Murky Number Seven's-head-sized hooves', and the basement lay open before us. A darkened and dusty hole in the ground, probably untouched since the war.

Pre-war. Irradiated. With a raider.

Why didn't I ever get to go someplace nice?

Not for the first time since we had descended was I beginning to realise how out of my depth I was. I was just a little slave who tried to run away, not some die-hard adventurer like Brimstone or Littlepip. Every ounce of me was fighting to keep my resolve strong, to stop me wanting to just turn and run. Protégé would understand, surely, if I turned up and just explained. Maybe he'd help out and get some for Glimmerlight somehow?

I hated the fact that I was caught myself wishing I could just go back to one of my old masters outside Fillydelphia, with a lot less scary things and pain all the time.

I could just barely see down here. Already the radiation was noticeable as I felt my chest begin to burn. Each breath was laboured and I had to stop and cough every so often, much to Brimstone's annoyance. I'd enjoyed a brief period of relief thanks to what I stole from Artery and then the healing I'd received from Protégé, but this place was bringing it all back. The sick little slave buck dragging his hooves and coughing up blood had returned.

Around us was little of note. Almost pitch dark janitorial rooms littered each corridor. Supply cupboards proved to be filled with racks of musty books or boxes of washers. Large pipes creaked and groaned as we disturbed the environment around them. Or rather, as *Brimstone* disturbed the area. If I ever needed to feel like I was better at something than someone else, I simply had to think of his complete lack of consideration for the term 'stealth.'

"Hey, Murk?"

"Y-yes?" My voice trembled as my rough throat caught the words, leading me to splutter and grab a pipe to keep myself on my feet. *Brimstone* seemed unaffected thus far. Perhaps he just didn't show it.

"Had a thought. If we need to gallop back and split up. We need a better password for the cell door so I know it's you."

I was about to comment that a number of knocks had seemed to work. But then, I was the moron who had got it wrong.

"So, what do you suggest?"

"Easy. The password is 'fuck.'"

Oh, not fair.

Brim turned back to me, I could see him grinning in the darkness. I guessed he liked to use a bit of banter to help relieve times when you could cut the tension with an auto axe.

"Aye, that'll do. Now, you should go up front. You seem to be able to see better than I in the dark. These eyes don't work as well as they used to before that little scunner with the flamethrower a few years back."

"A little what? I mean, you sure?"

"Aye."

Was he grinning? What was the joke with simply saying ay—

Oh. Wow. I was slow today. Sighing, I staggered up front, glad that at least *Brimstone* would be able to see if I were to be about to collapse. Perhaps he'd carry me back out again. Perhaps he'd just leave me here? The worry shaking me led to another foul cough. At least I wasn't vomiting blood yet.

Each step I made was hardly without worry. My eyes adjusted well to see a vague outline of thin corridors and irregular doorways that hardly seemed shaped for ponies at all. I began to wonder if the designer had even thought of those who might have to access it during operation. Thick layers of dust were not helping my breathing one bit as I carefully edged around old tools and rusted objects that I couldn't even discern the original use of.

My ears worked just fine though, and I didn't like what they were hearing. Light shuffling and trotting. I froze on the spot, leaning down and hoping *Brimstone* would get the message as I closed my eyes and just listened.

The sounds of something soft. Something irregular and organic. Every so often I heard metallic noises, similar to what we were making by trotting around all this plumbing and boiler kit.

The thick concrete ceiling kept all sound from above out. Whatever was moving was down here.

My quivering became a fearful shake as I remembered the hellish zombie janitor thing in the dark. That howling mutilated and rotten face inches from my own haunted my every thought. What I could hear was moving idly, dragging its hooves behind it and moving aimlessly.

Just like that monster before. I whined, fighting the urge to flee.

"Brim," I whispered, "I think there's a zombie."

"Not surprising, it's contaminated down here. They live off that stuff. Just find a room, we're under the main building, so it should be nearby."

I really wished I could detect where that sound was from, but the ambience and thick walls were giving me no clues. Dust hung in the still air, while repaired plumbing squirted the occasional mist of steam into the corridors that blocked my vision.

Of course, it also make everything look like it was some other shape.

Now if I could just stay quiet, we might find the medicine and get out before whatever it was wandering these thin tunnels found us. A nice doorway just close to me, that'd do to begin the search.

Placing my front hooves on the door, I pushed. In my weakened state, the door felt heavier than I could even attempt with a slow push. Slamming forward, I shoved it open roughly, before a wall of dust exploded in my face out of the undisturbed space. It went in my mouth, in my eyes, and shocked me to yelp and fall back.

My throat began to tingle.

The tickling rose, a painful building of pressure as I fought to keep the cough in. Unfortunately, the dust had done its damage. My throat was like sandpaper. I felt both lungs searing with the effort to breathe and making spasms as I tried to just inhale normally. I couldn't hold it in. Even with my hooves covering my mouth, the coughing went on for too long. I fell, crying out between them as I felt my entire mid-torso light up with the pain I'd began to forget from my illness. It wouldn't stop. Hacking and spluttering, I cried on the cold, dusty concrete floor as it felt like my lungs were about to erupt from my mouth.

It took a good ten seconds to die down, leaving me lying frail and weakened on the floor, scarcely able to breathe.

Whatever *it* was. It heard me.

A sickly howl of hunger and rage echoed through the basement as I heard rapidly moving hooves galloping. Brimstone leapt between me and the rough direction, a metal shard in his mouth ready. A ferocious crash boomed through the area as I saw the far oaken door shudder from a colossal impact. Even Brimstone seemed to be taken aback by whatever force was slamming on the door.

I got to my hooves, leaning my hoof on a pipe, wincing in pain as my shoulder reminded me why I shouldn't put weight on it.

The door was holding, but I could feel the impacts through it. It made a high-pitched shriek, and I saw a glowing haze emerge and fade from below the doorway.

"For the glorious love of great fuck, will you *shut the hell up in there and stop that endless fucking bullshittery!*?"

The sounds ceased. Everything became deathly quiet as Brimstone and myself stared sideways at the second pony who had approached us under the noise of the zombie ghoul pony... thing attacking the door. My mouth dropped, and not just at the rather imaginative cursing.

Another ghoul. If I could have screamed, I would have.

A unicorn stallion, dressed in a torn and faded doctor's outfit. Underneath it was nothing but rot and sinew, with visibly moving muscles and surrounded by a sickening smell. From the looks of things, he was trying to keep his body covered by as much of his uniform as possible. He glanced to the door and slammed a hoof against it. A face bearing the straggled

remnants of what could have once been an impressive beard scowled with enough disgruntled fury to make me wince.

"It's just me, you old cranky bastard! Now calm the fuck down and let me get back to sleep!"

His voice put even my sickened one to shame in terms of roughness and rasping quality, but it held authority and poise beyond any I had met, even Protégé. As soon as he had heard the monster back off, he turned to us, looking furious.

"Follow me! If you want to live more than one more fuckin' day, you'll come right the fuck in here this fucking minute! Fuck sake!"

I had expected some squalor filled with radiation enough to outright kill me. I had expected darkness, damp mould, and rotten smells.

I had not expected to find a surprisingly well-functioning medical laboratory.

Shelves of old liquids and materials lined the walls around workbenches, chemistry sets, and sinks. I saw a small flame lit beneath a beaker that was bubbling a nasty purple substance. Curtains at the back concealed patient areas that between the gaps looked long unused. In one corner, I could see a few blankets to make a rough sleeping area. The *entire* place was filled to the brim with chems, medical potions, and anti-radiation kits.

"Now, would either of you two moronic dipshits care to tell me why you came down here into an irradiated basement when neither have you have taken any Rad-X, neither of you have any RadAway on you, and the pegasus there has a severe infection susceptible to balefire corruption?"

I had been about to compare the volume of his swearing to the amount of chems in the lab, (I now knew where my share of swearing talent had gone) but it only took me a few seconds to register what had been said immediately. I stumbled into the lab, almost falling against a bed before holding myself up on it. Brimstone marched in impassively without a word as he looked around. I imagined he didn't care for the ghoul, only caring for the RadPurge.

But I had much bigger problems.

"P-Pegasus? I'm not a pegasus."

"You fuckin' are, little one," he responded sharply, before sweeping the blanket from the bed and tapping it with a hoof, "I don't need to see your wings to know. Get on this, right away!"

His voice held an authority to it. Without really knowing what I was doing, I climbed up as the ghoul magically threw a couple of RadAways to Brimstone.

"Knock yourself out looking for what you need while I tend to the stupid bugger here who didn't stay away from areas that'll fuckin' kill him! There's no rads in here, but Luna fucking damn it, you two. Just don't take anything without asking first."

"Fine."

Clearly, Brimstone was content just to search and let me deal with this strange undead stallion.

"Get that fleece off! Come on, I'm not going to laugh, not often I get to actually work my expertise on pegasi here, so hurry it up!"

It was like he was late for an appointment. What was going on? Who was this ghoul?

Why was he being a fast and to the point? How did he know I was a pegasus? Why was he helping without even hearing a word from us about what we wanted?

“Wait a minute! I... I don't understand, who are you? What are you do— YARGH!”

I felt myself lifted off the bed entirely as the ghoul doctor muttered a colourful term (What was a ‘douchenozzle’ anyway?) to himself and just used his magic to systematically draw my goggles, fleece, and PipBuck off me.

“Always with the fucking questions. Fine, listen while I work.”

He moved forward, dumping me back on the bed before walking around me with his horn angled toward me. I felt exposed, not for any sense of being embarrassed, but simply for my wings being on show.

“I'm Doctor Weathervane, trauma surgeon from Canterlot Royal University, and don't you fucking smirk because I am no hoity toity prick like some *others* I could mention. Pegasi specialist, lead surgeon general to the Shadowbolts under Ministry Mare Rainbow Dash, and previously the personal physician to the Wonderbolts. That's why I recognised you the moment you walked in. I don't need to see wings to see a pegasus. The way you trot. The way your head bobs. Fuck, even the average size of your hooves for your... scale.”

Alright, *enough* with the shortness already! But immediately, I remembered Brimstone's words about wings not being the only thing that made you a pegasus. I quickly had a sense of just how right he had been. I had been born to be what I was and I shouldn't be trying to change that.

“Could say I'm one of the most experienced surgeons in Equestria more than likely, if I do say so myself. And I do. I certainly haven't met any others with two hundred and seventy shit-filled years of experience. So consider yourself lucky you found me. Stupid bastard, wandering into an irradiated area with... hmm. So that's what it is. Interesting.”

I didn't even know where to start. Every ounce of social capability I had was simply being run over by this ghoul surgeon. Best to start basic, on the present.

“W-what was that thing outside?”

“Oh? Flowerpot? Don't mind that cantankerous old ass. Used to be one of my colleagues until the balefire gave us both a suntan till the end of fucking time. I locked him in that quarantine cupboard. Don't worry, that door's reinforced metal behind the oak finish. He can't get out. Good thing too. Big radiation leak in there, he's probably strong enough to knock your head clean off by now. Now hold still and raise your wing.”

Oh, here we go.

“I... I can't... sorry.”

I buried my face in my hooves, blushing red. This unicorn had seen pegasi in their glory days. How pathetic would I be in res-

My right wing screamed in pain as it was magically pulled out. I screamed in a more literal sense.

“Oh, stop whining. I tell ya, back during my time with the Wonderbolts? Mare called Spitfire had her wing snapped in three places from a crash landing. I reset all of them in the dressing room and did she give so much as a squeak? Hell no, she didn't. Not like Soarin'. Always whined on his check-ups that big foal did. Now come on, worst part is over. Hold still and it won't hurt a bit.”

“Why are you doing this?” My voice was gasping under the rough treatment, coughing every time I took a breath too quickly.

“Are you a bloody simpleton? I'm a fucking doctor! What do you *think* I'm meant to do

when I see a pony dying and injured in front of me?”

Silence reigned for just a second. Hesitantly, I cast a glance up to see for once he had stopped moving to match me. Only then did I finally catch the look in his eyes as I shifted uncomfortably. That look of pain, because he was seeing another pony genuinely suffering before him. How many times had he seen that same look over the long years in the wasteland? Those centuries of dedication to a craft did not allow him to ignore me. I quickly began to gain a respect, even through the rudeness. He had taken the wasteland’s horrors for longer than... well, possibly any pony ever. Yet he still helped.

Pain scared me, but for once, I nodded. Even if he didn’t truly show it, he was a true doctor.

I finally saw exactly what the DJ had meant. Ghouls truly were ponies too. In many ways, they were better than any of us, for they knew where this world had come from and what values had to be held on to.

“Now hold still while I get the other wing. Celestia’s fantastic arse, kid, how long has it been since you got these checked?”

After much wailing and cursed comments of how much of a foal I was, I eventually learned more as he went about his business. Weathervane, despite his somewhat abrasive manner, had taken to clinging on to his principles to help him stay sane across the centuries. The result seemed to be somepony who was more determined to heal others than was generally socially accepted. An odd combination, to say the least.

It was also why he had started working for Red Eye. Weathervane had lived in Fillydelphia, or at least had originated here, before the war. This basement was his personal research and chem lab for the hospital he had actually founded and run above. Very quickly, the haphazard artistic design made sense as I learned more about Weathervane’s insistence of efficient quality over aesthetic requirement. Even now, two hundred years after the apocalypse, he had remained at his post. No matter who now ran the city, he still ran the hospital he had built, teaching new generations to staff it himself.

I simply could not put properly in words how in awe I was of that sort of determination. Part of me was tempted to ask him about before, but I sensed it might be a sore spot and I knew how badly I reacted to stories of the past anyway. Perhaps it would be best just to stay quiet on this one and treat him as an individual of the present rather than a relic of the past.

While checking me over, his horn had flared as he spoke. My shoulder’s pain had numbed and eventually faded before he strapped a tight wrap around it. Bruises and cuts I didn’t even know I had disappeared as I was fed a stale-tasting healing potion. He seemed greatly interested in my wings, however, tutting and shaking his head.

“Somepony really did a bloody number on you, kid. Would I be right in guessing blunt trauma?”

I think I must have twitched as the unpleasant memory of being dragged into an old barn by fellow slaves resurfaced. Eyes clenched closed and fighting not to have a minor breakdown, I nodded. Doctor Weathervane’s tone had softened after his scathing anger. Indeed, he only *frequently* cursed now. For him, that was a step down.

“Old injury too, but that will have to wait. I’ll perhaps be able to give you some more

information or treatment or some shit or get rid of the pain at least later on, need to dig out my old books. But for now, we have something a bit more important to discuss.”

Setting some RadAway beside me, he motioned to drink up whilst he moved backward and settled against the counter. I could hear Brimstone still stomping around, becoming aggravated as he hunted for RadPurge in the back of the room.

“Well, Murky Number Seven...”

Weathervane’s voice rasped and echoed from the walls to give it a somewhat fading slimy quality. He brought a pair of reading glasses to his face as he gave me the look that told me I should be sitting down.

“...I’m afraid I do not have very good news for you.”

I’d known I was screwed long ago. But something about hearing it from a qualified medical professional really rammed it home.

“What you have isn’t a simple infected lung that got a little radded up. What you have is something we call a pulmonary embolism. A clinically severe affliction that provides the symptoms you have demonstrated. Basically, the arteries... you know what they are?”

I shook my head. To tell the truth, he had lost me at ‘pulmonary.’ Weathervane shook his head, tapping it and cursing lowly before continuing.

“This isn’t technically right, but something in your lungs is clogged up by an unspecified substance. In this case, it’s your birth defect. Your ears show signs of taint mutation. Were you ever exposed?”

“My mother was exposed while still pregnant.”

“Makes sense. You were exposed to taint as a foetus and thus were born with minor abnormalities. At first I thought it was the chemicals in the air that might have started it, but on closer magical observation, it seems your ears are not the extent of your tainted afflictions from the womb. Your lungs have mostly harmless but noticeable warped sections. Now this was never enough to really cause you trouble, until you came to Fillydelphia. The ambient radiation probably aggravated it, causing the tainted inner flesh to react, inflame, and begin to cause much more problems around your respiratory system. The more radiation you took in, the worse it got. Right now, it’s just a big angry fucking blob of irradiated flesh mutated out of your primary lung systems. Symptoms are just as you say you experienced. Shortness of breath, burning lungs, nausea, retching up blood, and immobilising periods of coughing. Untreated, this will likely kill you within days. You already know that RadAway can stall or slow the process, but...”

Even Brimstone had stopped to stand, almost respectfully nearby. He looked at me with impassive eyes as I lay on my front on the bed, slowly sniffing. I couldn’t even work up the energy to properly cry as I heard it all laid out bare.

Then he dropped the bombshell.

“I’m sorry, Murk. The taint is not curable.”

That did it. I felt my breathing heighten as my chest rapidly moved from hyperventilation, before I finally felt my tear ducts let it all out. Curled up on the bed, holding my head in my hooves, I just shook and cried... and cried...

This disease, it wasn’t curable at all. Artery had lied or had never really known. I heard Weathervane explaining it all, how taint that had been with me for so long could not be purged. About how even Tenpony Tower’s prodigious medical facilities would not be enough now. Taint just wasn’t something the wasteland was equipped to cure. If the taint were gone, he could have operated and fixed it, but with it?

"The most I can offer you is that regular use of RadAway will keep it benign. However, I know how hard this might be in Fillydelphia. I can give you a good amount to get you started but I must consider my long term patients. Murk, I must stress this. You *have* to avoid radiation as best you can from now on. Even with RadAway, an intense burst like the one you mentioned from the phoenix could, and probably will, kill you without immediate action and lots of anti-radiation medication. Its this city. If you weren't here, you'd likely be able to live normally with a little care, but in this damned place..."

I didn't reply. I couldn't. My forelegs were soaking damp with the overflow from my eyes as I just buried my face into them, wishing it would all just stop. But he continued, to get it all over and said rather than leave more harsh words for later.

Weathervane explained what to watch out for. I would become dizzy, tired, and very short of breath like I had while around Sooty if it was reaching critical stages. Further than that I would go into convulsions, bring up blood, and likely fall unconscious within the hour. I'd need somepony else to save me if that happened.

If not I'd...

...if nopony did, I would quite literally choke to death on my own blood.

The limit for ambient radiation was a few days. To avoid serious symptoms, I would have to ingest at least one RadAway every day or so to keep it at bay. He had given me five in the bag. In combination with Protégé's gift, I had eight.

Eight days. Perhaps a couple at most if I rationed. Less than two weeks, but I needed to survive two years if I couldn't get out!

It all felt so impossible. So unfairly stacked against me.

Why me?

Why *always* me?

I ignored Brimstone and Weathervane as they talked. Instead, I simply lay down quietly and found myself staring blankly at the wall in Weathervane's lab. In a fit of need, I had switched on my PipBuck's radio to listen to. I needed something, anything, to help give me hope now.

"Now I've been getting an interesting little question lately, or at least I've heard it's been asked in all those little towns around the big ol' Equestria wasteland these days. DJ, they ask! At what point have we won the good fight you always want us to follow?"

Well, children. That is a very good one. You know that I am known for the truth, fellow ponies, so I will not lie. I really had to think on this one! At least, all the thinking I could manage while I could find silence, what with my number one assistant and her new found friend both together in the area. Now I'm sure they were just moving some furniture around and were agreeing a lot over where it had gone, but what a—

Oh, sorry, off topic. Ol'DJ here just doesn't know when to shut his mouth these days, does he? Now allow me to answer you all. The good fight never ends. Even all those years ago when ponies lived in peace they were fighting it! By making cakes for a picnic to share with friends, they were fighting! By helping a friend finish their preparations for a relative visiting, they were winning the war! You see, my little ponies out there, there is no end because it's something to strive for. To be better. The obstacles in our path can be overcome if we just work together. So don't abandon those you care about, y'hear? These

days that which we fight against are bigger, more obvious, and deadlier than any ponies in the past ever had to deal with. Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better, no matter what horrors we all must share along the way."

I imagined the DJ out there in the wasteland some place. What had he been through to know it with such conviction? What had other ponies had to withstand? How many of them had been killed outright by taint or horribly mutated beyond life? At least I was still me.

It was a small comfort to be reminded that we were all in this together, no matter how far we were separated. Not much, perhaps, but enough to allow me to clutch the PipBuck close, close my eyes, and try to pretend that someday I'd be able to thank him for all the help. Weathervane had said it could be managed if I wasn't in Fillydelphia. It was... it was something. A little hope to cling to.

"Now for all you newbies to my broadcast over in Filly, I figured I'd bring you up to speed on what that little mare you all saw has been doing these past few weeks over my broadcasts for the next few days. For example, did you know the Stable Dweller severely messed up Red Eye's operation coming out of Old Appleloosa a while ago? Dropped a boxcar on an alicorn too. So if you had family out that way, you can rest a bit easier knowing that there's a chance they might not be headed for the hell you're in. Take heart in that mare, slaves. She'll save you all somehow."

I tried to smile, closing my eyes as I imagined seeing the Wall falling. Of seeing Littlepip charging over with the ponies that supported her racing into the city and taking out the slavers, griffons, and those monstrous abominations of the Goddesses' image, the alicorns. They were the elite beasts under Red Eye's control, so far as I knew. Mute and lethal, their magic was feared by the few slaves that had ever had to directly encounter one. Usually, they were seen in the crater basking in radiation or accompanying Red Eye. But for Littlepip to kill one?

Well, it helped bring a smile to my face as I fantasised that she might one day save me and all the others. What would I say to her? Would I introduce her to the others?

"Now until the next time of news for you all. Keep smiling, ponies, and if you see that little mare in the Stable suit holding a scoped revolver? Give her a little hug for me."

Oh I would.

"Till then, here's Pinkie Pie with, You Gotta Share, You Gotta Care!"

My eyes jolted open. No! Oh Goddesses, no! Even DJ-Pon-Three had fallen to her—

"Haha! Gotcha all! Ah, I'm just kidding folks, here's Velvet Remedy!"

Through all the pain, the horrible news confirming that my life hung by a thread and the ongoing torment of being isolated from the life I desired outside of Fillydelphia while the world kept turning without me, he had actually managed to make me smile.

I held the PipBuck closer, almost nuzzling it with my tears still dripping from my eyes. I needed to hold on to these feelings. Without them, I knew where my mind went. The control tower was too vivid in my mind. Too easy a route to avoid a life of pain the disease would leave me with. The Stable Dweller, Littlepip. She was the main source of my hope and inspiration to continue.

"Thank you."

Brimstone's deep voice cut the moment harshly and made me wince as his tone rose to fury.

"You want me to go *where*?"

I had missed the majority of Brim's debate over the RadPurge. Waking from my depressive daydreams, I found Brimstone Blitz and Doctor Weathervane engaged in an argument over 'payback' for him whipping up a new batch of RadPurge. Apparently, he was actually the *inventor* of the brand that had never really made it in the market the same way RadAway had. As such, he was now the only source of the medication.

"There are over thirty fucking slaves in this city that have this particular allergy, raider! You bring her to me, I'll heal her. But I do not give away my grade-A medication on a whim to somepony without any pissing proof! I know your name and reputation, 'Great Warlord'. I know what you did to Ponyville. Those defenceless ponies were only trying to repair a broken town. If you want it, you've got to bring me what I need or bring her here!"

"She can't *move*! Don't you think I would have? Now make that RadPurge! You know who I am, *you know what I will do to get what I want!*"

"And what? Harm me? Ha! Do that and you'll never get any and your friend will die anyway! I'm offering you a chance here, get me the materials and I'll make some up while you're away! You won't be losing time!"

Brimstone looked about ready to crush Weathervane's head completely. I could see the same look on his face he had worn against the raiders. His front hooves were scratching at the ground, itching to strike something. I heard the light snort and growl before a hoof raised and slammed down on the workbench beside him. The thick wood actually cracked.

"Fine!" He scowled, matching Weathervane's glare. "I'll go. But if you don't have the RadPurge by the time I get back..."

"I will. Just remember, as much anti-radiant fluid as you can find, as well as the silver sphere—"

"I know! I'll get them."

This could go badly. Almost suicidally, I decided to try and intervene, shuffling across.

"Um, excuse me..."

"All of it! I won't be adding the final ingredient until you're back!"

"...if I could just..."

"If you double cross me ghoul, you will not survive this."

"...could we please be calm a second..."

"Yeah, yeah. They told me the balefire would kill me too. Fat fucking lot that did."

Brimstone growled, baring his teeth as he pulled himself to his full height. I could see the anger in his eyes as he began to raise a hoof to lash out with it.

"WAAAAAAAIT!"

I screamed at the top of my voice as I hurled myself between the hostile pair. Throwing a hoof up and waving it to get their attention, I succeeded in stumbling around just enough to fall between them. Looking back up (or further up, in Brim's case), I sighed and tried to divert their attention from killing one another.

"I'm lost here. What are we doing?"

Brimstone was the first to snort and cast a glance back at the ghoul.

"Fleshy here wants me to go into the crater and retrieve some of his old stuff from a pre-war research facility. Ingredients for more RadPurge to replace what I'm taking. That and some ridiculous old project."

"Not ridiculous. Typical raider! It's a stored spell that is just short of a megaspell in potency."

Okay, things were getting beyond my understanding. A megaspell?

"You mean, like, a bomb?"

"No, a megaspell. The balefire brand were the destroyers, this one is a healer. Basically, a megaspell is just a normal spell with a turbocharger shoved up its arse. In this case, it heals. There was a pretty tragic incident when a healing megaspell brought a zebra army back to life on its first deployment, so we were tasked with making ones that could focus on one pony at a time instead and use less energy. Not so easy, getting a megaspell to reign in its power like that. We never quite finished it, but I am sure the prototype still works."

"I didn't know you could store spells like that."

"Normally, no. However, the Ministry of Arcane Science in Fillydelphia were involved in an interesting project to use the same spell that created memory orbs to 'store' pre-cast spells that anypony could use, as the energy required was all bundled up. It never properly worked enough to distribute. You still needed a unicorn to direct it after using one, and they had a nasty habit of dissolving after their first use, so it was never practical. But at least it allowed some unicorns to utilise spells they didn't normally know, if only temporarily. We used orbs to store the megaspell prototypes, cos' no unicorn alone would master a spell this potent; and it helped direct it where we wanted if you had a team of unicorns, unlike a full-blown megaspell that would spread it all around. Rainbow Dash was still bitching the entire time I was fixing her wing about that 'double battle' incident. Rightly so, I may add."

My head hurt. All this magical sciencey stuff was way beyond me. I was no smart-headed unicorn or technologically gifted earth pony (or a proper pegasus either for that matter...). I knew roughly about memory orbs and how they allowed a unicorn to see into the past like a visual diary or something. But I didn't even know what they looked like, never mind any details.

"Well, okay, it's important. A little silver ball you said? Like a bouncy ball?"

"Urgh, fucking wasteland pony similies. Yes, it's a little silver, glowing ball. I had to leave it all behind when Red Eye took over. I'm not permitted near the crater. Too much risk of a ghoulish becoming a bit too powerful for his tastes in there, y'see. But I can't risk Red Eye's crater teams stumbling across the technology anymore. I heal for him, but Celestia fucking damn me if I ever let him have that power. That's why I want Brimstone to get it. Not you Murk, the radiation is too high in that place."

I wasn't sure what to feel. Part of me was relieved. The crater was legendary amongst slaves for killing you in mere months from exposure while working. What it might do to me with my inherent weakness to radiation.

On the other hoof, I was disappointed. I had come all this way to seek a reason and purpose in my life. To be doing something to prove I could still face my fears and break my mental chains of servitude. To save a life. I found myself wanting to go.

That thought terrified me. But I couldn't ignore it.

"No... no. I can help."

For once, the two of them seemed to agree on something. My idiocy.

"Look! I'm small and can sneak around; you've seen how it's handy, Brimstone! I... I need to do this! Above in the hospital, I almost took medicine from somepony who needed it."

I left the fact that it had been RadPurge well away from Brimstone's ears.

"I feel guilty for that. I want to do this to help somepony. Make up for that. Doctor you

understand that sort of feeling, right? And Brimstone, even in those few moments, Glimmerlight was nice to me, I don't want to see somepony who did that go away before I can meet them. I... I don't have a lot in this city, and I just..."

Oh, come on, why could I feel tears again? Why couldn't I ever just be brave? My head fell away from their witheringly strong eyes. Caught out, not knowing how to express my need to scratch and claw for any way forward I could, I fell quiet, before finally muttering the only thing that came to my mind.

"The DJ on the radio said we all need to stick together."

There was a long pause. Eventually, Brimstone sighed, shook his mane, and rolled his eyes.

"If you want to come, you can. Just know that you will not be my priority if I have to choose between you and Glimmer. If you get sick, you can crawl."

Weathervane matched the rolling of the eyes as he turned away to his instruments and began setting up beakers and small flame burners.

"The times when I could hold a patient back are long gone now. If you do go, I imagine I'll be seeing you very soon. Either in intensive care or an autopsy. But..."

He sighed and magically grabbed two bottles of pills to toss to us.

"If you are going, take this. It's Rad-X, it'll help your immunity levels a little. You take it too, raider. Grab that healing potion from the far desk too, chances are you'll need one. Fucking hell, what is it with wasteland ponies being so bloody stupid these days? The rads in there are liable to kill you in less than an hour in your condition, Murk. Just move as fast as you can or something... still a fucking stupid move."

I thanked him. Even if Weathervane didn't show it, I could see he was saddened by my choice to put myself in danger. I didn't dare ask him about it, or I was afraid that I'd be swayed to stay out of fear by any logic or frank common sense he might use to convince me. The Master had nearly broken my confidence to rebel, but the urge to save a life, to gain an ally, was all I had left to prove he hadn't completely shattered my freedom yet. If I could help in any way to improve her odds of survival, even if I had to put myself into the very environment I'd just been told was the most dangerous thing I could ever do, I had to do it.

The healing potion went into my saddlebag along with the RadAway. I'd have to leave most of it at the Mall to not risk carrying every piece of my required medicine with me. As Brimstone left, I turned back, there were a couple things I wanted to ask.

"This megaspell, it wouldn't cure taint, would it?"

Weathervane just shook his head without even looking at me. His entire body seemed to slump a little. I hadn't held much hope for it doing that, but even so, I felt a painful pang of inevitability setting in again. Okay, one more question, then I had to get going. Just for my curiosity.

"Doctor, why do you swear so much?"

Weathervane turned back to me, raising an eyebrow.

"Son, I grew up in a world of peaceful glory and happy memories. I remember leaving my door unlocked during the day because I knew it was safe. I remember the days when you could trust anypony's word. When I could smile as I woke up next to my beautiful wife because I knew that it would be a good day. It always was. Then the war happened, and all that changed. Everything Equestria stood for was torn apart by senseless fighting and death. I witnessed what we once had corrupted by those who sought to save it. You don't know what it was like, son. I saw the perfect world burned asunder by the flames. I awoke in a

land I no longer recognised. Those first few years were a living hell. There were no settlements like now. No factions or groups. No trade. It was everypony for themselves in the most brutal chapter of our entire history amidst the baleful, still warping and burning what was left into devastation. Ponies gutted one another for anything. Violence was the only answer. Even after seeing our world scorched, we still fought. Things mellowed, but the more I see of this 'future', the more I'm convinced it's all just an ever-lessening shadow of what we once had. Like a dream that fades the longer the day goes on. You think we could ever go back to the way we were before? And here I am, cursed to witness it all through the years... such long years."

My imagination was overflowing. I fought to not cry again as I watched his eyes glance listlessly to the side at a photo frame I couldn't see, before he laughed without any true mirth. A horrible sound from a ghoul.

"And you ask why I swear a lot? You could say, I've learned to just not give a fuck."

I had thought Brimstone intended to go to the crater, but to my surprise, he led me back to the Mall. Apparently, roll call was kept to ensure slave attendance over time and that none had escaped. As such, a pit stop was required to ensure search teams didn't go looking for us.

Brimstone had returned to Glimmerlight to watch over her. Since returning and pulling the door shut again, he hadn't left her side. He didn't even do anything other than just sit and silently stand vigil over the sickened mare in the amber light of their old gem lantern.

I, meanwhile, had returned to my journal. Getting back to it had given my pained heart a little spike of joy (I even hugged it!) as I immediately fell into its comforting unreality to keep my mind from settling on the medical condition being diagnosed. Maybe if I could just forget about it enough, forget that I was going into a place that would probably destroy my immediate health.

Nosing open the pages, I took up my charcoal and began to sketch. As much as I considered Littlepip's intervention my moment of awakening, truly the first indication of it had been when I drew for myself. That had opened my mind to possibilities beyond what I was told. I had once drawn what my subconscious told me to. The walls had been closing in all my life steadily. The good little slave who simply did what he was told. Now I drew for myself. By drawing, I forced back the walls that threatened to overwhelm my sense and beat me back into line. It was my way of staying free, to sketch the things I wanted and take comfort in the freedom of expression, probably the only true freedom I had.

Imagination flowed through my mouth holding the black writing tool and onto the yellowed parchment as flowing lines began to piece together the shape I knew they would. I wouldn't enjoy the result, but I needed to remind myself of this forever.

A pony's head. Yes, but all mostly covered by a blanket... loose hair from braids and a ponytail.

I sat back, thinking and looking over at Glimmer, shivering from her illness. She clearly wasn't going to last much longer. A pang of sadness flew around my mind at imagining her dying after having gone to these lengths.

Immediately afterwards, I looked back at the drawing and saw the mare from the hospital. I had drawn her curled up, eyes clenched in pain as her own sickness reached the same point. It hurt to look at, to know it was immortalised in print. But I needed it. I

needed that reminder to keep myself in line when I got too desperate. What if she had somepony she cared about out there trying to help her as much as I was trying to help Glimmerlight? How would I have felt if somepony had taken Glimmer's last hope?

I had become a thief to help myself survive as a slave. I had stolen from ponies who I felt deserved it.

This time, I'd come dangerously close to falling to the other side.

"I'm-I'm sorry..."

My hoof patted the paper lightly and finally added in the caring nurse bringing the RadPurge. No, I drew the line at harming others to get what I wanted. If that was ever the price to get out of Fillydelphia, then it was much too high a cost.

My lungs ached and convulsed. Only barely in time, I got my mouth away from the drawing before coughing all over the floor. Despite it all, Weathervane's healing had helped for now. The cough was harsh but held none of the burning that signified true danger. Combined with his Rad-X, perhaps I stood a chance after all. Getting to my hooves, I slid the journal into my saddlebag and turned to Brim.

"How long till roll call?"

"Fifteen minutes. If you aren't back in time, I go alone."

So much for saying I was about to go out for a bit. Clearly Brimstone guessed ahead when he could, but then that was probably pretty important in order to be a raider warlord.

I trotted out into the Mall, finding most of the raiders were asleep or off on work detail. Glancing upward at the balcony overlooking the shop area that acted as our pen, I wondered just how to justify to Protégé that I'd figured out about the illness.

The entire area was pretty dark, so much so I wondered if it was night time. In Fillydelphia it was easy to not quite notice sometimes, the difference between heavy smog cover or a true night. Heavy shadows drew odd lines across the Mall from the skylight above, while slave pens were voids of black mystery to my eyes. Did they contain raiders? Normal ponies?

"Hehehe. So much for the little sneaky pony."

I froze. I knew that voice. Where had I heard it before? Carefully, I looked around. The only ponies in sight were sleeping or wandering at the far end of the hall near to one of the 'secondary' lines of shops that went away to either side of the main area. But they were almost seventy metres away in the giant space. Too far for that sound.

"What's the matter? Can't see me? I'm most disappointed. How about this?"

I felt the touch of cold steel around my neck. I was shaking again. Why did I *always* shake? Why couldn't I just be brave like Littlepip and do something?

"W-what do you want?"

"You to not scream like the little filly you are. Like before when my boys had your wing. Now turn around, I want to speak properly."

A raider, but this one sounded, well, not well-spoken, but clearly more intellectually capable. The only reassurance I had was he wasn't killing me immediately.

I turned. He was standing right behind me! Where had he come from? In the last couple of days I'd begun to feel a little happier about my ability to sneak around, but this was something far beyond me. He was a unicorn, clad in shredded, black leather with a dark blue coat so close to black it almost matched his clothing. His long mane was a dark grey, almost black itself. No wonder he'd blended in so well, he was just off-black enough that you might pass your eyes right over him. What shocked me though was his magic. The glow

around the small scrap craft knife was black and almost entirely invisible.

"There we go, little filly. Heh, think I'll call you that. Seems to suit, you ain't strong enough to be a buck. I mean look at me, I get by through being a sneakier bastard than anypony and even I look like the ol' Warlord compared to you. Now I'm not gonna talk long, so you best listen. As I hear, you can do that well."

I gulped and nodded. Internally, I was praying for Brimstone or Protégé to appear. This stallion was terrifying me. What was that on his cutie mark? A loop of razor wire?

"My name's Barb, filly. Used to be one of the Warlord's 'Big Four' until he went funny on us. Yeah, it's Barb, cos I'm sharp as a razor and I don't need something big to sever your life quietly when you least expect it. Now listen closely. I know you got out. Simple, really. You went out an air vent and came in again through that shop. I was watching. I'm more patient than that old bastard ever was so don't try and claim otherwise. But it's nice to see somepony like you trying to walk the path I did, stealing and sneaking to get by."

I highly disagreed about the path, but for preservation of my throat, I nodded.

"So let me cut you a deal. I'm gonna admit to you something here. Shackles thinks I'm an informant for him so I'm in a good position in this here place. I feed him what he wants to hear about us raiders, but he doesn't realise we aren't just mindless idiots. Some of us, but not me."

The informant! I knew I'd recognised that voice in the vent.

"That's all you get about my long term goals for now, filly. But let's talk about my deal. You want to be sneaky, I'll teach you how. You get me supplies to make explosives from out there back in and I'll reward you with survival skills. Leave anything in that vent you got out by. I'll check it by the hour. Now go about your business and don't say a word to the Warlord of me or I'll shiv you in your sleep. You don't want to cross me, but Barb's Bloodletters could be a very valuable ally in helping you get out. You'll benefit, Shackles may be your true Master, but I'm the master of the shadows, and I am *the* most absolute peer you will ever need to know in our field of talent. And let's keep it secret between us two, hm?"

I shook as I tried to process all this. So many ponies wanted some things in Fillydelphia. Why did they keep demanding it of me? Why did I have to be the weak one they all saw as easy prey to bully into doing things?

"I... I'd rather just not get involved... no, no thanks..." I stammered, gulping.

His eyes narrowed, as he leaned closer. His voice took on a darker, more aggressive tone.

"I wasn't asking."

Barb seemed to melt back into the shadows as he grinned at me, his oddly white teeth being the last thing to disappear as he once again became one with the darkness.

"I'm afraid this isn't the best time, Murk,"

Protégé was speaking quickly as he cantered back and forth in his office with urgency. I sat on the floor amidst his activity, watching somewhat amazed at how coordinated his telekinetic abilities were at knowing exactly where everything was in this mess of an office. I hadn't wasted time coming here. Barb had lit a new fire of terror in me. What was I supposed to think about a pony who even I couldn't hear coming and who was forcing me to steal for him, in return for tuition at theft and creeping around in return? The skills could come in handy for escaping, of course. He wanted to wreck Red Eye's operations? Well, that

was fine by me. If I learned how to sneak by the Wall in return, that was fine too.

But, he was one of Brimstone's old raiders. I hadn't trusted him at all, and so I had galloped toward Protégé's office as fast as I could, sticking to well-lit areas.

It hadn't been hard to get to him. The guards had standing orders to allow me through and escort me to his office any time I wished. But after knocking and entering, I had found the curious slave master in the middle of packing materials and loading ammunition into his revolver even while he skimmed a book with his eyes in front of his face. Looking around, I could swear that even in the hours since I'd been here every single book had changed places.

"I'm... I'm sorry, master, I'll be going then," I stammered. Disappointment struck me as I turned to exit. Perhaps I'd try back later on—

"I said it isn't the *best* time," he continued, "not that you had to leave. However, I will be going in a few minutes. I've received an urgent message from Master Red Eye requiring my immediate attention."

I looked at the revolver as the scope cover slotted into place and it floated to his foreleg holster. He was wearing the battle barding that had once sat on the hook, and loading two saddlebags full of RadAway, medical potions, ammo and of course, a book.

"Why? What's going on?"

Protégé stopped for a few seconds to look at me with a hard glance. Despite his politeness, there was an edge to him. I was seeing a hardline mentality setting in as he prepared for... something. It looked like he was deciding whether or not I should know, before finally resuming his packing.

"I told you of Master Red Eye's children, the foals he cares for in their hundreds within Fillydelphia and abroad? One of them has went missing, a small filly by the name of Starshine Melody. A lovely little foal, really, very curious. Possibly too curious. She ran off to 'see the sights' as her roommates said. She was last seen around the edge of the crater so as you can imagine, Master Red Eye is greatly concerned for her safety. He's called in everypony he can trust with kids to hunt for her."

For all my hatred of Red Eye, that was something I could agree with. In the past, foals had often been the only ones to not look upon me and my wings harshly. They were innocent of the prejudice they would later gain. As a result, I felt quite strongly about them being protected.

"Here."

Seemingly without extra effort, a small piece of paper slipped from his armoured saddlebag and floated across before me. It held a picture of a little light grey filly with a well-kept and groomed white mane. It seemed to have been cut from a larger image. I could see others around her like some sort of group photo.

"Master Red Eye insisted we test the recovered photographic technology on the class, let them see where they came from in the future. He claimed that having a sense of historic progression is essential to rebuilding our spirit as well as physical world. I had that section cut out to help track her down."

She looked impossibly innocent for a world such as this. I began to see why Protégé had so much respect for this angle of Red Eye's. They looked clean, well-fed, and intelligent as they all sat there smiling with childish joy. It could have been a pre-wear photo. Starshine Melody in particular had a big jolly and somewhat cheeky grin. I began to feel my own worries for her safety tug at my heart.

"I hope she is alright. I... I'll keep an eye out for her."

Protégé stopped immediately, rounding on me.

"I'm sorry, Murk?"

What was he-

Realisation shot through me like a rifle round. Panic surged within me, my stomach clenching tightly.

"I mean! Uh, as in, if I'm ever nearby to the area. Y'know?"

I grinned as wide as I could, trying to shrug.

"Like... with the slave work and, you know... stuff?"

Protégé didn't look too convinced, but his haste to make tracks led him to apparently cast his doubts aside as trivial for now. Trotting toward the door, he signalled me to follow as he closed it behind him.

"My apologies if you could not broach your own topic of conversation, Murk. I assure you, I shall try to find some time to talk to you. I am glad to see you're looking healthier than when I first met you."

If only he could have seen deeper. Yet all the same, the compliment was unexpected. Very few ponies said such things to me.

He began to canter down the corridor. Not knowing what else to really do, I followed him until my own corner back to the plaza. In the darkened night, the shop cells were scarcely lit, only by an ambient red hue through the boarded up windows. Protégé didn't even stop at the junction between the entrance and the shop area, kicking up centuries-old dust in his wake that continued to swirl in the airless corridor long after he was gone.

"Um... good luck, master!"

"Thank you, Murk. Good day. Ragini?"

He accelerated into a gallop as I saw his associate and bodyguard come bounding down another of the concrete hallways and join him. Watching them go, I sighed and turned to head back to the cells.

I should have known.

Protégé was gone.

Who *else* was going to take roll call?

I had made it to the ground floor, heading for the cage door when I heard his heavy tread approaching. Never mind 'hear', I *felt* him approaching. Like my mane and back tingling with fear within mere proximity.

No. No, I needed to get back to Brimstone, right now!

I galloped, surprising the guards as they saw me suddenly accelerate and gun for the door back in. He'd see me at roll call, but at least I'd not be alone with—

"Close that gate!"

It slammed in my face. Slapping to the ground, I quickly threw myself at it, pounding at the cage bars, and trying to pull it open. Oh Goddesses, please, I didn't want to turn around! I didn't want to acknowledge he existed! Just let the door open, please, please, pretty please...

"Well, well, well. Looks like our little Number Seven decided to start being teacher's pet to the upstart. Isn't that cute? Looking for an easy ride, eh? Pity we don't got long, but I

want a little chat with you before we do roll call. C'mere!"

I felt repulsed, screaming as I felt his hoof pass right around my body and yank me upward to be held against him. Holding me forcefully close, he eventually ended up dumping me in the corner of the guard room outside the cage door. My natural instincts were to find a small place. I retreated right into it and cowered. I hadn't looked at him yet, I didn't want to.

I'd fallen right into what he'd known I would do. With sadistic glee, he trotted forward, his huge bulk filling my peripheral vision as I was backed right into the corner. He kept moving forward, far closer than I had any real pleasing of. Anypony outside would have barely seen me in the corner below him.

"So you survived the raiders. Good, good. I can see I'm going to have a little more time to properly... hmm...'break you in' shall we say, Number Seven. You'll understand the chains that bind you soon enough all over again."

"Y-yes..."

"Yes what?"

His hoof slapped me around the face so hard my skull cracked off the wall. I felt that tooth loosen again after Weathervane had just fixed it. He was my Master, that tooth was beginning to become my recurring reminder every time he struck me for being disobedient. It made my eyes water, or was that with fear? I didn't know. I just curled away from him as best as I could, shrieking what he wanted to hear.

"Yes, Master!"

"You tried to escape me once. That won't happen again will it?"

"No. No, Master!"

At this point, in this situation, I couldn't say otherwise. Try as I wanted, I couldn't beat the slave I was born to be from forcing itself to the fore and controlling me while he was around.

"Good. No point in running away from those closest to you after all, is there?"

He laughed sickly right into my ear. I still hadn't looked directly at him. I kept trying to picture my drawings... please, anything but that face so close again...

"I suppose I mean a lot to you. I should. We're closer than anypony else in this place. Each of us born to be around one another. But more than that. I did a little checking on the records of your slave life that are still around. Turns out I visited Shattered Hoof where you mother was a slave, oh... some months before you were born?"

I hadn't forgotten his 'theory' before, but this brought new levels of chills to my heart.

"But then I noticed something else." His voice took a malicious tone all of a sudden. "Look at me, Number Seven. **Look! At! Me!**"

His hooves wrenched my head around as I felt spittle spray across my head. With a yelp, I opened my eyes out of fear alone as that sweaty, filthy, and disgusting face bearing a rotten grin bore down on me from mere inches away. Between the wall and floor behind me, he was leaning right over into my personal space once more. His oddly light green eyes wouldn't let up from staring at me, unblinking. I could see every detail this close. Every filthy strand of his mane, each rotten tooth, that odd scar I'd never noticed before that ran under his mane from his left ear to just above his eye. One hoof pressed me right down into the corner, backing away all my space to less than about my own body's size.

"Recognise anything?"

I couldn't even shake my head.

"How about now?"

He held a mirror up with the other hoof. I saw my own tear-filled eyes looking right back at me. I didn't understand. That was me, what was...

My eyes...

...light green.

I didn't know if he was simply lying or not. He could have been making everything up, for I had no way to tell. But as he drew the mirror away and I saw the colour, shape...everything remain almost exactly the same, I couldn't help feel a sick sense of belief in what he said.

Through that moment. Through him laughing in my face and roughly hurling me back in the shop pen, I had to actively force myself to believe he was lying.

I had to. If I ever started believing that he was truly linked to me somehow, I'd never be able to escape his chains ever again. But those eyes were imprinted on my memory. For the rest of my life, I knew that any time I ever looked in a mirror I would see him staring back at me. Even if I somehow got away, left Fillydelphia, left Equestria, he would be with me every step of the way.

The Master trotted in behind me. A unicorn buck assistant, skinny and clearly a hooflicking type, levitated a clipboard nearby to The Master's face obediently. Lying on the ground before him, I tried to crawl away into the crowds that were forming up for roll call. There were a *lot* of ponies in here, more than I'd thought. The multiple dozen raiders were actually outnumbered by the slaves who merely kept their heads down, hoping for freedom at the end of two years. In total, there might have been about a hundred and a bit slaves in here. That said, with my eyes to the floor, that was a best guess.

"Right! Every slave get down here to the ground floor! **Roll call!**"

Hooves clattered. The Master hadn't threatened them. He didn't *need* to.

Shoved around by slaves seeking to not be the last there, I was knocked from side to side, trodden on, or simply bucked out of the way. These ponies didn't care about stamping all over a pegasus to get by. Moaning, I eventually settled against the fountain inside the crowd, taking relief in the cool stone against my now swollen cheek.

"Settle down! Now, we've expanded our numbers since yesterday, so we're gonna do this a little differently."

Holding my breath, I could only imagine this was something to do with me.

"Earth ponies! Get on the left hoof side there! Get separated from the hornies!"

A vast swathe of the ponies here, perhaps more than half of them, all began shuffling over to the far side away from Brimstone's area. I saw the reluctant warlord stomp over himself, eyes never once leaving the entrance to where I knew Glimmerlight was no doubt still resting. If any raider dared go within a few feet of it, I could only imagine the imminent violence. Indeed, I saw a few raiders bearing injuries snapping and snarling at him as they found themselves beside him.

Unfortunately, I could see where The Master was going with this.

"Unicorns! Get on the right! Come on, **hurry your horned selves up!**"

A near stampede of the remaining ponies rushed to the right hoof side, and lined up like an opposing army to the earth ponies. Those limping on injuries or rotten and wasted limbs staggered after them.

I was alone next to the fountain, a million miles from any feeling of being hidden. Crouching still, I hid next to the fountain wall from at least one side. I was clear enough, he

couldn't want me to—

“Pegasi! Get yourselves into the centre! Into the open area!”

Dependently, I cast my eyes around, hoping against all hope that I'd see somepony else wand out to join me. Somepony that would share the obvious charade of a roll call to be displayed before everypony else.

Please, somepony else move...

A movement caught my eye, somepony moving at the side. Or was it... just somepony staggering while in the grip of a fever.

I was alone.

“Come on, all pegasi! Get out here!”

He could see me, but he wanted me out of hiding. Visible. The entire mall area was now silent other than the tiny pitter-patter of my hooves as I stood and trotted with my my head down in front of everypony else. Being forced to stand in the middle of the entire open space of the shops, I became the one little source of attention. A single point to be focused on. Remembered, known... hated. I kept my head down. If I dared open my eyes, the distance to any sense of safety would be further than any road to freedom had ever felt.

“Head up, slave!”

Howling in pain, I stumbled and fell as his whip lashed the side of my neck. Quaking on the ground, I looked up at The Master, standing ten feet before me.

“I... I'm here! I'M HERE!”

The whip slapped off the ground near my legs just enough to skiff them, stinging like a rough slap to the skin. Skittering to the side, coughing on my scream, I tried to get to my hooves.

“I'm here, WHAT?”

“I'm here, Master!”

He grumbled, seemingly finally satisfied.

“Now get up! I have no need for any troublemakers, pegasi worst of all.”

His intent was obvious. The failure of his plan to use me as a gift to his raider slaves required the Master to reassert his position over me. I was nothing more than a public display. Whimpering, trying to hold tears back, I stood up, cradling the whipped leg off the ground.

The Master began his routine. Names were called by the slaves, along with their slave numbers and type of race. Breezy Day, Number Eight-Zero-Nine, unicorn. Harshhoof, Number Three-Three-One, earth pony.

Brimstone Blitz, Number Six-Six-Six, earth pony.

He also quoted Glimmerlight's on her account, Number Zero-Zero-Five, unicorn. The Master didn't look too pleased at her lack of attendance, scowling as he nodded for her name to be checked. Name after name, number after number, earth pony after unicorn.

Amidst all of it, I stood alone in front of everypony else, shaking as I saw the Master maintain eye contact with me even while others shouted. Seeing me looking, he grinned and winked at me. Mewling, I looked away, seeing raiders snickering at me from both sides, so exposed between both sides.

I didn't even notice that silence had fallen.

“Come on! One more to go, where are ya, eh?”

The Master looked around. Everypony knew who hadn't spoken, but he made a show of it.

"Murky Number—"

Screaming, I staggered away as my face welted in pain diagonally over my muzzle. I hadn't even seen his whip approaching before the horrid crack of leather across my face. Dropping to my rear, I held both hooves over my already bleeding nose.

"That's not your name, slave! Don't lie to me!"

"N-Number Seven, Number, um..."

What *was* my number? Oh Goddesses, *what was my number?*

"...seven?"

"Number Seven is your name, slave! I want your *number!*"

The whip landed close enough to just whip harsh air near my face again, making me fall over backwards in shock. Raiders laughed, other slaves grinned, enjoying seeing the *pegasus* the source of their overseer's attentions.

"I... I don't know, I wasn't tol—"

The whip snapped down on my right, I yelped and rolled to my left, scrambling up to my hooves again.

"**You don't know!?** I *told* you, Number Seven!"

I wanted to scream, to frustratedly bellow that he *hadn't!* But I saw it in his eyes, that baleful look. He knew just as well as I did that he hadn't passed on the number to me.

"Your number is Zero-Zero-Seven! Now remember!"

"Yes. Yes, Master!" I added the latter part as I saw the whip raise again. My shrill voice pitched out and broke on the word 'Master' out of sheer fear, causing a group of raiders to mockingly laugh. From the other side, I heard some unicorn bucks mock my voice themselves. Somehow, I felt that if it had been *me* to talk, I'd have been punished. Double standards were very active when it came to pegasi in Fillydelphia.

Or perhaps just to me.

He snarled, stepping forward. "Now, repeat it."

"Number Seven..."

"Good. Heh, we have progress!"

The surrounding slaves and raiders lit up a small snicker with him, taking their cue well.

"Number Zero-Zero-Seven..."

"Very good. We'll make a little obedient slave out of you yet. Now, last part? Come on."

My voice almost sighed as I spoke.

"...pegasus."

"What was that? Speak up, Number Seven!"

"Pegasus."

He drew back the whip. Tensing up, I whined at seeing the windup, before it came down. It didn't miss. It landed directly on my fleece, striking my right wing beneath it. I felt the fragile bones and dead muscles spasm and flare in pain. Crying out, I staggered to the side.

"I said **speak up!** Loud and proud, so that *everypony* can hear!"

Twisted genius. 'Loud and proud', the feeling many ponies in here had about pegasus attitudes. Arrogant and self centred. The Master, he just... he knew *exactly* what he was doing to me.

I took a breath, the whip looking all too likely if I didn't. Tears in my eyes, I closed them and shouted to the skies above, the ones that would never hear me to answer or come down to aid the one pegasus it had lost.

"Number Seven! Number Zero-Zero-Seven! *Pegasus! Master!*"

He mockingly looked impressed, before grinning and chucking.

“Oooh, how proud you are, eh? Well, get used to being down amongst us land-lovers here, slave. **Back to your dwellings! All of you!**”

The slaves moved. Brimstone headed directly back to watch over Glimmerlight without so much as a glance at me. Raiders joked and raucously laughed at the display they had witnessed. Some slaves still saw my voice as some sort of running gag. Others scowled as they muttered about the sky-lovers.

Alone, I just lay down on the spot as everypony whirled around me on their own ways. Stuck on the ground amongst hatred, I shivered with my head hidden under my own hooves amidst one of the few remaining beams of light that centred right down on me. It cast a spotlight upon me, one that held me alone from the entire darkened nighttime Mall. I didn't care. I'd already been held out on show enough that this was nothing for them to see me upset.

I didn't even dare move until Brimstone finally returned to lightly nudge me and signal that we were leaving.

An alien world.

Stories in the past had spoken of places that were unlike anything ponies would ever, should ever, see. Now I was standing in one of them.

The Fillydelphia crater expanded ahead of me. A colossal scar upon the planet itself that would no doubt remain as a painful reminder longer than any picture I could ever draw. I had imagined it as a perfect circle, but really that wasn't quite true. Tougher areas of rock or buildings had reflected the shockwave or the fire just enough to slow its progress. As such, the colossal border stretching in all directions was more like the ragged edge of an irregular cliffside than a geometric shape. There was no beauty here, only a mercilessly indiscriminate and vibrant horror.

The entire thing had blown the earth away so harshly that to walk to the middle would seemingly take somepony a significant height below the usually flat surface of Fillydelphia. A serried and ruin-pocketed surface flowed down each of the slopes from the sides in ways I could never have imagined. Smooth, glass-like surfaces were in my mind, but the truth was that there was wreckage, collapsed housing that had fallen below the earth, and even small hills from chunks of rock too hard or too solid to actually be shifted by the balefire. It was almost like a small war zone contained in a weird shaped bowl.

No, there was nothing here but wretched and twisted devastation curled into its most heinous shapes. No wonder Red Eye was still sending slaves in. To hunt through all that refuse and loose earth for radioactive material would take decades to complete! Even as I stared down from the massive piles of earth that surrounded the entire crater, I began to realise how easy it would be to get lost in that skeletal jungle of rock and metal.

“You know where we're going Brimstone?”

The warlord had been standing, watching into the crater himself. We'd had to get by Red Eye's defences around the crater by claiming we were on a work detail. I had still been depressed and hurt by the roll call earlier enough that the guards believed our story that I had been sentenced here for stealing. As such, we'd been lumped with large saddlebags each that they used for the materials. I had wondered about the defences. Why would they want

to stop somepony going in?

Then I'd noticed the guns had pointed *inwards*, and suddenly the dangers in here made perfect sense.

"The rot's old lab should be near the rough outskirts. We shouldn't need to go in too deep. He said to look for an angular metal shaft that would probably still have survived at that depth. Keep your eyes peeled, Murk."

Brimstone was allowing me the freedom of working together here. Even he had been shaken by the sight of the direct impact zone that ended this portion of the world. Alongside us, we saw ponies retching and coughing with radiation sickness that even outstripped my own wandering into the crater for their work. They almost looked ghoul-like, for their very flesh seemed to sag and hair was coming off in patches. Very quickly I realised how glad I was Weathervane had treated me before leaving, and for his Rad-X. According to him, I'd have about half an hour before I started to feel it, hopefully enough time to get back to him. Approaching an hour would be a serious risk, assuming I didn't encounter any higher radiation areas in the process.

"Come along, Murk. No sense in hanging around with this much rad activity in the air."

He clambered over the earthworks and dropped down the slope with the rugged capabilities of a pony that was born to the wasteland's troubles. My own descent (delayed until I could push myself to take that last step) was somewhat less capable as I hopped, floundered, fell, and promptly rolled down the remainder before coming to a halt upside down, half-buried in the earth. It was dry and warm, like a heavy sand with absolutely no real tension around me. I struggled not to breathe as I tried to pull my head and front hooves from the ground. Mumbling and trying to shout for help, I ended up just making something more akin to 'Mmphmmp' while waggling my rear legs around. Even by my standards this wasn't particularly dignified.

A quick tug on my tail ripped me free as I dangled in front of Brimstone, my tail in his mouth. Swinging back and forth like a pendulum, gasping for air and spitting out mounds of foul tasting dry dirt, I eventually sighed as I grasped how hard this was going to be. There was absolutely no way to move other than to plough through the loose earth that had been chopped up by the balefire and shockwave. Perhaps if I could—

"YARGH!"

He dropped me. Landing sideways, I flailed around until I managed to force myself up. No wonder so many ponies got irradiated here. Even aside from the ambience, the loose earth kicked up in your face, nose, and eyes every step you had to take. I'd heard of such an effect after large explosions, like a loose earth problem, but how did the ground remain this way after two hundred years? Were megaspells so powerful that they corrupted the ground to never truly heal on its own?

It wouldn't surprise me. After all, that's what had happened to Weathervane.

We staggered on, Brimstone's heavy hooves not finding good purchase on the very unstable ground. Very quickly, I felt my stomach twist. Fear clenched my heart as thoughts of the radiation piercing through my Rad-X based resistance entered my mind. They were quelled as it rumbled.

Malnourishment, that old hateful presence across my entire life was still with me. It dawned that I still hadn't eaten a thing since Protégé's apple stew gift other than drinking foul RadAway (A substance I suspected was dehydrating me even more if my dry and cracked lips had anything to do with it). I could feel my limbs trembling lightly from the

hunger. That ever-present feeling that you never got used to as a slave, of never truly having enough food in you to feel full or properly fuelled. Really, the only thing keeping it from affecting me too badly was the greater threats ahead of me in my mind.

Shaking my head harshly, I looked around to try and take my thoughts off of my aching belly. Around me, I saw many of the “regulars” to the crater were wearing planks of wood on their hooves to spread out the weight. Those without were like us, their hooves disappearing up to the knee or, in my case, torso on every step, and kicking up dust and earth everywhere. The entire operation was truly grim. Scrambling through fallen houses on their sides and under mounds of loose earth, they sought out scraps and valuables to throw into their saddlebags. I could see the mouths of the earth ponies were raw and scarred from the ragged edges they had to dig and scramble for. Unicorns lazily levitated things with little real power. Every few seconds, I heard somepony shouting, either in a fight over who found what or in a panic over some injury. The sound echoed in the lonely maze of ruin that towered above me on every side.

I had been a slave in some horrible places. I had been an illiterate librarian assistant. I had pulled carts and tugged scrap. I had been a forced labour servant to a trader. *I'd farmed rocks.*

But this... this was the most dreary and depressing sight I had ever witnessed.

Half-skipping and half-almost-swimming, I kept up with Brim as best I could after snapping my goggles across my eyes. Wicked Slit had some weird ways but clearly she knew a comfy set when she found one! At least in my service they'd keep all this loose earth from my eyes, especially what was kicked up by Brimstone Blitz. His massive presence kept the more opportunistic hunters at bay as we headed for the location Brim had been told of. He had seen it from the lip of the crater already after we'd climbed up the refuse pile. A single flagpole still oddly standing among all of the ruin (or perhaps raised again afterwards by the most determined flag bearer in *history*). Nopony would think anything of it but for an oddity, but according to Weathervane, if we looked for a small formation of little rocks, the entrance would be nearby as a hidden underground metal shaft.

It seemed close. I really hoped we could just poke our heads in, grab what we could near the door, and then gallop off. We were about five minutes in of my thirty minute limit before Rad-X would begin to wear off and I'd start to suffer at a vastly increased rate. That thought still clenched at my heart. Given a moment of hesitation, I might lose my nerve and gallop for the exit. What was I doing here? Brimstone probably didn't really need my help, and I still had Barb's offer, right? But I couldn't. I'd made my stand; I was going to put my hopes in these ponies, and just pray that something worthwhile might come of finding some allies. The fear of failure was so great in me that even one slip might convince me that it wasn't even worth ever trying again. I was hanging onto the cliff edge with one hoof here, relying on finding some help to pull me out of it again.

As such, I was fearing everything that might aid in that failure, and of course, chief among it was the radiation. In a way, it was somewhat creepy. I couldn't see the radiation. I couldn't feel it right now either. Only through *knowing* was I aware of the malignant, magical aftermath accumulating in my body from the crater. I needed to take my mind off of it, get my mind off it *all*. Perhaps Brimstone would be open to conversation?

Truly I had reached the end of things available to help distract me if *that* was my option.

“Brimstone?”

“Aye?”

Well, it was a start.

"When we first met, I thought you were escaping. Did you honestly just run back to your pen? To Protégé?"

"Aye."

It wasn't much, but anything for now to build some conversation to stop my imagination running rampant in this place was good.

Or to stop it settling on my lungs, or my eyes...

"What was your clan like, anyway? I'm sorry, but I hadn't heard of it."

"You probably didn't. You were kept sheltered."

"Didn't feel like it..."

Brimstone snorted, looking around briefly. The look frightened me, but at least he was talking now.

"Whatever. There were about a hundred of us, one of the biggest single clans. Some called us a gang or a warband, but we chose the term clan. It speaks of a proper bred group rather than just a motley collection, for we only took in the toughest around. Caravan guards used to pay us in advance so they knew they could promise safe passage to their clients. Anypony who wanted to join had to survive a ten minute beating from the others. Sometimes I joined in. Those ones never made it, other than one. Reputation enough that other raiders paid us tribute just to not steamroll them, so we really had another five or so groups out there that I put chiefs in control of. Because of our size, we often split up, spread the misery around, y'know?"

Okay, lots of talking. I was surprised as we trotted along. Perhaps this place was getting to the big stoic raider. I'd never get used to thinking of him as good or bad. He just seemed to drift too easily without, presumably, Glimmerlight around to guide him. Sometimes he felt like a noble redeemer, others like an unstable mountain of carnage ready to unleash its rage on anypony that rubbed him the wrong way. Yet that last line had almost sounded self-demeaning.

"You had other leaders then?"

"My Big Four. The toughest or nastiest ones in the entire clan, except me. Three of them are in here, actually. Two of them went to the Pit, the third is a nasty piece of work called Barb who took over the clan after I gave it up. He won't dare confront me directly though, he knows what would happen. But back in the day, I sent them places. They went and did the job, got the loot, and brought back any prisoners to our home camp. We hunted other raiders just to prove we were better. Sometimes we all got together just to scare the shit out of the wasteland in some big attack. Took Ponyville that way. Heh, most of the guards just galloped off the moment they saw us."

I saw a nostalgic grin spread onto his face. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea to go poking around.

"Pity for them Barb and his lot had their retreat cut off, he always was good at that sort of thing. It's why I made him one of the Big Four. Not one of the Ponyville settlers survived that day. We made sure of it. An example. Don't fuck with the Great Warlord Brimstone. Anypony who goes to Ponyville now? They'll see my legacy."

There was something disturbing about hearing this from his own mouth. That last sentence had sounded suddenly regretful amongst what else sounded like a boast. He stopped, that same melancholy seemed to overtake him briefly.

"Sometimes I wonder how many I killed as a warlord. How many I sold into these pits to die under Red Eye before he betrayed us at the hand-over and took us too. How many

families curse our name and weep at night for their lost ones? How many colts or fillies growing up without parents because of what we did? How many only growing up *because* of what we did?"

Brimstone stopped, turning toward me. It looked like he was having trouble knowing how to emote something.

"Makes you wonder what history will see of us. Will they remember the Warlord or the repentor? Or just... ah, fuck it."

He stomped off ahead of me with a manner that implied I was not to follow or go too close to him. Somehow, I got the feeling I'd stumbled on a side of him I shouldn't have seen. I'd seen him angry plenty of times. I'd seen him show regret or a more melancholic side before too.

But that time, he had honestly seemed, well... upset.

"Get away! This is *my* scavenge spot! I find stuff here, so you go away! Go away!"

We had come to the flagpole after ten minutes of laboured trotting only to find a scavenging unicorn mare poking around. I couldn't even tell her mane's colour, it was too dirty on the few strands remaining from weeks of radiation poisoning. Her bony-looking pink body only seemed to be in a worse state, while her cutie mark of some meat on a stick was almost obscured by scars. The rest was covered in rough fabric bandages over festering wounds. She was waving a chunk of rebar at Brimstone after he had entered, her eyes full of panic and seemingly well-prepared to attack out of sheer desperation.

Brimstone was less than subtle about how he dealt with the problem.

"Move away now, or that same rebar will cave in your head. I've no time for this."

I could see this turning violent very quickly. Even I could see the mare wasn't thinking straight, she was just terrified! I knew what it was like to live under the ticking clock of rad-poisoning. Hastily, I moved toward Brimstone. His mood had been slowly turning from regret to anger. Whether at himself or the situation with Glimmer, I couldn't tell.

"Look, let me talk to—"

"I said **move**, mare!"

She shook her head, body shivering and eyes far too wide.

"I said you go away! Th-this is my place! It has the scrap I need! I'm almost done my months. I... just two more weeks I think! No pony has ever done it, I think I can! I... I know who you are! So go away, Warlord! You brought me in here, you won't take my work for freedom away from me! GET BACK!"

I moved over, hopping onto my rear legs and placing my front two on Brim's upper front leg to get his attention.

"She's just scared, Brim! We don't have to—"

"**Enough of this!**"

The air was knocked clean out of me as he swept me to the side roughly and charged forward. The rebar was grabbed in his teeth as I saw him barrel into the mare and knock her behind the collapsed wall out of my sight. I heard her shrieking, until his warcry drowned her out. I huddled into a corner of the ruins, trying to get my lungs to work properly again.

Brimstone emerged, spitting the bloody rebar out and motioning to me that the door was inside, leaving a moaning sound behind him. I could see the wild look in his eyes, and his

entire body trembled with a dying frenzy. Behind him, the mare fled, if such a word could apply. She was limping horribly, and holding her frayed and now blooded clothing to the side of her head.

Any disagreement I had with his method here would go unvoiced. I never wanted that anger directed at me.

It took a lot of willpower for me to get up and follow him to the hidden door half-buried in the ground. It was disguised as an old radiator, just as Weathervane had explained to Brimstone. I kept my eyes averted, not wanting to see the sight of the poor mare as she wailed and tried to gather up what she could before unsteadily fleeing into the smog.

Darkness awaited inside as I crept in ahead of Brimstone. After a few seconds, he followed. But hidden in the corridor, I caught him taking a last look at the dripping rebar, before snarling to himself and slamming his front right hoof into the wall with enough force to dent the metallic corridor and send a ringing noise down it all.

"Fucking damn it. Too much like before. I can't lose you."

It was barely a whisper, but I heard it clearly. It was becoming apparent to me just how badly this situation was affecting the big raider, knowing that the only saviour to his life's direction was at death's door and he was so far away from her.

In a way, I could relate. Both of us were after the same thing, albeit from different approaches. Something to prove we were who we wanted to be. Not who we started as.

Glancing at the thick darkness ahead of us in the metallic corridor, I flicked on the faulty light of the PipBuck and cast it around the entrance. I wasn't terrified of the dark, rather more dark that could contain something, such as whatever it was that Red Eye was worried about coming out of the crater. But right now, I was too afraid of the raider behind me to even consider hesitating in the job. Instead, I pulled off my goggles and left them around my forehead to see better, before advancing past the doorway, and being struck by just how quiet everything suddenly got in here.

Inside was what amounted to a bunker entrance, an empty guard booth sat to one side behind thick glass. I could still see their hat sitting on the chair. Beyond that, perforated metal stairs led down underground past an already open cage gate. Clearly, this was a larger complex than we had been told of. Particles of dust floated in the air from the still atmosphere, but somehow I got the impression it was just as contaminated as outside. We were fifteen minutes in. This had to be quick.

The hooves of my companion clanging off the mesh stairs hardly let the silence be unbroken, so I took the opportunity to move ahead a little and try to stick to the shadows. It gave him some space to think and kept me away from that noise, but the further down I went, the more I was beginning to realise that this stairwell was not ending. It just kept going deeper.

The entire stairway was just one long, cramped way down, with shutters every so often that seemed to have been wedged up. The steel frames, deep shadows, and flickering light of my PipBuck didn't do much to make it seem anything but an intimidating stairway into the underbelly of the crater. Into the heart of the balefire.

I tried to push such imaginary thoughts from my head, but with this place hidden away for years even from Red Eye, I couldn't help but feel like I had stepped into something distinctly *not* in Fillydelphia. Feeling the stairs creak and occasionally bend below me, I wondered what the standards of this place's construction were. After all, it had survived relatively intact under the very site of the megaspell.

Ten feet further, and the darkness gave way to something different to my right. A doorway! There was *one* door at least on this descent. It looked like a small guard post intended into the right hand side wall. If I had to guess, maybe somewhere to go if not on door duty above?

I waved to Brim before disappearing into it. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't much. A small desk, a smashed terminal on it beside a lot of strewn papers and small relics of whatever guard used to spend his days sat away down here. Given the relatively minimal security, I imagined the building that this had once existed under was the real place that would have kept ponies out. After all, this entrance used to be a good forty feet below ground until the balefire wiped it all away.

Kept ponies out, I wondered. Or in?

I sifted through the guard's belongings. A rusted old toaster had been smashed on the floor, and the sink above it gave out only a thick brown goop. Nothing really made sense to my eyes, all written notes and documents beyond my ability to read. With his heavy tread, I saw Brimstone's head poke in through the doorway to what I now knew was likely a common room or shared office space. Briefly, I contemplated asking Brimstone what any of the documents said, but at that moment, I doubted what he needed was me badgering him to be read what this old skeleton's groceries were—

Wait... skeleton!?

I flipped. I hadn't even noticed him, but letting out a terrified yelp, I made a dive over the desk. The pony skeleton had been dumped in the corner, bones cracked and lying around the main body.

Brimstone just grumbled at my reaction, before wandering around to have a look himself. He knocked it with a hoof, snorting.

"Now this just ain't right."

"I... I *hate* skeletons." I was whining and I didn't care, "The past. It's just horrible to think about. I don't like being reminded of it all. I see him or her and then I see a few things on a desk and-and I just can't help putting it all together. These ponies died as they saw their world come apart around them."

Brimstone glared briefly, raising an eyebrow, and poked at the desk, before rotating a small picture. Craning over the furniture, I had a look myself. On it was a montage of six images stapled together. Each showed a buck standing with a toothy grin beside a mare. Weren't those the same ones on the banners in the Mall?

Yes. Yes, they were. Pinkie was there, her eyes staring at an odd angle out of frame. They were looking right at me from the way Brimstone was holding it. I shivered at the uncanny coincidence, before he pulled her glaring eyes away. I could swear they followed me as the angle changed.

"You want the past? This is it. This idiot believed in them but from all I've heard, discovered, and seen over the decades, they were the idiots who messed it all up. Put their hooves in places they shouldn't, made things that never should be, and meddled in magic and technology ponies never should have touched. I don't know the details. Few ponies do. But at the end of the day? It was under their guidance and leadership that the world ended. Too optimistic, too stupid. The world wasn't the perfect paradise you see, Murk. These ponies ruined it with their so-called 'Ministries.'

I peered at the others. One was clearly the 'Rainbow Dash' that Weathervane had mentioned, judging by her mane. I saw the medical poster one too, she looked surprised at

the buck grinning for a photo with her. How could she have caused anything? I surmised that perhaps the others just did things. Pinkie, probably. That yellow and pink one was too nice looking to do anything, I was sure of it.

"That buck really loved them, didn't he?"

"Foolish idiot. But that isn't him lying here."

His back hoof tapped the skeleton, nudging the skull to fall to the floor. I winced, before turning back to the raider. He nodded at the skeleton.

"That's fresh. No cobwebs, no mould. Somepony died down here within a week or so. Wasn't rad-poisoning, before you go on that theory."

I blinked as he wandered out of the room.

"Why? What tells you that?"

"Rad-poisoning doesn't crack your bones in two for marrow, Murk."

I felt every hair on my neck stand on end as the shattered leg bones suddenly made horrifying sense. Backing away into the corridor, I averted my eyes and shook as I leaned on the wall. I might have cried for them, but my attention was instead drawn by an all too familiar sound.

Beep!

I was getting used to it. I didn't jump or even squeal from the sudden noise.

Well, perhaps a little hop... and maybe a squeak.

Beep!

Brimstone's harsh glance looked accusingly at me as my PipBuck began to blip and beep. I'd turned off the sound! How on Equestria had that dial turned around again? Was it on automatic? Sighing, I turned it back down to a level that only I might hear what the apparent automated audio diary had to say.

"Hah! Sundial scores! Heh, sorry, wanted to try opening one of these things a little excitedly. Oh boy, is that gonna sound embarrassing when I listen back to it or what?"

I couldn't stifle a giggle. After today, after all that had happened in my life since the Pit, I couldn't help but enjoy Sundial's more innocent times. His worries that someone might laugh at something he said? What a world when that was your real concern. Not like mine.

"So, uh, basically, yeah. I asked her."

Oh! I gasped slightly, feeling my cheeks turn up in excitement. What had she said?

"And well, she said yes! I got a date! Well, I had one, since I'm recording this at night. Skydancer. She's just... she's just wonderful! Everything I said, she responded to. She makes me laugh! I tell you, she has a mean sense of humour too. We're meeting again tomorrow night before she heads off to Manehattan on a delivery. I just... wow. How did she come into my life like that? To just appear from nowhere, help me, and then immediately become so important?"

I could believe it. I'd met two mares who had done the same for me. Littlepip and, well, the mare. I really wished I could see her again.

"So yeah, times are good. Well, my times are. Equestria wide, not so much. My old man's not too pleased that I'm still working for the Ministry of Wartime Technology. You know, Ministry Mare Applejack came to meet us at the new factory yesterday too! She's incredible, really. Totally on our side, aiming to have us make more armour than weapons, and even hinting that we may get to work on some new project soon. I coulda sworn she looked a little upset as she spoke of it being made to protect the ponies from having to die like... yeah, I had guessed it was about her brother. Big damn hero, that

stallion. But I've signed up to the work. Longer hours, sure. But a higher pay and I get to protect ponies! These Ministries aren't so bad, really. They do want to help us, I don't believe what they all say quietly about them. Although Pinkie Pie is kinda freaky. A little grating to see everywhere you go. Heh, she even sent me a personally written birthday card this year. Nice but, well, weird."

Conflicting reports, but between a lovely young buck in Equestria of old and a borderline psychotic raider trying to drop the habit of anger and killing, I knew who I would trust to believe. I sensed Sundial and I would agree mightily on the merits of being watched forever by Pinkie Pie.

"And just to end off, I kinda need this higher pay. I've decided to start saving now. If Skydancer and I become a... y'know, thing? Well, somepony has to be able to pay for a second Stable ticket, right? Okay, night shift time. Wow I'm-I'm properly happy. Hopefully all this war business blows over and Skydancer and I can just spend time. Well, I'll um, see you later. Alright, that just sounds weird every time, what should I say though?"

Beats me.

"Argh! Dammit, I forgot to talk about my cutie mark again! I promise! I'll get to that next time! So, yeah, happy Sundial signing off. Bye bye!"

"Bye..."

"What was that?"

My eyes shot upwards. I'd been following Brimstone further down into the complex without even really realising.

"Oh! Um, nothing. Just me being weird, I guess."

Brimstone seemed to take that as a satisfactory conclusion (wait a moment...) and turned back to what was in front of us. The complex had opened out into a room lit by a single almost non-functional strobe light above. It was pretty big, stretching perhaps ten feet upwards and about fifteen to the other end where a huge metallic door was clearly locked shut up a flight of mesh stairs. All around us there were vents in the floor, long since disabled no doubt.

But my eyes were instead drawn to the way it was decorated. Little slips of paper covered the walls and floor. Were they pamphlets? Tribal designs were haphazardly coated on the walls. I recognised them. They were like Brimstone Blitz's.

"Zebra war paint designs. I chose them to scare other ponies, but this..."

He learned closer, reading the words of a slip of paper.

"It says, 'The Blessed Children of the Striped Way'. Well, there's a mouthful. What the hell is this? Zebra cults under Fillydelphia?"

I honestly hadn't got a clue to even answer. But even as I stood up, I jumped on hearing a light scuffing nearby. What was that? Where did it come from? I backed off toward the door in fright as my eyes ran from side to side. *Where had that noise come from!?*

"Murk? What's wrong?"

"Something in here..."

I heard another... and another, little dry shifts of material on metal. Then clicks. I knew that sound. I'd had enough of them pointed at me over the years to scare me.

Safety catches on firearms.

Below!

"Brimstone! Watch out! The vents!"

I was almost too late. The first vent erupted open in a burst of dry air as a black, white and rotten figure hauled itself up from the duct beneath it. Ghouls!

Brimstone was just adjacent to it. If I hadn't shouted, they may have got him. But forewarned, his left hind leg lashed out and kicked the vent right back down on its hinges so hard it left a dent as the lid crashed down on the occupant. A sickening crunch of metal colliding with flesh and bone rung out, and the vent slammed shut again with the figure slumping away.

It wasn't enough, all around us more were popping up. They weren't zebras! I could see them clearly, ghoul ponies painted in zebra stripes over their barding and weaponry. Clambering from the holes in an ambush, they completely surrounded us. Behind me, I heard a crash as wall panels ripped out and two more galloped down the hall at me. Hideous, dry war cries filled the chamber.

Brimstone either didn't notice or didn't care for all the intimidation as he hurled himself at the nearest ones. One front hoof roughly knocked a pistol from the magical grip of a unicorn while he threw his entire weight on one that was still trying to get out of the vent. Flattening it, Brimstone's hooves beat the first ghoul's head off the ground twice before a quick twist hurled the unconscious body at his comrades. Three more fell as they attempted to cluster together for a charge.

A shotgun roared. I saw a zebra-coloured ghoul collapse against the wall as Brim threw him in the path of the shot. Struggling to sort his aim from the massive recoil, the ghoul was bucked square in the chest into the wall where he lay silent.

There was nothing I could do. I ran. In these places, with no way out, I did what I had always done.

Found a corner and curled up.

Gunfire echoed a dozen times in this small space. How they missed Brimstone was beyond me, or was he just *that* good that he had known when to dodge behind some wounded ghouls? He was using the cramped arena and their thick numbers against them even as his colossal size allowed him to simply pound anypony he met into the ground with unyielding force.

But that same size was his weakness. It didn't take them long to figure it out before I heard the carefully aimed shotgun blast.

I wanted to scream. But as I saw the mighty raider rock to the side and grunt in pain before staggering into the wall, I knew it was over. Blood flowed from his side where buckshot had split open a dozen wounds. The ghoul took aim to finish it.

A flare of green magic flew across the chamber, striking the ceiling and lighting everything with a brilliant emerald haze. Under a trickling of molten metal from the searing wound in the roof, the ghouls turned in shock before backing off immediately. I had just screamed and hit the floor. Whatever that was, it was one *intense* weapon.

"Stay your judgement, my children!"

A ghoul. A unicorn buck by the looks of it, bearing black and white robes. Straggly, dyed white hair fell in single strands from his head. Held in his magic was an ornate yet rusted magical energy pistol that looked like it could incinerate a brahmin in a single shot. As every ghoul in the chamber bowed to him, I galloped over to Brim before realising; what could I really do? His right foreleg was badly wounded to the point where he could do little but limp. With a snort, he cast me away before pushing himself up, stamping the injured leg a few times and swearing colourfully enough to make me blush. How dare he talk about Luna

that way!

"Pilgrims! You approach our sanctuary with strange intent. Tell me, do you bear the signs that shall stay our hand? Did those in the Station send you?"

The ghoul... priest? What was he? Whatever he was, he moved toward us. I stood between him and Brimstone, before realising how pointless that was.

"We, um, we came to find some things for a friend! Things we were told were here, anti, um, anti ra... some sort of stuff that helps against rads used in making medicine and some silver bouncy ball."

Yup. Definitely a born trader, Murky.

The ghouls hissed to themselves as their leaders eyes narrowed, before trotting around me.

"You speak of heretical relics, little one." he spoke with a raspy voice while waving his glowing horn over me, "It is good you survive! For they have brought us a gifted one! You are blessed!"

He must have seen my confused look. Blessed? *Clearly* he had no idea about my life. Before I could voice my reasons, he continued.

"I speak of the gift within you that I can sense. An ever expanding source of the great striped blessing!"

Wait, the striped blessing? Inside me? It took a few seconds, but even my brain began to piece it together, only for Brimstone to voice it first.

"You— ergh, you idiots believe the zebras blessed you with radiation? What a load of—"

"Yes, warrior. Did we not once worship the sun long ago? The zebras brought many suns to eradicate the misery we had become in the shadow below the moon of nightmares! In their wake we have been blessed with the purity of the flame! To be converted and blessed for all eternity that we may continue the work of the striped ones! That was what they gave to us, the will to carry on their mission even as the world was cast in brightness. You have been chosen, little one, by birth I sense, not as we were by those who came to this city."

I could see his horn glowing again. He must have had medical training to spot my irradiated infection. Had he been an associate of Weathervane back in Old Equestria if he knew about this place? I glanced at Brimstone to check his condition, but much to my surprise, barring the injury holding him back, the big raider seemed to be fairly calm and conscious. Judging by his scars, I could only assume he had been through worse in life.

"Look, I... we can take those 'heretical' things off your hooves, no trouble?"

"No. They are a reminder of our past, little one. But I do invite you and your partner inside. His markings denote he has a liking to our blessed faith. Perhaps you will learn, as we did, and understand why you are special. But we cannot risk the great deceiver or the bringer of the past to touch the items that would give them power."

"The who?"

"The great deceiver! The one of us who left our cause in early days to commit heresy! To create substances to purge the blessing of the stripes from those who would be its children! Who took our great prophet and leader to hold him in eternal confinement!"

Weathervane. They were talking about Doctor Weathervane. Had that crazed ghoul he had locked up been their old leader? Just what had happened over two centuries between these ghouls?

"As for the bringer of the past, he is the one who conquered the surface, that place we will one day hope to bring ruin to. That is what we were tasked. When they told us. Take Fillydelphia. We will liberate the blessed from his baleful gaze."

Red Eye! They were fighting him? That explained the defences around the crater. It was against ghouls attacks from a hidden lair they hadn't known about.

"Now, I must ask you to enter. My children here are eager, and do not see the gift within you. Come!"

I wasn't sure. These ghouls were *insane*. Radiation as a blessing? Becoming a skinless rotten and living corpse was the true way forward? The gift of the zebras? Someone who told them to fight against Equestria? I wanted to just get out of there, but the items we needed were no doubt inside. Besides, looking at the fanatical and heavily armed ghouls, it's not like we had a choice.

I genuinely hadn't expected it. My mind had imagined cold hard metal labs and a layout similar to the chunks of Stables I'd seen in Red Eye's scrapyards. Instead the inside was warm, full of rich wood textures, and more open than I might have ever expected. Above us lay a polished wooden carving, bearing three butterflies in a glittering pattern, their patterns lit with glittering gems. Clearly Equestria's medical research had enjoyed their comforts in the hidden workplaces. I saw offshoot corridors, stairs to a higher open-plan level, and several secured rooms. The furniture was soft and bright red. Faded perhaps, but the soft leather looked comfortable all the same.

Dozens of ghouls wandered around, both mares and bucks. I saw two of them sharing a tender moment of an embrace nearby. They were all speaking a language I could not understand. Zebra, I guessed, although I wondered how they had learned that, if so. Traders stood by their tables, a teacher was explaining how to repair a spark generator to three others. This was a full community! The only real offputting elements were the tribal markings everywhere in white and black paint, and the dead plants that languished as unclean piles near the corners. Only that made this seem anything other than a perfectly peaceful little ghoul home. Given how lonely I normally was, I could appreciate the comfort of it.

And yet, the way these ghouls interacted unsettled me. They had wide eyes, their rotted mouths almost held in forced grins at times. Some looked around as though hearing things even I didn't. Occasionally, one would seem to chant something in a strange language.

Trotting past those strange individuals, I could easily feel that this place was just as irradiated as everywhere else. My Rad-X was beginning to wear off. I could feel my windpipe beginning to itch. How long had it been? Twenty five minutes? *We had* to settle this now. If I could gallop the whole way perhaps I'd be fine.

"Tell me, little one. Why do you desire the relics?"

The ghoul advanced beside me, a good few feet ahead of the others that formed a protective barrier around Brimstone. I wasn't sure for which side. It seemed this leader had taken me as the speaker for us here due to my tainted lung infection.

"We have a friend. She is dying."

"My condolences, what of?"

"Radiation poisoning."

Every ghoul in the vicinity paused. There was a moment of silence before a delighted and sick cheering went up from every ghoul I could hear. Wincing, I fell to the ground and desperately covered my ears.

"Bless your friends' soul! For she is blessed to travel down the path without even requiring our aid! This is a wondrous event!"

It took fourteen guards to restrain Brimstone. Snarling, biting, and bucking, he was eventually pulled to the ground in his efforts to kill the leader. Four of the ghouls were injured in the process before they finally got a good grip through numbers. After a gun butt to his injured hoof, the big stallion growled in pain and shook his mane out, his eyes fixed unrelentingly on the ghoul. I mentally pleaded with him to remain still. I didn't want to see him hurt.

I wanted to protest it, but the moment I did that all too hated feeling returned. That convulsing cough that signalled that my radiation poisoning was beginning to grow. My airway was rougher, beginning to burn.

"You show good signs yourself. This is what they told us would happen. The world would light, and then we would take Fillydelphia for their gift. Come, little one. We should be away from this place. Allow me to show you what we truly aspire to."

"One... one second. Please."

The ghoul nodded gently as I cantered back to Brimstone. Kneeling down beside his head, I spoke quietly to him, hoping that none of the ghouls watching him from a few feet away with weapons would hear...

"I think I can do something here. I'm the little sneaky thief, remember? Look, you're injured. Please, let me do this for you, Brimstone. Give me some space here. Let me help Glimmerlight."

The big raider almost got me to run scared from his glare. But eventually, he nodded.

"Just scream if you need me to kick things off. But in ten minutes I'm going regardless. She can't wait."

"I'll try. Look, take the potion. I know it's for me, but you need it."

Brimstone looked almost confused for a second, shocked as I drew it from my saddlebag and passed it over. Eventually, taking it closer to him with a scornful look of being 'helped', he shook his head.

"Why do *you* care?"

"I... I just do. I'd want somepony to do it for me."

He looked about ready to say something, but thought better of it and looked away. Rising to my hooves, I struggled to comprehend the responsibility I'd just given myself. I'd wanted a chance to prove to myself that I wasn't just going to always hide and run away. Greater fears would eat at me in many places, but in this moment, I had to take the chance that perhaps things could go right for once.

"My name is Magister Heartcare, little one. Yours is Murk. We heard you coming in to lay our prepared defence. Did you not think we would have detection grids? Now, what I am to show you is our home and our most sacred place. In preparation for my question to you."

He wasn't lying. Home truly was the word. We passed through corridors that showed sleeping areas, living rooms with musty old cushions for sitting on and chatting, or various workshops turning scrap into useful tools. It wasn't large, perhaps fifty ghouls according to Heartcare (I guessed it was from his old medical profession), but it felt oddly safe and secure. I quite envied them. For a ghoul this was truly somewhere to be.

Provided you had some crazed cult belief, anyway. I still questioned how that had come about. I'd never heard of such a thing, and they kept talking as though they'd been turned to it.

Heartcare carried on, before waving into one of the rooms. It looked like a converted supply cupboard.

"This is our weapons armoury, as we were instructed to keep. You are lucky I saw you for what you are. A potential convert blessed by radiation. Someday these will be the tools to bring about the revolution in the name of the striped blessing."

I was taken into a cramped, old room with a single workbench in the middle surrounded by rows of stuffed shelves. I saw firearms of all shapes and sizes, including a few... oh gosh! Battle saddles! The Magister seemed to chuckle in amusement as I hopped to and fro, handling and looking at them all. That was it! Sign me up! They had ones that could fit four small guns, two big guns, and even ones for big single-barrel artillery! All the handles, the gears... oooh, they were amazing! I wanted to try them on. I'd have to draw myself in one later!

"I see you enjoy our stocks, Murk. We have learned over the many years what kinds to keep and which to throw away. For example..."

He floated his magical energy pistol out, checking the battery slot as he did so. I watched the little release slide cause the housing to retract and expose the internals alongside the battery itself that acted as, I presumed, a magazine for shots. Pleased that it was still holding charge from the shot earlier, he closed the slide. Surprisingly, he drifted it near me. Staring at it, I noticed him nod for me to take the pistol.

"Do feel the weight, Murk. Understand we care for our things. Of course, I also wish to show that I trust you to not do harm. I want to know you as one of my people. That is the first step to any companionship, is it not? Trust. We were told to seek more."

I wouldn't really know. I'd never been able to fully trust anypony. I reached forward, biting the grip in my mouth, and immediately overcompensating. The energy pistol was light! Not just without much weight but almost like a feather! Twisting my head about, I quickly understood both how well made this weapon was to my rather basic knowledge, and how awkward mouth held guns really were.

Heartcare moved around the armoury, turning away from me to tidy one of the benches while tutting at its idly dumped cleaning kit and several flat discs that I recognised as explosives. I let the pistol drop into my hooves and turned it over a few times, playing around with it.

"I do so try to have them keep it organised, and these mines should have been put away hours ago. This is also where we keep the minor elements of heretical material. For all their harmful traits to us, the unblessed 'medical' liquid makes a good lubricant for our tools if properly prepared."

He pointed a hoof to a locked glass cabinet. I recognised the clear liquid sachets from a couple in Weathervane's lab. Anti-radiation water... gel... stuff. I winced as I saw the keypad lock. So much for stealing a key this time.

"Murk, I realise I am dodging around the issues here. There is your future to show. Please, follow me."

I didn't particularly feel like hearing much talk right now. After hoofing over the pistol again, I felt my chest clench badly before I began to walk. This was taking too long. Too much chit-chat and nicety that was letting the radiation slowly build up. Soon I'd be feeling

My thoughts died that moment as I felt my entire body quake. Oh no...

The coughing took a full twenty seconds to subside. I almost blacked out from the pain in my lungs as I felt a metallic tang in my mouth... blood. I must have fallen against the desk, dozens of various coloured mines had collapsed all around me. Shaking and feeling tears drip from my face at the sheer pain, I clenched my teeth and got up. I... I wanted to run away. I wanted to just abandon all this. But then what would I be left with, the guilt and a lack of self confidence all over again? I had to press on. I had to. I had to prove to Brimstone that I wanted to save her too. Show him I was worthwhile to have around and build trust.

Heartcare had moved on to await me catching up. Good. With a cheeky slip in the saddlebag I added a little... insurance, to my presence here, before pushing on after him. Even if things turned out fine, it'd do well to keep me in good stead with Barb.

A temple. This place... had a temple. Were the doctors of old highly religious? Was it for ponies who were being treated in this odd underground place? Had it been built over two hundred years by insane ponies? Whatever the reason, it was here, and it was... well, strange.

White smooth and polished rock raised up high to a pitch dark ceiling. Recognising the colours and shapes embossed on them, I lowered my head respectfully as I looked in the entrance before offering a small prayer to Celestia and Luna for my deliverance. However, the architecture wasn't what drew my eyes. Inside, there were several small pods like large eggs, each one about big enough to fit a pony inside it. They were hooked up to what looked like some sort of radiator that was half-embedded in the 'shell' of each pod. All were connected to one generator at the back. No two of them were the same, like they'd been built from parts found in the crater and then painted to look majestic. However, all of the ghouls present reacted to my sudden and somewhat revealing gasp as my eyes spotted my objective!

The silver sphere sat to one side of the room on a pedestal! All I had to do was grab it!

The Magister nodded to the two guards and turned to me.

"Murk, here you see our nexus of worship. We like to remind ourselves of the past, and of those that told us how to live all this time to carry out what they wanted. These incubators are the basis of our purity. Furthermore, to centralise ourselves, we have kept the heretical silver orb you referred to within this room. Its presence is, to remind us of the dangers the blessing faces from those who seek to stop us, to stop the final victory. Now I must leave you briefly. There are matters that need attending to decide whether to offer this to your companion as well. I shall return momentarily. Feel free to look around, however there are some restrictions as I am sure you must understand. Any guards will instruct you on the particulars."

Incu-whats?

Throwing the question away, I nodded, beginning to feel a little bit more at ease with all this. The slave in me was happy to follow instructions, especially if they helped the more free part of my mind do what it wanted to! Watching the ghoul sweep away in his fancy robes, I immediately turned to the shrine they had built. The two guards stood unmoving. Wait,

were they pegasi!?

They were! I could see the rotted wings drooped at their sides. These ghouls, they didn't care for it!

A part of me almost broke down. Here was a place that truly didn't care and it was one place that I could never settle in. Their environment would kill me within the hour. I could feel my limbs beginning to shake and my skin itch already.

I couldn't wait around. Time to go in there and see about snatching that orb! I trotted forward, only to find those rotten ghouls snapping into a cross before me. Their voices cut in across one another.

"Halt!"

"You may enter, but know this!"

"The unconverted within—"

"—may not leave!"

I leapt back, staggering on my hooves before realising they weren't attacking me. Suppressing the urge to let my envy of moveable wings get the better of me, I trotted back up. I nodded to them. Fine, I wouldn't bring whoever was in there they considered to be unconverted or whatever back out. I wasn't interfering with their prisoners. I was only interested in the sphere!

The wings descended as I trotted through, hearing my hooves making sharper taps on the marble flooring. This place was so clean. I'd never seen anything so smooth in my life. My eyes fell upon a curious doorway at the back. It was enormous, some sort of powered industrial seal that took up most of the wall.

In fact, perhaps this room wasn't so beautiful after all. Freaky pods, a stored megaspell, and a strange door under the guard of ghouls pegasi? Something was amiss.

I desperately wanted to take my RadAway, but I had a horrible feeling the ghouls wouldn't appreciate it in their more sacred place. No, something was definitely not right here.

I found it the moment I looked in one of the pods.

And saw her.

A little filly. She lay in a small curled up ball, crying quietly into her front hooves. Barely more than six or seven years old.

A ghouls.

I almost screamed at the thought. A foal? She was just a foal? Did the balefire have no mercy!? Even as my hooves clunked on the clear glass of the incubator to look in, I saw her stir and turn while I found the urge to break down on the spot.

"No... I don't want to stay here. I want to go home..."

Her voice was corrupted. What once would have been a high-pitched and cute was just like any other ghouls, only so much more tiny and tragic. I couldn't help it as I felt my eyes become wet. Her tiny hooves hopped up onto the inside of the glass opposite mine as she saw I wasn't one of 'them.'

"I... you..." I tried to form the words.

"Can you take me home? I want to go *home!*"

Suddenly, it all made sense.

Protégé had been hunting for a filly of Red Eye's that had gone missing. The ghouls claimed radiation was their purifying blessing. They had talked of 'converting' those with the gift. Then the last piece of the puzzle... these pods.

My blood ran cold. I backed away from the pod slowly as I saw the ghoulish filly tapping the glass, her remaining hair from her mane flopping to and fro.

They were *making* ponies into ghouls!

They had made Starshine Mel... oh Goddesses... no.

My mind ran amok. I wanted to throw up. To corrupt healthy ponies into this, how many of them had been forced through this? How many had been simply killed by whatever these pods did? There was too much wrong here. Children didn't deserve such horror. If Red Eye and I shared one thing, it was *this*.

"S-Starshine Melody?"

"That's me! That's me! Please, mister! I want to go *hooooome!*"

The last line was wailed at a high pitch that rasped and broke in equal measures. The filly was being traumatised by her own speech changing as much as her body having been ruined. I *had* to get her out of here.

"I... I'll try Melody, I have a friend, he'll get you out, okay? Just, uh, please don't cry, it'll be fine. Protégé, you know him? He's looking too."

'Don't cry'. Yeah, that advice was just *fantastic* coming from me. Her eyes lit up at the mention of Protégé. Was he known to the foals? I cast my eyes around for anything to help. That silver sphere still sat there, while I could hear strange noises from behind the barrier. I'd heard them before, behind the oaken door in Weathervane's home. Feral ghoulish ponies. Lots of feral ghoulish ponies. For a second I didn't understand, before it became obvious. The ghouls here were capturing them, or putting the ones they'd turned into a containment room for use in their eventual war.

How many ghouls did they have locked away in there, ready to surge across Red Eye's operations from within? This entire thing was messed up and confusing as to what had driven ponies to act like this. They were forcibly contaminating, killing, and degrading ponies into these things! I had to tell Protégé. If they got loose then so many slaves could die.

"Little Murk. I see you have met our latest convert and accepted our offer yourself."

I swerved to face the Magister. He stood resplendent in his robes, flanked by the two guards as they marched in. I trotted toward them. I needed out to get Brimstone Blitz, but stopped as I realised, they weren't just standing in the entrance, they were blocking it.

"What have you *done* to her?"

My question was not as confident as it sounded beside the anguish I felt at the foal's life being *ruined* by these fanatics! I felt my voice break as I tried to articulate it all into voice.

"She has been saved. Joining our—"

"*She's just a foal!* I-I've seen enough, I want out. I need to talk to my—"

"Did the guards not tell you, Murk? You may enter, but the unconverted may not leave."

"But she's there, she's not..."

I paused mid sentence as the reality began to dawn. They hadn't meant just her. They meant *in general*.

They meant me too.

I panicked, galloping suddenly to try and rush past them. The two guards, driven by pegasus agility to match my own, were not taxed to grab me and wrestle me back in with little effort.

"Oh, I am sorry, Murk, if you did not realise. But you must see this as the best solution. You hate Red Eye, that much I can see. The bringer of the past shall fall to us and you shall

help! Bless you, Murk! For we grant you a rare gift not seen in aeons since the great fire!”

He raised his hooves in the air as he reared back, before looking down at me.

“Slumber in the incubator, Murk. Immortality awaits.”

“I don’t want it. I just want to see Brimstone.”

Heartcare smirked, before nodding the guards forward.

“You imply you have a choice. Bless this poor pony, children. He will see the truth eventually.”

The guards lashed forward, grabbing my hooves and torso. I struggled against their foul sickly bodies, screaming and thrashing as best I could. Slowly, inexorably, I was pulled into the pod opposite Starshine Melody’s. I could see her wailing and hammering on the glass. Despite my best efforts, the guards stuffed me in. There was only one other thing I could do. I took a deep breath.

“BRIMSTONE, HELP!”

The cry ended in a spluttered cough as I was bundled in and the pod shut while incapacitated. Blood sprayed over my hooves from my mouth as I struggled to breathe.

“Bless him! Purge the corruption from this poor child’s body! In the name of the great zebra stripes, we commend him to *purity!*”

The pod activated as I saw the three ghouls bobbing their heads, chanting and screaming verse in the zebra tongue. A low-pitched whirring gave way to a pulsating hum, and the air became warm. The radiator-like machine beside me in the pod began to glow. A sickly incandescent lime green quickly filled my vision. The throbbing of the pressure was making my head hurt. I thrashed around, kicking up the pillows and covers for more willing participants as my hooves battered the tough glass.

My PipBuck suddenly wailed with a horrible mess of static as something in it reacted to the overwhelming levels of radiation, like a whirring, clicking, and squealing all combined. The screen was trying to flash something. My entire body was warming up as I felt my inner chest cavity swelling, burning, convulsing. I couldn’t see! The green had filled my vision and imprinted on my eyes that I couldn’t even see the outside. Only the cacophony of their chanting resounded in my head as the machine worked up a gear and I began to feel my very flesh burning. Vision swam as I collapsed.

No. Becoming a ghoul... I didn’t want it. I didn’t want it! It would just make me a slave for all eternity! A fate worse than my own even now!

One last, desperate, idea formed, and I reached into my saddlebag for the mine I’d hidden in there. I heard the Magister scream something as he saw it from outside. Briefly, I worried if this would just kill me, but matters were too desperate. Better dead than enslaved! I slid the safety catch away and hoofed the pressure plate before jamming it into the radiator machine thing. I curled up with my back to it, pulling the sheets and pillow inside around me, for what good they would do. At least I’d stop them from using this ever again!

I was a little disappointed when it didn’t explode.

I was very *surprised* when every single machine in the area started exploding instead!

The mine hadn’t blown up. Instead, it had whined and sent a blue, arcing magical spark that enveloped the entire pod and gave me a shock that was more uncomfortable than truly painful, making my mane stand on end. A whine from the machines grew louder until the generator the pod was attached to detonated with a sharp bang, sending shrapnel flying off my pod all around the room.

The green glow died away as the power died and deactivated the lock. Taking the small

chance, I put my shaky and weakened strength into pushing it off. The Magister and guards were down, staggering around with wounds from flying machinery when I dropped to the ground, my vision swimming. Cables sparkled around the floor, and pods popped their lids with their generators discharging green magical energy in savage arcs. The mine had to have been some sort of anti-machine one, a happenstance I was enormously thankful for, or I'd likely have been diced within that pod.

My body was weak. All the flesh on one side of my body felt singed and tingly while my throat was swollen and half-wheezing on every breath. Even as I staggered up I felt my stomach churn before throwing up next to the pod.

Oh, that was a lot of blood...

Pulling my goggles on against the smoke, I looked for Starshine Melody. Almost falling from hoof to hoof, I dragged out my RadAway and set to sachet in my mouth before almost tripping rather than trotting toward the next pod.

"Star—"

I coughed again, spraying RadAway over the dead machine. No, no! I couldn't waste any! Desperately hoofing the packet, I tried to rescue as much as I could while looking around.

"Starshine! Are... where are you?"

The little filly was terrified, curled up near the edge and wailing in that raspy little ghoulish voice.

"Come on! We're going home-ergh..."

Her wet little eyes were quivering as she stopped and looked at me.

"Are we?"

"Yes! On my back, quickly!"

It wasn't fast enough. The guard was on me. He was badly wounded, but managed to shove me over with sheer weight and howl in my face before trying to restrain me. I felt a hoof slap the side of my head once. Twice. The third I felt being pulled back, before ceasing as the guard fell sideways from Starshine leaping onto his head and biting his ear. Brave filly! She'd bought me a second, but what could I do? I had no weapon.

Oh wait... yes I did!

I reached below my stomach, grabbed it from my stash pocket, and with a sharp swing, swiped the metal ruler across the face of the ghoulish. With the sharp slap of impact, he cried out in agony, going down as it left a searing mark across both eyes and his snout. I felt elated and powerful. Never underestimate the metal ruler! At least I knew he could regenerate. No guilt from this one!

"Quickly, Starshine! Hop up!"

I knelt down, trying to ignore my stomach clenching to cough as she clambered up. Feeling her hooves around my neck, I was very glad for the high neckline I'd sewn into it, as I saw her wasted-away skin. Staggering over, I grabbed the silver spell sphere, slid it into my saddlebag and tried to find my way to the exit in all the machinery's dying smoke plumes. My entire body was failing, but I'd survived! I'd even knocked over a guard and was rescuing a foal! Was this what it felt like to be a hero like Littlepip?

"Watch out!"

Starshine's warning turned to a scream as I felt somepony grabbing her, trying to pull her off me. The Magister had found us and was howling as he yanked at the poor kid.

"You will not take my child! She is ours! THEY TOLD ME I NEEDED TO DO THIS!"

I was weak. I was a coward. But I did *not* appreciate foals being harmed! Stopping all resistance, I hopped backwards, raised my right back hoof, and shot it directly under the Magister to impact that little sweet spot that *anypony* could do harm to, no matter how weak they were!

As it turned out, ghouls made very strange sounds when bucked in the happy sack. I felt him writhe and fall off of Starshine before I kept moving for the door. Almost there... almost there. My energy was running low. I wasn't built for fighting.

I stopped as a blaring alarm sounded in the room, causing me to stagger when my whirling senses were further impaired. The noise was so loud it threw off the balance from my ears. I heard a shuddering clank behind me, and the great door began to rise. Its locking mechanism pinged and detached, its own powered seal breaking from the mine.

"Get him! Get him my purest of converts! He seeks to take her from us!"

A dozen green glowing eyes and organs illuminated from within began staring at me, more and more adding on the further the door rose. With throaty roars they began to lurch forward, too many for me to quickly count. Foals, bucks, mares. Every one of them a feral nightmare.

Oh... *fudge*.

I found Brimstone in the main corridor smacking a ghoul into the wall so hard that they just seemed to crumple. Clearly he had found and raided the armoury, for I saw multiple bent weapons all across the ground and a sack of anti-radiation fluid across his back. Great! Just great!

"Murk! Who's the filly!?"

I didn't even stop. Racing by him I just kept going.

"Run, Brim!"

"The sphere—"

"I've got it! *Just run!*"

"You-you got it?"

I just screamed over my shoulder as I worked my little hooves as fast as they could go toward the exit.

"BRIM, JUST RUN!"

Brimstone snorted before turning and seeing what was following me. His eyes went wide.

"Oh... *fuck!*"

We burst from the hidden doorway at top speed. The moment I hit the looser earth, my speed slowed from the extra weight of Starshine on my back. She was still squealing at the howling of the ghouls behind us, making me wince every time she screamed in my ears. I felt myself go down, tripping in the loose earth until Brimstone threw her on his back instead. I could swear her scream was more at *him*.

Pandemonium broke loose the moment the ghouls emerged. Exploding forth like a tide of rotting zombie flesh, and galloping with uncanny ease across the dusty crater base, they quickly drew attention. Slaves cried out, panic broke loose, and everypony in the immediate

area fled in all directions. Those wooden 'shoes' were good for balance but terrible to gallop in. All around us, I heard screams and shouts to the slavers on the wall for aid. Blood-curdling howls roared into the sky as the ghouls fell upon such a cluster of weak ponies. Streaming through the ruined carcass of a few buildings, I saw slaves being run down by the horde as they fell to the ground. Agonised wails as they were bloodily ripped apart set my heart to clamp. Or perhaps that was the radiation doing that. Every step now, I could feel my lungs complaining. My vision was darkening. I couldn't fall now, not now!

Above us, I could hear screams for the guns on the smaller wall. Slavers were running to and fro. Spotting the ghoul rush, I saw griffons dive from above. Somewhere nearby, a slaver actually *in* the pit itself was trying to direct slaves toward a gate. The voice was familiar. Was that Protégé?

I wasn't given the time to think as a zombie spotted me, its glowing eyes seethed as it brayed and galloped for me. Screaming in return, I hopped on top of a wooden plank amongst the scrap, using it to give me purchase. I heard it thrashing in the earth, kicking up dirt in all directions as it ploughed toward me. Gunfire was whizzing to all sides across the gap between juts of burned rock, cutting down ghouls and even slaves who were just in the wrong place. I saw the wounded ghouls still pulling themselves to the now lame, injured slaves.

Without a thought, I galloped for that gap and dove aside as a burst of gunfire slapped with a dull noise into the earth, kicking up little plumes in my wake. Maybe somepony would shoot it! Maybe! Brimstone had disappeared. Please, someone shoot it! The ghoul leapt, hooves extended as I cried out. With a horrific rip of flesh it landed on me, hooves scrambling at my body as blood splashed all over me.

It fell limp. I didn't feel any new pain.

The blood was coming from its neck stump, a sniper's bullet had blown it clean off. Above me, I saw a griffon throw me an obscene gesture. It was Ragini!

Some of the cult had stormed outside. Fire was exchanged with the griffons above as zebra war cries emitted mixed with staccato gunfire. Ragini swerved in the air, gliding off behind buildings as I heard that voice again. It *was* Protégé! I could see him through the gaps, leading guards down into the crater itself to form a cordon against the oncoming horde. There must have been dozens of Heartcare's ghouls swarming up now! I saw him directing the guards with gestures of his hoof as his revolver slapped rounds at the oncoming cult and forced them into cover. Amongst the shattered ruin of the crater, a confusing, brutal and terrible firefight was mixed in with a desperate and unarmed rush of ponies escaping howling ferals. Yet Protégé cried out, directing slavers to cut down those attacking groups of slaves, while waving above him. The griffons, led by Ragini, responded. They flew overhead at speed, landing atop a cage of rebar behind the cultists themselves, flanking and pouring fire into them.

I wanted to run to Protégé, benefit from his clear orders to help everypony get out of here in one piece, but everything was too chaotic. Ghouls were now mixed in with slaves fighting for their lives around me while griffons weaved through buildings, dropping grenades on large concentrations of the horrors. The kick of the explosives blew earth across everything. Bewildered, sick, dizzy, and tired, I found myself lost amidst it all.

I ran, I needed to find somewhere safe, to get out of the crater. But my hooves were like lead, slowing me down and becoming clumsy. Even taking a second to sit on some wood for a breath in safety led to the entire thing cracking beneath me and plunging me down the

slope once again. The noise was absolute, nothing standing out but for the screams of the slaves caught and torn up. Beside me I saw a dead—

It wasn't dead!

The ghoul had been blown in half by the grenades, but continued crawling toward me, its distended tongue lolling out to the side. Unearthly noises hemorrhaged from its throat as it pulled itself after the ever-slowing escape I made. I tried to throw rocks. It didn't care. I swiped my ruler at it and just got it covered in icky goo before having to roll to dodge it. It just didn't care!

Brimstone's hoof *made* it care.

After wiping the mucus from his hoof on the now sand-like dirt, he cast his head around.

"Hope you appreciate it, squirt. Just happened to be in my way."

I nodded, before screaming. I saw a magically flung rock crack off of Brimstone's forehead. Stunned, the raider staggered before turning to the new threat as. Through all the dust and swirling battle, I saw the Magister advance on us, his magical energy weapon pointed directly at Brimstone.

"You two ruined everything! You desecrated our most blessed artefacts! Now you draw us early into the fire of battle!"

He wasn't joking. *Battle*. That word felt right as I saw a griffon land on the ground from an injured wing and immediately grapple with a ghoul. She was forced down until, amazingly, a slave of all ponies smashed it over the head with an iron pipe. I could hear Protégé nearby, the loud report of his revolver distinct from every other source of gunfire going on. The Magister was wounded. A bullet, probably from a griffon, had lodged messily in his side. All the same, his eyes were locked on Brimstone as the immediate threat. Even the big raider couldn't cross this distance and Protégé was still far off. The pistol pointed at me quickly too as I squeaked in terror.

"The zebras gave us this world! Those below, they told us! Why do you deny it!?"

Brimstone snarled and made to charge as the pistol jerked his way again, making him stall. I could see the frustration on his face.

"Now you'll die. You will never see the world they told me I had to make, Murk. Not as long as you live. I offered you immortality. As for you, raider, you killed my children. You destroyed our homes in your rampage. But you consistently make one mistake. Allow me to teach you a lesson..."

Brimstone lowered his head, growling. "And what's that, rot?"

"Never bring hooves to a gunfight."

With a smirk, the Magister aimed at his head and pulled the trigger.

It clicked.

The silence lasted only a second before the Magister registered the misfire. Panic set in on his face as he pulled the trigger again... and again.

Through my fading consciousness, I couldn't resist a smirk as I reached into my saddlebag and drew his spark battery between my teeth, grinning as widely as I could around it.

"And *you* should never let a thief hold your gun."

The (oh so very satisfying) look of surprise on his face lasted only long enough for abject horror set in when Brimstone grinned and stomped the ground with both hooves, ready for a brawl. The big raider actually grinned at me.

"Nice work, kid. So, rot, what was that about a fight you wanted?"

To his credit, the Magister didn't even hesitate before fleeing immediately. Roaring and

chasing him for only a few feet, Brimstone made sure he was gone. Starshine had fallen from his back, standing beside me.

"Thank you, mister."

"Think, uh... I— oh..."

My vision *swam*. In the aftermath of the confrontation, I felt reality slam home. This... this wasn't good...

The coughing began, I felt blood curdle in my gut, lungs, and throat. No, I was so close. I'd won! I couldn't... not now. But it wouldn't stop. I couldn't breathe. I tried to move, but the loose earth didn't even let me drag my hooves correctly as my balance fell from under me. I fell to my knees, feeling Starshine shaking me with her little hooves and shouting off to the side. Through hazy vision, I staggered and convulsed, only briefly seeing Brimstone running back to me.

"Murk?"

I didn't reply. I couldn't open my eyes, I could feel blood spraying from my mouth. I threw up. I couldn't take air... oh Goddesses...

I collapsed. Unable to breathe at all. Oxygen deprived, I felt myself going into shock as I spasmed with the failed effort to take in air. Only a vague muddy sense of hearing even heard Starshine scream as she shook me, or Brimstone bellowing.

"Murk!"

Something shook me before I just went numb, and let it overcome me as my lungs burned up and clogged. I finally gave up as the radiation finally won out.

"MURK!"

I dreamed... or I thought I did.

I could barely move. My limbs were heavy and felt restricted. Like I was locked in a cloying blanket. What could I see? Nothing. I could see nothing but a small light. Wait, that was something. Nothing made sense, what way was up?

My head hurt as I felt like I was drowning. My hooves reached out but found no purchase.

But they did. I felt somepony grab hold and pull me, and I saw the shape of... of somepony pulling me along. Wait... I was going forward, was I running? What was I running to? Or from? I just... it was all too hazy.

Like running through liquid, I felt myself being pulled as a bright flare lit her. Was it a her? Was that Littlepip? I fell, as we separated. I fell, upward through water.

Even as I broke the surface, I woke.

My *everything* ached.

"Well well. Finally, you're back with us."

The raspy voice caused me to twitch and spasm, to throw myself around as the bed's blanket caught and twisted with me.

"Fucking calm it! Hold still."

Oh. Swearing. Weathervane, not Heartcare.

The ghoul was looking over me in a somewhat musty bed. This was the hospital, but not his own little area. No, this was one of the wards I had seen. I tried to look, but the motion made my lungs twist and my stomach heave.

"Careful," he muttered as I threw up into a convenient bucket. It was strangely orange. Had I just been drowned in RadAway?

"You're lucky to be alive, you crazy little bloody idiot. You'll be fine in a few hours, once the medication has time to work, magic is handy like that. But you may take a little while to quite feel one hundred percent. Your temperature has gone down by about a fifth of the way to normal since that rad-fever. Yeah. Lucky. Fucking lucky."

"How... how did I get here?"

The medical ghoul looked a little surprised, before chortling.

"Didn't you realise? Brimstone brought you here."

"Brimstone?"

"Oh yes. Galloped the whole way with both you and that foal on his back. Broke down the doors to the hospital, gave the guard a concussion, sought me out, and promptly declared that if I didn't save your life, and I quote, 'right fucking now', he would do something. That 'something' he mentioned, I can assure you as a medical expert, is quite anatomically impossible. However, I got the feeling he was about to try anyway."

"Brimstone did that? For me? But..."

"He didn't tell me what it was you did to change his view, but I did hear him saying something about what 'she' would want him to do. Oh, and by the way, he told me if I informed you it was him, he'd crush my skull. So don't tell him, alright? Or I'll find a way to give you every fucking injection I can think of in your rump. Besides, there's somepony else who wants to see you."

He trotted off after tapping a RadAway to my chest.

"Wait, Weathervane! The RadPurge, did—"

Weathervane didn't answer. Instead, the newcomer did as he trotted in to my shock.

"Glimmerlight is, last I heard, recovering," said Protégé calmly, trotting amiably into the ward and pausing in the entrance. "Brimstone apparently left for her the moment he dropped you here. Rather literally, so I am told."

I squeaked. My master was here, I wasn't in my cell!

"How... I... oh no..."

Protégé held up a hoof to quiet me.

"Now, I'm not even going to *pretend* I'm not disappointed that you felt you had to escape me, Murk. I like to think I am a kind pony. As such, I was prepared to punish you as befits how I run things. I dislike workers attempting to escape me, to escape their duty to Equestria."

He trotted closer to my bed, magic fixing the blankets over me to not be as messed up. An odd move while talking of punishment.

"But it seems I am inclined to drop it and not even ask how you got out. I know my own building, so I am sure I can guess how. I trust it will not happen again. But no, my punishment is stayed only by that you have inadvertently done me a great service, Murk. We turned back the tide, but you saved one of Master Red Eye's foals. Starshine Melody has been returned to him. Master Red Eye was quite delighted, if saddened by her... condition."

I nodded, trying not to allow a relieved smile on my face that Melody had in her own obtuse way, saved *me* from Protégé.

"Is she alright, master?"

"It is sad to say the condition is, as we know, non-reversible. She will not grow properly. However, Master Red Eye is kind. He has still granted her a home under him. Melody will be safe. As for the ghouls, those who did not charge out were exterminated."

My jaw dropped. "Wait. All of them? But there was—"

"A small army, yes. Master Red Eye sent his alicorns on a personal mission. The deterrent is now clear for all to see. The foals are off limits to harm and any who dare do so will not go without vengeance for their assault upon the children of the new world. They or their leader shall not be harming anypony else, Murk."

"I-I guess that's good."

Protégé nodded slowly, patting the bed, taking off his eyepiece for a moment.

"Yes, Murk. I am told you went to great risk, so I feel that I owe you thanks. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found her down there. While the fact that you did so goes against every rule I have, I am also grateful for you helping save Glimmerlight. She is a good worker, a good pony, and my own efforts to requisition the RadPurge had failed."

He smiled at me, leading me to feel an odd surge of pride that my master was genuinely pleased at my efforts. It made everything feel worth it and—

No, that wasn't right. I didn't do it for him. I did it for those on my side. Part of me liked Protégé's appreciation more than it should, but it still felt like a betrayal of my freedom. It would take me a little time to properly kill off that part of my mind. But for now, yes, I could still do it.

"Now rest up, Murk. I will see you returned tonight. Then you must rest more."

"Forgive me, master, but why?"

Protégé turned and trotted off, turning his head.

"Your first day of work under me, of course. We have an objective. On the hills outside Fillydelphia. We found one."

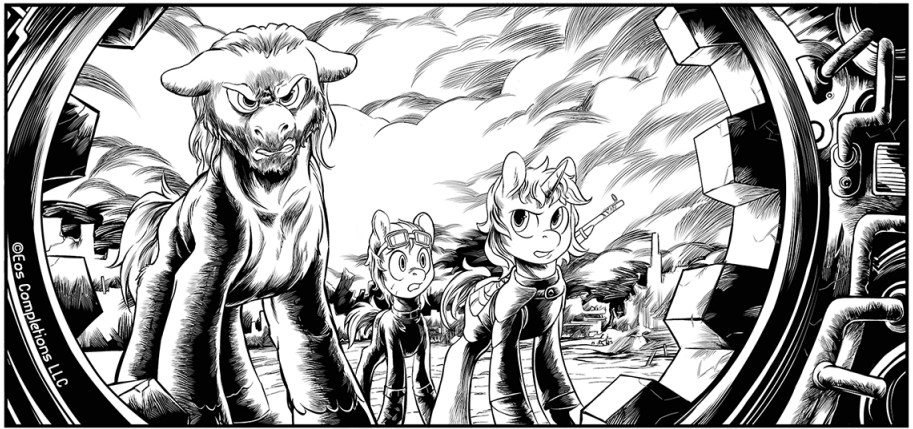
I felt my body clench up as it ached terribly. Fear made me tremble.

"You mean a... you-you found a..."

"Yes, Murk. We found a Stable."

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Sleight of Hoof (Rank 1) – Everypony better be careful what they have near you, for even those items they love the most may mysteriously disappear after that hoofshake they gave you! You may now attempt to steal even while detected!

Lighting the Darkness

"A good friend, like a good book, is something that will last forever."

"What is it like to have confidence in yourself?"

Well... confidence. That's where you're able to feel safe about your own decisions, isn't it? Where you can look at yourself and feel happy about who you are regardless of what others think of you. It's where you can find happiness, a sense of self worth, and understand that even if everything is against you... the path you chose is still the right one.

I was struggling with it.

Even in the wake of rescuing a foal, and rooting out a powerful and dangerous force that was poised to attack slaves and slavers alike, I didn't feel any more courageous. Having saved the life of somepony precious to my companion, I had expected to feel some sense of bravery, but none came. I simply remembered all the ways that I had needed help, or messed things up. How many times had tears trickled down my face in terror? How many times had I run away? How often had my ends been met or my life preserved only by the charity of others?

I took the journey to help Brimstone save Glimmerlight not only to seek a way out on the only path I knew, but also to try and restore my own confidence to resist The Master's influence. But in the end, all I found was that I would have died had it not been for the luck of Brimstone Blitz once again bailing me out. Alone, I would never have gotten as far as I had. That fact bit deep... if I couldn't do things all by myself, how could I ever hope to escape or help anypony else do so? What use was I to the mare or her buck if I couldn't even help my own sorry hide?

Brave ponies were supposed to be able to do it all on their own, weren't they?

If felt that if I were confident, perhaps I'd not hide my wings. If felt that if I were brave, I'd not stammer just at conversation.

Not to mention that every time I thought of going back to the Mall, to be within reach

of The Master... My Master, I felt nothing but a chilly panic. I knew that I would do anything he asked of me. Would a confident pony feel that way? I'd bet not.

There were a dozen things really. From being worried about what others thought of my wings, to my instinctual loyalty to The Master, to even the embarrassment of people seeing my more personal drawings. Really, would a confident pony feel any of that? I didn't think so.

Nothing, not even that, could overcome the slave in my mind that still knew its place was by The Master's side. By Protégé's side. Under the heel of Master Red Eye. To be the loyal slave of Fillydelphia.

I was fighting a losing battle, trying to be like I thought brave ponies were. That you had to deal with it yourself, or you weren't brave. In some ways, I missed the clues I'd already been given by others as to what I was lacking.

But when I looked at others, I always wondered, where does *their* confidence come from? What made them feel good about themselves when they didn't feel it inside?

Whatever it was... it was something I knew I badly needed.

Finally, mercifully, I could rest.

Protégé had given me a few hours free to recover in the hospital ward while the healing potions and RadAway worked their (rather literal) magic on my body. Apparently, being involved in rescuing one of Red Eye's foals was enough to have gotten me on the 'protected slave' list for treatment.

Yet, as I stared across the bed at my fourth RadAway sachet in under an hour, I reflected that this, perhaps, wasn't the best outcome in the world. For every three I drank, one seemed to come back up. I had complained (not whined) at length to Doctor Weathervane about my fears of my body beginning to reject RadAway. Eventually he had called me a 'little fucking earache' and hit me on the head with his clipboard till I agreed that I was talking nonsense.

Even so... looking at the sachet only reminded me of how I'd have to get used to the taste. I'd be living with it for the rest of my life in this city now.

Curling up in the thin satin blanket, I felt myself shivering as the sounds of the hospital washed around my peripheral hearing. I had to keep myself from thinking on that. The condemnation to an incurable illness that would affect me every single day. How did you get over such a thing?

I couldn't. But to avoid myself falling into a pit of despair I pulled across my journal and started flicking through it. Carefully, I searched backwards until I found the last one I remembered. My eyes only briefly fell on the large volume of pages I had drawn upon during my early days in Fillydelphia and before. No... I didn't ever want to see them. I'd forgotten what was on them and reminding myself could never be good.

I'd thought that a chance to calm down, leaf through sketches, and think for myself might help. It might settle things, allowing me to calm down and rest properly.

It didn't.

If I'd thought ahead, I'd have realised I was making a mistake. Not since the Pit had I had a proper chance to reflect, to simply think and realise how much my life had changed in just a few days. From those original hours of awakening to realise I didn't *have* to be a slave,

through the desperate attempts to stay alive and escape Fillydelphia, meeting The Master and the mysterious intentions of Protégé, fighting alongside a raider warlord against ghouls and breaking rules left, right, and centre to do as I needed. I had been shot! I could still see the scar if I lifted up my blanket and—

Oh... oh Goddesses... I really was thin there. My stomach gurgled and ached in response. Low energy levels were making me shiver all over. How had I gone this long?

So many eventful incidents; more activity in those few days than in over a decade of slavery. What was I supposed to worry about? The Master? My illness? Escaping? Protégé? Barb's demands? Or was it even just that I hadn't seen the mare since? Did she know I was alive?

So many threads... so many things all at once with no chance to digest it. With no hope to digest it. Even drawing was still new and eventful to me. I wished I had somepony I could find comfort in, but there was no one. The DJ couldn't hear me, the mare and Littlepip were gone, and Brimstone wouldn't care. I couldn't do this by myself... but I was alone. Alone and lonely. How could I deal... deal...

I...

I couldn't.

I pulled the blanket over me, feeling the emotion all welling up, too much of it with no outlet. I couldn't draw, and nothing was on the radio. Burying myself within the musty satin, I just curled up and prayed that by the time I had to come out it would all be better.

Even Doctor Weathervane's foul attitude couldn't push itself hard enough to insult me in the state he found me in. I heard him trot in and sigh as he saw me, a quivering little shape under the covers, with damp stains near where my head was. He stood quietly, as though unsure how to approach this. Eventually, I heard a second, more reluctant sigh as he shook the bed with a hoof.

"We've got incoming wounded from the flamer fuel vat teams. Bloody unsafe walkways, no Luna-damned consideration at all. We'll need the bed in ten minutes. Saving lives and all that shit, you understand?"

He must have seen a section of the blanket shift, as I nodded under it and sniffed. Silently, I thanked him for allowing the ten minutes. Right now, it felt like another eternity to pretend nothing was wrong. That when I came out I'd find a nice repaired Fillydelphia, Sundial and Skydancer waiting to be friends in the lobby, clean floors to trot on and fresh air to breathe...

Screams and wails of agony came from down the hallway. I heard them. I tried to block them out. They didn't exist outside my fantasy. No... I'd wake up and everything would be fine. Under the blanket it was all safe.

Even as I heard the burn victims approaching and the shout from Weathervane for all non-critical patients to vacate, I tried to just pretend it wasn't there. Another ten seconds was a long time, right? But I just couldn't stop shivering, even as I felt myself compelled to obey him, to crawl out from under the blanket and begin the long trot back to the Mall. To go back out into the crimson hell I was still a part of in the bleak and harsh industry of Fillydelphia.

A hard leather-armoured earth pony of dull yellow awaited me outside. As I trotted past

with my head lowered, he spat out his cigarette and spoke up.

“Yo, Number Seven. The Master wants you to report to the flamer fuel factory, emergency replacement of slaves needed, sent me to catch you when you came out.”

I trembled, trying not to collapse and cry out loud on the spot. Why did I have to be the one who cried at everything? Why did The Master choose me? He wasn't being fair! Why did I have to be the target of his attentions?

“But... but I'm to go back to the Mall. Protégé said—”

“Fine, I'll go tell Shackles you refused then.”

He turned to trot off without so much as a care in the world, coughing from either his own cigarette or the smog that drifted across from the copper mine refinery nearby.

“No! Wait! I... I'll do it...”

“Good little slave, he knew he could... heh... *rely* on you.”

The slaver gave me a sick grin and trotted off toward the Mall, while I turned to get right back to the daily grind of being a slave.

My back was aching.

The Master's post was not a fun one. Well, when were they ever? But this one was worse than most. Set within the giant refinery for Master Red Eye's ambitions for flamethrower fuel, I was given the task of trudging various mixes of chemicals around slung over my back, only having just enough time to hide my PipBuck in my saddlebag. The buckets either side of my body probably each weighed as much as I did, making it a slow and back-breaking effort to lug them to each of the giant vats. On arrival, I was to tip them in and hope that there was no refined fuel to take back. If there wasn't, I was given the ‘merciful minute’ where the buckets were empty to walk back and get more. If not, it was an immediate refill and another long trudge to the storage tanks.

But worst of all was the smell. It cloyed and thickened the air with the sheer wealth of fumes and stench to the point where it made anyone sick and dizzy. Some slaves claimed you could get high on it, and I wouldn't be surprised. I'd seen more than my fair share of minor hallucinations already in the few times I'd been sent here. The noxious fumes got into your head in a bad way and made every sense feel stuffy. It was in this very refinery that I'd gained my radsore, when I thought I'd seen my mother through the crowd, and ran to her. Tripping, I'd realised that it had just been a fuzzy-headed belief through my blurry vision. The upturned buckets had splashed me with chemicals, the burns quickly becoming irradiated and infected. They'd never truly healed since; even after Doctor Weathervane's attentions I could feel them burning away on my legs and muzzle.

I staggered up the scaffold walkway to reach the unicorns stirring the fuel vats through massive telekinetically-controlled rods. Around me, earth ponies tipped the buckets in gradually and tried their best not to fall in. The fuel itself wasn't lethal... but being covered in a highly flammable (or inflammable, what was the difference anyway? Oh why couldn't I be wordy like Protégé?) substance left you a susceptible target for any spark in the area. Being Fillydelphia, there were quite a few. Frankly, it was a miracle this entire place hadn't gone up at some point. Even as I poured my buckets in, I noticed the section of collapsed walkway that had caused the accident drawing me in to fill the workload. There were no barriers on it.

Just... just... WHY?

Seriously, were pre-war ponies just really dumb or utterly uncaring for simple ergo... ergono... practical ideas!? I almost wanted to stop and rant on the spot as I felt the annoyance that some idiot two hundred years ago had made the stupid decision to save a little cash by not placing on a railing, thus landing me a horrible job today! Only the presence of a (thoroughly high-looking) slave overseer nearby kept my mouth shut and my head down. I'd already received a clip around the ear for not meeting quotas in the past three hours.

Stomping my frustration on the badly constructed walkways out (not perhaps the wisest course of action), I tried to think. It wasn't entirely easy when the fumes were giving me a headache, but I needed something nice, and right now all I could think of was the mare. I wouldn't be able to hear the radio over the ambience in here, so I let my thoughts drift to her instead. I hadn't really had a chance to think about her properly yet. Just what was her name anyway? What was her cutie mark? Goddesses... had I even missed that when I saw her?

But somehow I just couldn't quite get a grasp of her. She was kind, and, well, I felt safe speaking to her. But it was just the way she... argh. It was like she understood me. Understood my problems, and genuinely wanted to help me. I felt relaxed, more comfortable in my own skin when I had spoken to her. Was she just a natural at helping others? She was the only pony I truly trusted in this entire city, probably more than I should given how long I had known her. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her. My mysterious mare.

The gurgling of the thick gel-like chemical as it slopped out of the bucket only reminded me of the groaning of my own stomach as the hours stretched on. Move, collect, stumble, carry, pour, and repeat. I watched another slave try to make a dash for his fallen bucket before a slaver saw him and sent his whip flying with magic to catch the fleeing target. Squeals from ponies being scalded by chemicals mixed with the hiss of pressure cookers preparing the thick gel. I couldn't ever remember looking forward to going back to my pen, but the prospect of being near Brimstone again at least gave me something to look forward to. In the past I had just wandered and done the job as I was asked... but now that I had a sense of wishing to be out of here, I could swear the day lasted longer. Was it day? I never could tell any more, my head was too messed up from fumes...

With a strained heave, I turned to tip the other bucket while glancing around. My mind was drifting too much in the heavy air, thinking of what had happened, and what was to come. I just wanted to be below that blanket in the hospital again... not have to deal with any of this. But try as I might, I knew I would have to return. For one, Protégé or... *he*... would come looking for me, but on the other I was simply obeying, even if it meant facing my worst fear soon.

The past.

I cried at skeletons; I was terrified of disturbing them from their places of passing, froze up as though paralysed when I saw them, and worst of all... drove myself into manic fits as my mind pieced together their last moments. It was like some spirit had always left just enough clues... or was I just observant of the past? I really *really* wished I wasn't. After all, I knew my next destination would test my courage to the full extent. A Stable.

Crafted in the days before the balefire, they were shelters of great depth and fortitude to keep ponies safe underground for a few generations, until the world outside was safe again.

That thought alone made me nearly drop my bucket. What would it have been like to live in a world where things were so grim, so dire, that ponies genuinely put thought and application into those things? What was it like for Sundial, knowing his world was approaching the end? Now I would have to visit one. What if it was the one he *should* have been at? Would I find his family's skeletons? His father? Skydancer? The sealed and preserved Stable could mean anything from a dead tomb to a thriving and passionate defence by their descendants. Behind those great doors, closed and locked, lay a gateway into the past. They represented everything about the end of Equestria. Built by desperation and designed by fear, they were eternal icons of where we had come from. Often literally. A great many of the ponies in the wastes today were descendants of Stable survivors.

They had brought horrid tales of Stables not designed properly, or being the recipient of dangerous experimental concepts meant to help ponies. In reality, they had made life a nightmare or had destroyed it entirely. These days, unopened Stables were a most unusual find. But dead Stables, filled with the legacy of misguided ideas, lay open for all to see the mistakes of times long gone.

Why was I so afraid of the past, anyway? It was all gone, long gone times couldn't harm me, and it couldn't affect my life other than the modern use of its secrets. But it wasn't just relics... I couldn't even face my own past, like my journal. Why did I avoid those early sketches? Well, I knew *why*, but what drove that fear? Was I just afraid of looking back? Terrified that if I did, I'd fall under the weight, the realisation of what was behind me and driving me to stay and work as a slave? That must be it... I just simply couldn't bear to contemplate such a life.

The unicorn turned and directed me to the nozzle at the bottom, breaking me from my thoughts. My heart sank; no merciful minute for me on this journey. As I stood beside the tap and bucked the heavy latch, I glanced around me. I saw slaves on their last legs, sometimes literally, walking beside the fresh new starts with fear in their eyes. Those looks would turn to wearisome acceptance after a few days. They always did. I saw the more 'experienced' slaves looking like they were eager to simply keel over any day now from the poison in their blood. They didn't worry for the past... many of them had forgotten it in order to not go insane from losing all they had. Once, when I had first come here, the sight of them had made me cry, but it was too normal in my life now to even affect me. But, how I longed just for a random meeting, a small chance to feel I knew some of them, like if I turned my head and just saw... saw...

She was there, right across the refinery work floor, her cream and orange distinction just drifting between the slaves, exactly the way she had looked when last I saw her. Finally, something *good* from my past, even if it was just a... a day? How long had it been since I saw her?

I shook the question from my head as I saw where she was trotting, the mare was leaving! I quickly turned to the nozzle and saw my first bucket was only close to filling. Come on, they were watching me. If I just left it, I'd be brought down. Come on, fill faster! She was heading for the exit already!

Watching the bucket and her as much as I could simultaneously (and wishing my eyes could look both ways), I swung around to let the other one fill. Pining over my shoulder, I watched as she disappeared amongst a crowd of the new-starts. I only caught glimpses of that brilliant orange and red mane between them. Impatiently glancing at the second bucket, I saw it was three quarters full, it was enough!

I bucked it closed and ran as fast as I could for her. The fuel sloshed about in the buckets as I took as direct a route as I could. She was already about to go past the side doors and leave the gateway! Ducking around other slaves and ignoring a random shout (was that a slaver?), I nearly forced the new shift out of the way to clamber through the small gaps. Splashes of fuel dripped all around my progress as I tried to follow the the occasional sight of her bright mane. I screamed her name. Wait... no, I just screamed... something. *I didn't know her name!*

Eventually, it came to me.

"I'm alive! Hey! HEY! Somepony saved me! *I'm still alive!*"

Her head didn't turn, she hadn't heard. Damn, just a bit further! A bit further and—

Little weak pegasi with broken wings don't gallop too well with buckets carrying unbalanced amounts of fuel in each of them. With a slip and a horrible lurch I felt my entire balance shift right, spraying the contents everywhere as I clattered to the ground. I was stuck, suspended on one side with my hooves in the air around the weight of the large buckets. Kicking and wriggling, I fought for the latch while trying to avoid the foul chemical spilling on the ground. Landing on my hooves (for once...) I made to gallop after her. I ran past the side doors and directly out into the yard, she had only been a few feet away, she was... she was...

...gone.

But... but she couldn't have just disappeared! It was open ground out here and there were no crowds! I stood in the gaping maw that led into the crowded refinery, staring in all directions as the long expanse of the yard swallowed my small presence, alone outside. Even with my hearing, I felt all sound muffle down as I realised the truth and lowered my head. A few teardrops dripped onto the ground. Why...

"Hey! Who in the bloody wasteland spilled this? Was that the little one running?"

Even without looking up I could *feel* all of them who recognised me as *the pegasus* point with their hooves. When the demand for confirmation came in a raspy voice from behind a wrapped scarf against the fumes, I couldn't even help but turn and nod, while listening to the sound of a whip being magically drawn and raised.

Maybe that was why I hated the past. Even the good parts of my own history were always taken from me, or never even there to begin with.

By the time I finally trudged back to the Mall, I was very late. The guards obediently allowed me through the well-defended entrance, chuckling as they witnessed my rather pathetic efforts to reach and push the emergency bars. They were attached to what had once acted as a turntable door before the balefire. I suspected they would have been automatic on some gears below the ground. Now, they acted as a simple barrier that took ponies a few seconds to push in and out of in clear view of the guards. Straining and pushing from my hind legs, I felt my back ripple with both dull muscular pains and the harsher, sharper stings of whip scars until, somewhat unexpectedly, the gate popped open.

Caught by surprise, I squeaked and fell forward, landing on my chin on the inside with my hind legs in the air. As if being stuck in the dirt yesterday wasn't bad enough. At the very least, I felt better at the plans I'd overheard to remove them entirely soon enough for metal salvage. Groaning and rubbing my chin, I stood up and, rather without warning, came eye

to eye (well, almost) with Protégé.

He didn't look entirely pleased.

"You know, Murk, I had begun to wonder how much I could trust you. To some extent I still do... but arriving four hours late and neglecting a direct request? You do realise any work leader less understanding than I would have you killed?"

"I..."

I was just too tired to even explain... besides, it wasn't the slave's duty to make excuses.

"I'm sorry, master... it won't happen again."

"Why were you late?"

His voice cut hard. I'd come to think of him as somepony that, even if I couldn't bring myself to like, I could at least expect a level of care and understanding from. I felt ashamed to have let him down. But that was the hard part. He wasn't angry, just disappointed. Somehow, the slave in my mind found that all the more hurtful.

"When I came out of the hospital, I was told—"

I quickly shut up. My mind remembered The Master's warning, was this part of his 'games' with me? Would saying it result in the mare being harmed? I couldn't risk it...

"I mean, I thought I was told to go and work in the fuel refinery. I... I just misheard... it's my fault..."

Protégé merely sighed, trotting around me as the guards opened the gates for him. He moved with that certain poise and dignity I had come to expect from him.

"I am due to meet with Master Red Eye for a report on the rewards of the Stable. Please, return to the shop levels and remain there. The worker wagons will arrive within the hour to begin transport. If I am not back, as is likely, Chainlink Shackles will organise the embarkation."

Stopping, he glanced around at me as I sat down, feeling the weight of The Master's ploy hitting home. Why did I feel guilty at disappointing him!? Protégé was my slave master! Once again, I began to wonder if he truly cared or if this was all some devious ploy to build loyalty from his slaves.

"I don't want to have to consider you unreliable, Murk. Please, I ask of you, do not prove my confidence in you wrong..."

Tapping the side of his eyepiece before heading outside, the unicorn made his way into the ruined streets. Presumably leaping from the roof, I saw an ever watchful Ragini join him. For all her rudeness to me, she sure was a very good bodyguard. But, as I took a shaky breath and limped back to my cell, I couldn't help but run Protégé's words through my thoughts again and again. Even as I watched him stride into the harsh landscape of Fillydelphia to receive the objectives that might just kill me soon, one question beat around my brain repeatedly.

Why had it sounded like he was afraid of me failing him?

"You took your time."

Brimstone's voice rumbled quietly from the dark corner as I flopped down onto the musty cardboard 'bed' in the shop cell. I felt a dampness from a leaky pipe above squelch beneath me as the hard ground made my back ache. How had he honestly lived with this thing for so long?

"Got called away..."

"For what? If you're on Stable duty you don't have to—"

"I know. I just... I don't know... it's just me being me..."

Brimstone didn't seem to be appreciative of being interrupted, but hid his obvious annoyance behind a snort to simply turn away and look out of the cell at the raiders. From the sounds of things, they'd found themselves a 'plaything' in one of the other slaves to shove around. I guessed the guards, despite their repulsiveness, wouldn't allow it to go too far, but the begging to be let go from their role as a stress reliever made me shiver all the same. I sent a quiet prayer to the Goddesses for that poor slave, but right now I couldn't help them. That was the harsh reality of slave life in Fillydelphia when you're just a weak pony who can't help anypony, not even himself. I just wanted to lie down and rest, to forget about everything that had happened and *try* and forget about what was coming up in my life, too.

Hating the past and afraid of the future, living only for the demands of the moment... wasn't that just the perfect description of a slave?

Curling up, I tried to doze as best I could. Left with little other manner to get rid of all this painful worry, it was all I could think of. I didn't have the energy left to draw and my ears hurt too much to want the radio on. I knew Brimstone would look down on me for hiding away, but it was just too natural.

Instead, he simply spoke without looking around.

"If it helps how you feel, Glimmer will live. We did it."

Through the dark haze of my mood, my heart ignited. Of course! In all my worry about The Master, Protégé, and the mare, I'd forgotten what we had accomplished was still to be discovered! A new, apparently gentle and caring, pony! Glimmerlight! I couldn't hide the sudden enthusiasm from my voice, even as it broke on a fevered choke. (Perhaps Barb was right to call me 'filly.' Oh Goddesses, why was my voice so shrill?)

"So... she'll wake up?"

"Aye. Probably sometime soon, if not in a few minutes. Fever's gone. The rot knows his stuff, I'll give the bastard that."

I couldn't quite lie still. Glimmerlight was waking up! A new pony who I'd been promised was kind and didn't judge anypony! She sounded like an older version of the mare so much that I couldn't quite suppress some genuine excitement about getting to meet her. Indeed, I thought I even felt a smile coming on! She'd be so nice and polite, just like me, she wouldn't be all rude or dirty like everypony else. Brimstone had said she wasn't!

I heard movements in the back. Noting my twitching ears, I saw Brimstone stand up expectantly.

"Or perhaps even sooner..."

Nerves finally kicked in. How was I to meet her? What should I say? I had a chance for somepony who wasn't nasty at last... what if I screwed up? What if Brimstone had been exaggerating and she *did* have something against pegasi?

I heard hooves approaching the door to the store front, staggering and light on the floor.

Pacing from hoof to hoof I trotted on the spot. Calm down Murky, calm down. It'll be fine. She'll come out and say hello and comment on how you're cute again! Yeah... she'll be just like the mare, nice, calm and really polite and sweet and gentle—

There was a sudden crash of shop stands being knocked over. Glimmerlight staggered through the doorway, trying to kick one off of her hind hoof, and almost collapsed onto the

staff desk of the shop. Recovering just enough to roll her weight onto it and stay upright, the pink and white mare sighed and rolled her eyes as she cast a look around. Her face screwed up as she facehoofed and groaned.

“Celestia’s great fucking mane, Brim... did I sleep with a glowing ghoul or just drink way too much of the Roamer’s special ale again? Damn, my head hurts...”

Blinking rapidly, she seemed to finally focus her sight and spot me standing beside Brimstone. Almost slipping as her hooves skittered around, Glimmerlight beamed with a sudden and elated joy.

“Aha! So you *weren’t* a hallucination brought on by the medicine! How ya doin, big eyes!?”

Glimmerlight seemed not to notice a lack of reply as she immediately floundered over to a small cracked mirror. Slapping her cheeks four times and sitting down, she then started pulling at her mane with a bent comb, before turning slightly toward Brim and myself.

“Now... anypony here know any bucks or mares looking for a good time? It’s been almost a week I’ve been cooped up sick without any ‘relief,’ y’know? I’m itchin’ for a fixin’ if’n you get me?”

Chuckling softly to himself, Brimstone Blitz merely reached across and closed my mouth after its jaw had hit the floor.

Glimmerlight was not how I had anticipated, that was for sure. Where I had expected a quiet, polite, and kind mare, there now stood a (mostly upright) pony who seemed to be more concerned with how she had missed a ‘rest day.’ Her worry lay in that she had been sick through a time where alcohol had been provided from the Roamer bar outside the wall to the slaves. That, apparently, was a rare event. True, I had only seen it once in my time in Fillydelphia.

Not speaking, I just sat on the cardboard bed and watched this incredibly strange unicorn as she sorted her mane. Magically levitating the scrap comb made of bobby pins and a block of tinder, she hummed an unknown tune to herself while occasionally asking Brim for news reports on the way things had been for some others whilst she was out.

Only after a few seconds did I realise she was talking about ponies whose flanks she enjoyed watching whilst slaving away herself. Was this truly the pony who had been so soft spoken to me while sick? Truth be told, I didn’t know what to think of her. Booze, casual sex, and a self deprecating humour was a long way from the quiet, peaceful, and kind older version of the mare I had thought of. Very quickly, I began to realise her lucid soft speech was just from her having been high on medication when I had last met her...

Sitting quietly, however, I finally had a chance to properly study her. Glimmerlight was definitely a bit older than me, probably within the last few years of being a young adult. Perhaps... high twenties? Her body was just as thin and scrawny as most slaves, not to mention her sickness, but what caught my attention was her cutie mark. Three small sparkling spheres, purple, pink, and light blue. Where had I seen them before? Part of my mind was sure I had.

Flicking her mane about, Glimmerlight hopped on the spot before swivelling on a seemingly random urge to face me.

“Right! Mane fixed, sexiness restored, and the power of standing upright reacquired!”

Now, it's time!"

I backed off, a little intimidated by the forward and supremely confident manner. If she noticed, the unicorn didn't show as she trotted a little unsteadily around the store.

"I... uh..." Why could I never just talk normally on first meetings? "I... wait, time for what?"

Glimmerlight rounded on me with a grin I was sure was about to leap off her face. Her eyes seemed to light up and almost sparkle when she lowered her eyebrows and smiled like that. I wondered how many bucks had fallen prey to that... look. Of course, she was a bit old for me, though.

"Time for me to find out just who you are, Murky!"

"I..."

"No arguments! Come on!"

Well, that was that, an order. Groaning at my still aching back, I struggled to my hooves and plodded after her own unsteady gait. But, as I followed her into the back of the shop, I had a slight sense of worry. (Not just from Brimstone's dangerous look promising what would happen if he heard any trouble back there.) Thus far, she had dodged everything I had imagined about her. What in Equestria could I expect from her now when she wanted to get to know me? How could I predict how she would react? What if she just rolled her eyes? Glimmerlight had been through just as much horror as I had at the whims of raiders, possibly more. Was this how she forgave? By not caring about anything but the simple pleasures in life?

Glimmerlight led me to the sofa. She hopped up and made a dramatically extravagant flop onto it. Sighing happily, she shimmied up until she was sitting on one side, before motioning for me to sit on the other. Clambering up with some difficulty, (why so high a seat? It's a sofa!) I meekly sat on the other side from her, naturally as far away as I could.

What a strange sight, I thought. Under the dark environment, there was glowing and confident life of Glimmerlight on one side with the lantern; and the muddy-coloured little buck huddled up nervously on the other, far from the light. She was beaming, those eyes staring unblinkingly at me with that little grin. Perhaps... perhaps this wasn't so bad after all. Just the pair of us alone, no danger, and just being able to talk in the quiet gloom of the storage room.

The amber gem light flickered and weakened, casting an odd glow on her face. Almost gasping, I saw an immediate change. Hard, tough, and weathered below the crazed exterior. For all the bluster, I had a sudden memory reminding me of what this mare had been through in her life. Suddenly, I didn't feel quite so comforted.

"So, Murky... what's your story?"

"Kinda long, really... I'm not sure it—"

"Come on, we're slaves. We have the time. Now spill the beans. If you're going to be staying with us I need to know who you are, yeah? Come on, can't be any more embarrassing than the time my father caught me with a pair of bucks from Tenpony."

Alright, my imagination was shutting down right now! But try as I might to avoid it all, I realised she had me trapped. If I left, the raiders would make my life very short without Brimstone's protection. Only one thing for it...

"Well... I... uh... there isn't much to my life. I was... um... I was born a slave, you see."

Her eyes widened quizzically, before glancing away toward the far wall at some shelves crammed with small parts. Something about that look struck a chord. She hadn't laughed or

looked down on me. Lightly, a small ray of hope fed into my mind that perhaps she wasn't going to judge me for it.

But then, how would she react if she knew the truth about... about what I was...

"Geez... sucks," she muttered, before shaking her head and looking back at me. "What is it like to be born a slave?"

Taking a stuttering breath, I began slowly, talking of how I was raised to be an obedient servant and labourer. Of how I was taken from my mother and thrown from master to master. But as I talked, I realised something was different from *any* other time in my life...

She was *listening* to me. Just sitting there, eyes wide, interested in my tale. No pony had ever done that. I felt isolated, as though on a stage.

Something in me just clicked. My story changed, and I began including details. Little stories within stories. I told her of how the other slaves had once held me down by a blanket and beat me with pebbles inside of socks. Of how once they had run out of enough food and sent me out in the rain to harvest more, then never gave me any. I began to sniffle as I talked of the horrid cramped cages that took us from place to place across the wastes and of my final brutal journey to Fillydelphia. My vision blurred as I dropped forward onto my front two hooves, lowering my head while I talked of drawing and hiding, and of Noose and her gang picking on me. Of how I couldn't break free of the indoctrination in my mind. I showed her my cutie mark, that hated emblem that told me what to do and how I wanted to break its grasp on my life.

Her eyes looked at it, before glancing back at me, almost confused. Those sparkling azure eyes softened. Her hoof gestured for me to continue, before moving forward to rest against my own hoof lightly.

That light contact between hooves, as caring as it was, did it. I spilled. I told her everything, from pain to humiliation, from Littlepip and the Pit to Brimstone Blitz saving me. I almost broke down as I told her about the mare and my illness soon after. Dripping tears struck the sofa as I quivered with fear, and explained the brutal regime The Master had placed on my life. I wept openly while I told her of how much I was scared, of the fact that I was always hurt for being small and an easy target. She listened impassively, as though judging everything I said. But the mere fact somepony was willing to listen to it all... it just all came out.

All of it.

Minutes passed. I didn't even move in historical order, just remembering story after story, torture after pain after terror. I jumped from running terrified of ghouls all the way to the pre-war farmhouse skeletons. Trying to speak through great heaving sobs, I told her of how I had once almost committed suicide from the top of the airfield control tower. Of how I had lain screaming with my lifeblood pumping out through my stomach after failing to escape.

An entire life of pain with scant little inspiration and reason to keep going. Years of loneliness and neglect. I was whining, failing to remember she had lost her entire life to the wasteland as well, but I didn't care. I wasn't being selfish, I just couldn't stop the outpouring of emotions. My innermost thoughts just kept flowing, one after the other in one great big expulsion of everything wrong in my life. Eventually, I almost collapsed in front of her, breaking down completely at last as the tears flooded, while I talked of the disease that was slowly killing me and driving me into fear for my life. I told her *everything*...

All except one thing yet.

"And... and everypony just hates me! Just because of some stupid thing I can't help! It's not fair... it's just not fair... I don't want this life! I catch myself not wanting to be who I am!"

Quietly, she finally spoke. The feisty attitude had slipped into a deadly seriousness.

"Who you are? Why do they hate you?"

Stopping, I drew short, hyperventilated breaths as I sought the courage to do this. But the words wouldn't come. How could I tell her? How would she react?

Eventually, I didn't. I just sighed... and took my fleece off. My dead wings hung limply at my side, catching her attention immediately. With my own eyes closed, I heard her gasp suddenly and shuffle back. Finally daring my trembling body to open its eyes, I found the look of shock on her face painful to see. Avoiding it, I turned sideways, grimacing and hanging my head in front of her. Already, I could feel the shame building the tears.

"I'm a pegasus. They hate me because of that. Everypony seems to... they've tried to kill me just because I'm different... because I have wings. I... I just don't want that anymore, I even stood ready to fall from a tower! Just I was too much of a coward to go through with it! I even realised how much I'm hurting myself by thinking like that but... but it's hard not to, even though I know about it now! Everything in this city, it's everything! Sometimes I... I just wish somepony would reach out, grab me by the neck and... and end it *for* me..."

I cried still, my entire life and situation laid bare. Glimmerlight didn't move, her wide eyes and open mouth just staring at the wings. Eventually, she shuffled forward.

"You... you really want that?"

Her voice was low, steady and breathless, holding so little emotion. But the words bit deep. I'd never properly thought of it as directly, but here it was. I had never heard anyone say it aloud. I never had, not in those words. Despite my wishes to escape, despite the mare, despite everything I had done and every self preservation effort screaming otherwise, I was just so tired. The thoughts had never left me. It was true.

There was a long silence with me not looking at her. The warmth of the room had my head fuzzy and set my throat to be rough on each breath. I just sniffled and shook.

Eventually, she moved. Rapidly, her hooves shot forward for my neck as I felt a great force tug at it.

...then she did it.

...something nopony had ever done for me since I was a foal.

She hugged me.

Her voice cracked, every ounce of that confident swagger hurled into emotion.

"No! I... I absolutely refuse to let you think that way! Don't ever think you need to do that!"

I let myself be held, falling into the embrace and feeling my own eyes cry again as she held me, her magic levitating the ragged blanket around me.

"Never again... you'll never have to think that way again. *I* don't hate you, Murky. Oh goodness, a pegasus in Filly..."

Her hooves tightened as she sniffed deeply.

"You poor, poor thing..."

I felt comfort.

For once, I felt comfort and safety in somepony else. The mare had always been in passing within dangerous areas. Brimstone Blitz was an unknown terror as much as he was a protective behemoth and Protégé... well... who in Equestria knew what he really wanted from me?

But Glimmerlight... she was different. Confident, inviting, and surprisingly full of empathy underneath her incredibly casual exterior. As she finally let go of me and tightly wrapped her blanket about me, I began to re-evaluate her once again. Yes... she had her own rather 'unique' style to life, that much was obvious already. From the stories she'd told outside, and the way she acted, Glimmerlight seemed to just bounce from impulse to impulse, but now I knew that it didn't mean she couldn't slow down, listen, and care. Was this what really mattered in finding others? To see that everypony had their own quirks, flaws, and hidden sources of varied strength? If so, what was mine?

"Now, you just sit there, Murky. Rest, for Celestia's sake! Your eyes look about ready to fall off your face with how sunken they are. Besides, I did enough resting while you were saving my rather well-formed flanks, so I hear."

Her smile turned less joking and more to a sincere expression.

"Thanks for that... I owe you a lot. I just hope Brim wasn't too... severe, with you. He is trying to be better, he really is. But it's a hard path for him. Once you get to know him he's really quite alright, wicked sense of dry humour if he's in the mood. Just you rest up from your little Glimmer-saving adventures, okay? I'm just gonna tidy up a little."

"I... I understand... thanks." I muttered quietly as I replied, still unsure on how to really talk to somepony this overwhelmingly forward in her intent to make me comfortable. Should I be asking questions? What should I ask? I watched her fussing around her belongings, mostly lots of scrap and many of those orbs from before that glittered in their boxes. How had she acquired so much junk?

Wait, a question!

"Um... Glimmerlight?"

"Please, just Glimmer. No formality in this hellhole." She grinned as she took some tattered red robes, so faded they almost looked brown, from a metal box and played around with them. "What is it?"

"How did you get so much stuff back here? I've never seen a slave with so many things that wasn't a trader."

Oh, how pitiful I sounded in my whiny high voice compared to that strong confidence she exuded while sorting through her things. Her magic (azure coloured, like her eyes. My artistic side grinned widely) sent nuts, bolts, and old spark matrix parts flitting around the room. One side of her mouth smirked as she stood and wandered back and forth without ever taking her eyes from me.

"Oh... I'm a pony of varied tastes you might say. I know a little of everything. Need somepony to work a terminal? To repair a spark generator? To work your windmill, suggest Manhattan cocktails from memory or get a good fire going from just rocks? Hell, I even know how to make brahmin moo louder."

I just blinked, my face no doubt showing little more than a bewildered look as the cogs in my head slowly turned. Given by the look on her face, she could hear the rusty machine that was my brain failing to compute. Chuckling, Glimmerlight tossed an old rag over the room and looked over her shoulder as she went back to her scrap.

"Don't think too hard on that one, Murky. You'll strain yourself. Suffice to say, while I've

got some serious knowledge of technology, I am a bit widespread in my tastes and skills. Just never could hang around too long, always something else to see! You'd be surprised what I know, and perhaps, at how handy I can be in a pinch when you really need that odd task done right. I'm the type of pony everypony should know."

She turned, again, before pausing and lowering her eyes.

"Except lockpicks... never could work the damn things out. That, and sewing. Never had the patience!"

I couldn't withhold my sudden excitement. It wasn't often I had a chance to claim any prowess. Almost falling off the sofa as I reached into my many-pocketed fleece I pulled my needle and thread out with my mouth.

"Oh! I know that! I made this fleece before I tried to escape."

Actually, that came out more as a muffled blurt, as I tried not to swallow a needle while talking. But she seemed to get the idea, giggling at my frantic mouth movements.

"Well then, seems Brim and I have a reason to keep you around, Murky. I've got a job for you! My robes got a little torn when I fell into the rad-metal pit. If you don't mind, think you could fix them up?"

She asked.

She asked.

I had *never* been asked in my life to do something! Not out of courtesy! Demands, orders, and quotas drove my life and my mind. Even as I nodded furiously, I began to wonder if I could have said no. Then I realised, I hadn't *wanted* to.

The robes were of heavy, thick, and insulating material. Cut near the ground to be practical, and lavish enough to clearly be of pre-war design, they immediately raised questions. Who wore stuff like this? It wasn't exactly wasteland-proof. All the same, I took to work, patching away with needle and thread. Glimmerlight watched for a minute or so, seemingly marvelling as I operated a tiny needle with my mouth and hooves (if only I'd chosen this talent... the skill comes easy when at threat of a barbed whip) to begin fixing her clothing. Eventually, she answered my question.

"So, as to the pile? I know a lot, but particularly in fixing up old things into either new concepts or just repairing them as best I can. Not many ponies can properly work those old magic matrix thingys these days unless you've been born some place to get a little training. So Protégé chucks all this stuff at me, after he's done scratching his head at it, so I can fix them up for his work efforts. Oh! Yeah! What did you make of those flanks of his? Pretty hot, right?"

I almost spat the needle. Glimmerlight burst out laughing, rolling onto her side at my reaction. Her laugh was *wonderful*, utterly unrestrained and full of absolute joy like nothing in Equestria was wrong with her life. Or at least, I'd be spending time enjoying it if I hadn't almost fired a sharp needle across the room through the sheer power of a spit-take.

"Oh come *on*, Murky!" She wiped a tear from her eye, standing up. "You don't go for the bucks too?"

I blushed, what kind of question was *that*?

"I... uh, I'm kinda more... mare-inclined?"

"Aw, missing half the fun of life. No wonder you're such a sad thing."

She chuckled again. Personally, I was beginning to feel out of my depth. Instincts were telling me something was wrong, but my heart couldn't feel anything but relief to have finally found somepony who wasn't trying to abuse me, take advantage of me, or get

dragged away immediately. I tried to giggle (I failed, but I tried!) and went back to stitching quietly. What had I found here in this Mall? All my life I was the outcast; the hated, the slave, and the bottom of the chain. Occasionally I had met ponies who had made me believe it didn't have to be that way. But was this finally proof that there were others out there I could... be around? That I didn't have to be alone? Glimmerlight had, within five minutes, shared jokes, hugged and cared for me, given me a job I chose for myself...

I just couldn't comprehend this. What did she want? *Everypony* always wanted something. Was sewing for her going to become my job in life? My mind raced, panicking but unable to muster the energy to do anything about it. At least she wasn't hurting me, that was a start. No, she cared... just to what end was not for me to consider right now.

Sitting back on the sofa, I curled into the blanket and let out a long breath. Somehow, it felt like I had been holding it ever since I had woken up in the pig sty in the FunFarm on my first night there. For once I could let my guard down. Yes, I ached and there was still a lot of unknowing, but surely this couldn't go wrong? Just... just once, where I could relax and stitch something I wanted.

Only... I couldn't. What was all of this but just a facade that I was hiding myself within, until The Master came again? Until we were all forced into the Stable? I felt myself beginning to shake as the needle dropped. My chest heaved a little as I fought to hold it back. The past... I had to confront the past more than ever before, and likely fight for my life...

Goddesses, I was so pathetic... she was the one who had barely survived after her world was destroyed, and yet Glimmer smiled and kept going... I just cried and... and worked on this old... old pre-war clothing...

"Murky?"

The robe fell from my hooves. Falling in a heap on the floor before the sofa, my eyes rested upon the markings, machine stitched seams and properly dyed, if faded, colours. Who had worn it before? Where had they bought it? What would they think of it now in this dark place? My hooves shook, the thread falling as I pulled the blanket around me, turning my head away from it with a whimper.

"I'm sorry!" I sniffed deeply, wiping my nose with a hoof and avoiding her look. "I... pre-war stuff and... the past, it, I don't know... something about it just... just makes me well up and... and..."

"Shh... shh, it's alright..."

I felt her move over, a hoof passing around me gently and pulling my blanket-wrapped self closer. The feeling was too alien, too unknown to me to take any real comfort. Touch had only ever been a bad thing for me. Thus... I simply shook and cried. I cried in the pathetic manner in which I always did, my one defence against it all becoming too much. This was getting too big for me, heading to *a Stable*, preserved past times. I just couldn't cope. If Glimmerlight hadn't been here holding on to me... if Protégé hadn't locked me away in a pit with raiders... what might I have done? Run off again?

"I don't want to go to the Stable. I don't like the past, it's too... too hurtful. Everything I look at, it's just all filled with bad memories."

"Not all memories are bad, Murky..."

"*It feels like all of mine are!*"

I hadn't meant to shout so loudly. I pulled away, scampering over the couch away from Glimmerlight. Trying to hop the edge and run into the darkness to hide, I felt my hooves

catch in the blanket, tripping me with a high-pitched yelp off of the couch to squarely land on Glimmer's possessions. Cases spilled open, sending fragments of circuitry and little orbs rolling over the floor. The shock finally brought me to my senses... somewhat. I lay on the ground, surrounded by her things, shaking and apologising so fast and repeatedly it was just a constant stream even as she stared down at me with a mix of confusion and sadness.

Without a word, she got up and helped me back onto the couch, before placing the blanket over me once again.

"I... I've been through a lot, Murky."

Her voice shook, an unusual tone.

"But trust me, there is always good. You told me about that mysterious mare you keep meeting... about Littlepip. Take strength from their examples. The mare stood up to Shackles for you! Littlepip inspired you!"

Shivering, trying to make sense of the overwhelming emotions of her being there, of feeling unusually safe *around others* in a place I didn't have to get dragged out from, I just looked at her.

"I don't understand, why... why are you acting like this to me? I've never..."

Glimmerlight reached out, and brushed a strand of my mane from my eyes.

"Easy... you saved my life. You did what others wouldn't. You've proven what kind of pony you are to me. And to Brim. He saved your too because he was impressed... whether he'll admit it or not. After what you risked for us, he does care about you, Murky. As do I."

My voice felt very fragile, uncertain how to ask this.

"You mean I can... I can stay here?"

She squeezed my hoof and smiled, as I heard voices start to shout in the rest of the Mall complex. The Master above them all... coming closer.

"Alright, all you wretches! It's Stable time! Wagons are here so get your scrawny flanks moving! First slave to bring me a nice untouched Stable-dweller alive gets a hot meal! Now get moving!"

I clammed up, shaking and feeling the tug to respond. Briefly, I caught Glimmerlight's confused look as I upped and began trotting out. In the end, I realised it didn't matter. I went where *he* wanted me.

It had been foolish to think otherwise.

"Come on, all of you, out here. Now!"

I emerged from the back room to see sompony else in the cell with Brimstone Blitz. The big raider was glaring at an intruder, as in the entranceway, I saw The Master waiting for me. His rotten teeth grinned at me as the raiders filed past, followed by the dejected slaves.

"First mission, Number Seven! Come back to Daddy alive now, y'hear?"

I shut my eyes as I trotted past him, alone out of the cell, before squealing and crying out in quick succession as I felt his hoof slap my flank and knock me over after I passed him. The raiders stomped their hooves and jeered at the Master's little toy lying on the ground while I was too scared to move.

Just as quickly, they shut up as I felt two figures trot up either side of me. One whose imposing presence gave them a very damned good *reason* to keep their traps shut. The other gently knelt and helped me back to my hooves. I stared at Glimmerlight disbelievingly. She just winked.

"Told you, we're here. And yes... of course you can."

With one quick glance behind me, I watched as my Master seemed to snarl at all of us,

glaring with interrupted fury, as I was helped by my... my...

...what were they to me?

I didn't know.

Fillydelphia was never an environment that permitted moments of peace and happiness for long. Mere minutes after finding some strength in Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz, the 'workers' were to march to the front of the Mall under heavy griffon guard for relocation into a series of caged wagons.

Trudging out, my back reminding me that whip injuries cared not for positive thoughts, I found the process of embarkment aggressive and intimidating. Slaves were being shoved by slavers from all sides, keeping them disoriented and stumbling as they filtered through the heavy gate of the Mall into the thick smog of the outside world in the city. Many choked immediately from the nearby copper refinery blowing its foul wastes down the streets, or from the rank smells emanating from those ever-present caged pits dug down into old cellars and mines. I saw The Master's cronies hurling slaves into each of the half-dozen wagons, raiders or not, with enough force to rattle them off of the far side. Those baleful gas masks gazed upon us from above on rope and scrap bridges running between gaps on neighbouring buildings, weapons ready to mercilessly cut down anypony who trotted out of line. Whimpering, I stuck close to Glimmerlight as best I could while the thick mass of rank slaves and disgusting raiders crowded about us before being split toward their transports.

My turn came and went about as smoothly as I could have hoped. The same slaver who had directed me to the refinery chuckled as he found me on his wagon. He tossed me to his comrade. The shoving was about as demeaning and embarrassing (my yelping may have had something to do with that) as it could be before a magical throw hurled me inside the wagon to slam on the hard straw-ridden metal floor. Curling in the corner out of sheer protective habit, the only real consolation was that Glimmer and Brimstone were brought into the same wagon. The guards didn't even *try* touching him as his huge weight caused the wagon to rock on the suspension by merely stepping inside. That, and making the four slaves tasked to pull it groan audibly, mostly asking why *he* wasn't pulling.

Even as the cage door was slammed shut after a dozen more slaves were crammed in, I didn't move. Nothing could help my mind worrying on all the twisted fates I was in for. Stables were *legendary* for how messed up they could get. I wanted to just run away. Hide, go back to Wicked Slit and beg to be allowed to just pull carts again...

"Just stay with us, we'll try and keep you safe."

Glimmerlight's voice was shaky. The harsh loading sequence and imminent Stable invasion had to be affecting her as well. The mere fact she had added 'try' said it all. Zombie ponies seemed little in comparison to the past that had ended the world with its horrors.

Settling down, I tried to calm myself. To remind myself to breathe, just breathe, and look around. To not think that of being in a cage, but rather to look around at the world. At all the ponies and buildings that I was used to in Fillydelphia...

Instead, I saw The Master moving away from the armoury wagon that carried the weapons to stand at the gateway to the Mall. Seeing me looking, *that* grin began to crawl across his face while his head followed me on our departure. His eyes were fixed on mine the entire time, before he raised a hoof to actually wave, mockingly. His voice rang out, just

loud enough for only myself to hear it. *How did he know the volume to use?*

“Enjoy the history of how ponies like me came to rule your world, Number Seven! Just think of all the skeletons you’ll get to meet!”

Moments later, Glimmerlight began her efforts to understand and help me after I had collapsed into a blubbling heap at her hooves. Perhaps, if I had been watching, I might have felt something as we passed through the main gates and outside of the hell I had been trapped in. But I was too busy trying to quell thoughts of dark voids looking to pull me underground into the past’s madness.

That was something about travelling with somepony who, for some reason, wanted to be nice to me. Horrible events that made me scared seemed... further away... when around her. With reassurances and a nice hug, I felt... better. That alone was something new. As was the land outside.

It had been a long time. The walls of Fillydelphia and the hellish industry were all that I had encountered for months. To witness the wastes one more time, I had expected to feel a sense of escape. Perhaps even begin to realise the concept of freedom.

Instead, I found it haunting. In all directions around Fillydelphia were either more concrete ruins, rolling fields of broken soil, or low hills leading to larger, snow-tipped mountains in the distance. On in particular spired up above the others, its tip past the clouds. The air was clearer pit here, but not by much. Huge billows of smoke drifted over the Wall in various places, driven by the lazy wind to suffocate anything outside of the pit itself. Even the wasteland itself seemed to darken as it got closer to Red Eye’s empire.

Our column was being pulled slowly under heavy guard toward the nearest set of hills, to the west, I thought. The wagons quickly proved to be incredibly foul, packed in with slaves as filthy as I was myself from months in Fillydelphia. Curling in the corner, with Glimmerlight and Brimstone to one side, I could only feel like I was being contained in some sort of handy portable slave pit. That, and there was an annoying squeak from the right back wheel every few seconds, never in a regular pattern either, that was slowly driving me to want to beat myself unconscious to not listen to it any more. On the upswing, however, my sickness had steadily relaxed out here. Already, I could feel my breathing becoming a little easier away from the industrial atmosphere. Out here, the ambient radiation was much lower than back home in Fillydelphia.

My heart stopped for a minute.

I had just called Fillydelphia... home.

Oh Goddesses. I immediately looked out and around, trying to find *anything* to take my attention away from how seriously messed up my head was getting from my time in there. I had been working for days to feel free and confident in myself; *why was I still thinking things like this?* I had to take a long breath, trying to quell the anger at myself. I’d learned that recently. It wasn’t healthy. I had to just... just slow down my thinking.

Around us trotted slavers and soldiers of Red Eye. Above, griffons drifted back and forth gracefully on the hot winds to watch the horizon. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have said it was a military grade convoy instead of a slave excursion. I followed one griffon as she spiralled down, whirling in the air before rounding off and gliding into the distance to perform a check on something. The others hovered in place with powerful flaps of their

colossal wings.

Watching me, Glimmerlight saw my eyes following the griffons. With a soft stroke of my fleece around where my wings were, she looked a little sad.

"You want to join them?" Her voice was quiet, quickly learning she didn't need to speak up where every other filthy slave crammed in the wagon could hear.

"The sky isn't mine to have, I've never been up there."

"Doesn't stop you wishing if it's what you want, Murky."

I sighed, looking over at her instead of the griffons. She hadn't been around me long enough to really get that while I had wings, and was a pegasus with a natural love of open spaces, my place was forever on the ground... possibly beside a slaver. But no, that wasn't why I was watching.

"No... I was just wondering why they're here. It's not like we can escape from these."

Glimmerlight's eyes moved away from me to glance at the griffons. Each carried a gigantic long rifle, undoubtedly the anti-machine rifles I had often seen. She smiled a little wistfully.

"Because they know who would kick their collective flanks if they didn't bring adequate counter-measures. The Steel Rangers operate in this area pretty heavily. If Red Eye has found a Stable, they'll know too. Stern wants to deter them with enough force that even their power armour couldn't handle. I'll bet they've got matrix disruption grenades too."

Combat knowledge wasn't my area. I instead turned back to the robes she had brought along for me to finish on the journey. There was just a couple of patches left to sew.

"How do you know about the Steel Rangers, Glimmer? I thought they all stayed pretty secret, only to their own kind."

Pulling the last thread tight, I smiled at my work. The big symbol on her robes was reattached proudly on her left side, bearing the icon of an apple surrounded by three gears. Azure magic coated over it as she slipped it on, lightly shoving enough room to get dressed from the slaves around us.

"Because, Murky..."

Shaking her mane out of the collar, Glimmerlight trotted side to side a couple of times to work in the red robes.

"...you're looking at one."

I wasn't the only slave who stared disbelievingly, some of the other dirty masses raised their heads from trying to rest. Many clearly knew already and showed no surprise, while the newer arrivals, like me, seemed to half-expect her to magically summon a huge suit of armour. Glimmerlight was a Steel Ranger? But... but they were supposed to be all stern and focused, not whimsical and casual like her. That said, I did remember that one look of a weathered warrior in her eyes from before.

"You... you're a paladin of the Steel Rangers!?"

Glimmerlight laughed, shaking her head. "No, Murky. I wish! I was just an apprentice when I left home to get away from how stuffy things were. Not my kind of scene. Far too much staying inside, with strict limitations on every facet of your life like social clauses against who you could and couldn't hang out with, drink with or take to bed. I lived in the Ranger stronghold at Bucklynn Cross. My folks still help guard there; mother's a paladin and father is a scribe. Each wanted me to go into their professions."

One of the other slaves piped up, his voice implying a clear disbelief.

"Bullshit, I heard unicorns couldn't wear the armour! Their horns don't fit in the helmet!"

Glimmer merely smiled at him, but still resumed talking to me as I kept shifting from the unsteady wagon. The speaker earned himself a harsh glance from Brimstone. Thankfully, he didn't decide to kick off.

"We can't. But if I'd travelled the path of the warrior under my mother, I'd have become a knight. Skilled in combat magic, healing, and battlefield repair of the paladin armour. We'd support their advances, and if needs be, provide a little magic cover for them. We only wear lighter metal plates and armour, nothing powered. Scribes, meanwhile, well, everypony knows them. Sit around, research stuff, get to build cool shit from the past. Both paths had their temptations, y'know..."

I stretched, standing up and trying to find room amongst the cramped slaves in the wagon. Most were just ignoring our conversation now, seemingly worried more about their own selves or just not wanting to attract attention from Brimstone. The massive earth pony still sat silently at the side of the wagon where he simply watched anypony for signs of trouble. The raiders, I had noticed, were being kept in a separate wagon, away from him.

"So... which path did you take?"

"My own. Folks weren't too happy about me leaving, but one night I just told them to their faces that being in the Rangers wasn't allowing me to see all I wanted to see. That I could learn more and come back to them someday with what I had gathered. Caused a bit of an uproar really..."

In the past, I had been dragged from my mother against my will. Glimmerlight had chosen to leave hers for a better life. Immediately, I couldn't decide if I could have done the same, if it would have let me escape. All I knew is that my mother would have wanted it. But hearing it from Glimmer, through all her smiles... I couldn't help but feel sorry for her parents. They wouldn't know what had happened to her, that their daughter was now in the thrall of Red Eye. That thought bit hard, especially if they had parted on low moods.

"Did... did they hate you for it?" My voice was shaky, trying not to step on any emotional landmines.

"At first, yeah... but they were a little more progressive than most of the Elders. They said that if I could bring something incredible back then it could all be spun as some big quest to help the orde.! But the Elders... they put out motions for me to be regarded a traitor unless I returned. An ultimatum, you might say. Said to break the ways of isolation and preservation was to break the chains that bound us to the great cause."

A little element of kinship lit in my heart for her. Glimmerlight had sought to escape a life not chosen by herself, just as I had. Instead, through cruel happenstance, she had been enslaved.

"Did nopony say otherwise? Realise it was wrong?"

Much to my surprise, Glimmerlight did not reply immediately. For once, she seemed to be at a loss for words as she turned away from me and stared in the direction of Manehattan. Eventually she spoke, as though having to think long and hard to find the proper words.

"There was one. I would have followed him if I knew where to find him. Still would. Take his lead, his ideals, at least for a while. But the Rangers just don't think that way anymore. Now they only care about technology, anything they can get to hoard away, just like they tried to hoard my skills and my life away, as just another one of them. Knowledge, and ponies... they both deserve to be free. That's what he believed."

"Who was he?"

“Somepony very special, Murky...”

She hoofed the symbol on her robes lightly and longingly. Or more particularly, the apple.

“The one Ranger I know of who hasn’t forgotten what we’re meant to stand for.”

My mouth opened, the question of who and why, along with a dozen other thoughts, prepared to come out. I felt a huge hoof nudge my side. Turning, I found Brimstone looking down at me and lightly shaking his head.

This entire business of being friendly and helping one another was entirely new to me. I did not know what it was called, or what Glimmerlight truly was. But at least for now, I understood that there were always limits. As I pulled my journal out to draw instead, I reflected that at least Brimstone had also showed he cared by just gently reminding me.

Glimmerlight didn’t cease looking out into the wastes for a few minutes, before giggling to herself and sitting down. But I knew, more than any pony in the world, how to look past the smile and recognise the look of somepony realising they were trapped away from the ones they longed to be with.

“Aw, fudge!”

Muttering to myself, I bent my hoof across my drawing and tried my best to smudge out the line that had gone astray when the wagon lurched on a rock. The last half hour I had spent with my head down just drawing something I wanted, because why not? It was not like my life needed any more horror or emotional turmoil. So I had settled on drawing something pleasing. Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz had chatted quietly. Or rather, she had chattered, and Brim had just given gruff answers and sardonic quips while filling He stuck to the important events as he spoke.

“Wait, you kidding, Brim? He’s seriously never said ‘fuck’ before?”

Well, mostly important.

Drawing kept my mind off of what was approaching, anyway. With my back to the hills, I couldn’t see the great rock face approaching that was casting a shadow over the entire convoy. I couldn’t see the little glint of metal in the hillside that indicated our destination. I willed myself to just draw and not think... draw and *not think of the past*. Glimmerlight had helped give me the courage to look on the past and not despair for everything... but a... a Stable...

No, I had to just keep drawing and ignore it. That place was future Murky Number Seven’s problem to deal with! I could just concentrate on the lovely lines and charcoal and relax... yes. I felt the fear back down and diminish in the back of my mind. Sighing as I held the journal back up on my front hooves, I maintained sketching away so intently I didn’t even see Brimstone loom over my shoulder and cast a glance at my drawing.

“You know, Murk, you got a better look at Littlepip than I did... but I could have sworn she had more clothing than that.”

The charcoal spluttered from my mouth as I whipped the journal shut and held it against me before looking up, shaking my head. My voice rose in pitch, almost squeaking as I felt myself turn red as Brimstone Blitz himself.

“I... I just haven’t added it yet!”

He let a low grin fill his face as he leaned back and stared at the hillside.

"Sure, buddy... sure."

Glimmerlight's mad grin appeared from behind him as she raised and lowered her eyebrows.

"I guess I'll need to have a look at that journal sometime soon..."

I was already a small pony... somehow I managed to feel even smaller as I tried to turn away in embarrassment. But she only just smiled, as did Brimstone. What were they doing? They weren't insulting me or demeaning me, but still they teased me. What was this sort of thing? Tucking my journal away safely, I reflected that there was a lot I didn't understand right now. Why were they even looking out for me anyway? Probably just so I could do some job for them soon... that was all anyone ever wanted from me, eventually.

Despite trying hard, even my negative thoughts couldn't quite believe that about Glimmerlight. But my wandering mind wasn't given much opportunity to think longer, as the wagon ground to a halt and slavers began shouting for us to dismount and stay well away from them. Squeaking in terror, I finally allowed myself to turn and witness the reality of my situation.

Uncovered from behind an old rockfall, I saw the giant shape. Burnished steel made up its entire construction beside a frayed control panel. A number I couldn't read was emblazoned on the front. A huge door, gear-shaped and already rolled to the side revealed a thick blackness beyond, one that my eyes couldn't adjust to through the bright red haze of the valley around me.

Thrown out of the wagon while looking, my gaze never once left it. That gaping hole into the past. Towering over me, I felt impossibly small in its presence; unthinkable unimportant to the passing of time and the events of the world shattering past.

"Gather round! Stable excursion starts in ten, get geared up, pumped up, and let's do this!"

The raiders cheered. Glimmer and Brimstone glanced to the rest of the slaves and took deep breaths. Shouts for the armoury wagon to get its contents spilled and chants of raiding and looting began. The entire excursion, slaver and slave alike, began to thrive with excitement at another chance to earn their freedom, if only by a small amount.

But I just continued to sit alone and stare into the void that had terrified me all my life.

"Stay back! Get into your lines and wait for your kit, then stay against the walls! Step one hoof out of line and you *will* be shot down on the spot!"

The griffons were not taking any chances when it came to handing the slaves weaponry. As they explained, we would be given unloaded weaponry one by one from the armoury wagon that had been pulled up behind us under heavy guard. The slavers would then depart about half a mile to a nearby ruined farmhouse, leaving boxes of ammunition at the door to the Stable. Griffons would cover us all from above, about three dozen slaves, while we armed up and headed in. Any resistance would be met with a barrage of heavy weaponry that the rusty old things we were being given wouldn't have a hope against. The bombardment was safe in the knowledge that no other slavers were in the area.

Very quickly, I began realising how that barrage would include me, regardless of my own actions...

I spent a brief time as we waited staring out into the wastes. For once, there were no

walls. No smog clogged my lungs and I couldn't feel my pulmina... ebo... lung disease thingy, at all. My lungs were resting easier on the cleaner air, to the point that I almost felt dizzy to take a deep breath. The distances were incredible, I could see further than the next industrial street.

So why didn't I feel free here?

The answer came to me rather simply. Because I wasn't. No matter what I thought, I was still property of The Master, Protégé, and of course Red Eye. A quick glance at my flank revealed the gnashing shackles were still there... still signifying that even here, outside the Wall, I was just a slave on a mission.

The raiders apparently had weapons well known to them, drawn from Protégé's armoury that was mostly made up of weapons confiscated from them after being dragged into Fillydelphia. Apparently his theory, as Glimmerlight explained, was they would fight better and be better controlled in higher moods while in possession of their own kit. I saw brutal mouth knives, spiked hoof caps, auto axes (I hoped for door busting), rusty revolvers and pistols, and even a few long rifles used by the unicorns. Much to my surprise there were even a few magical energy weapons among the handouts from the armoured wagon. Shivering, I tried to hide behind Brimstone as I saw raiders gesture my way with the knives, mimicking a wing slice before laughing amongst themselves. My mind was beginning to work in overdrive about Barb in such a dark area. His presence removed all comfort of me finding a hidden little spot and just waiting it all out.

To distract myself, I tried to concentrate on the armoury wagon and the process involved. Who knew? Perhaps I'd get a battle saddle in my size?

A very odd stallion indeed was acting as the arms master. An old, dark grey earth pony with a straggly brown mane and sunken eyes was grumbling and muttering cynically as he dragged weaponry from the wagon. He sported a missing eye and seemed to scowl about as much as he took shots from an old glass of alcohol. He left it sitting on the weapon bench he had lumped all the way over here for running repairs. His accent was beyond my knowledge by at least several regions, missing words and occasionally breaking into a harsh dialect that sounded like it had been designed exclusively to swear in. That is, I could only assume the words were curses, they sure sounded like it.

Brimstone and Glimmerlight were clearly headed to be 'served' by the strange armoury slaver, with the big warlord moving up first to receive a chosen weapon.

"*Govno!* Brimstone Blitz! Is brave of you to request weapon from me after state you return poor gun last time!"

With just a shrug, Brimstone motioned to the raiders.

"They got rowdy, needed calming down. I'm not their leader any more; doesn't mean I have to let them get frenzied on the others when they go unsupervised. Your gun was a nice beating implement, Mosin."

Brimstone's clearly deliberate grin only made 'Mosin' bristle, idly take a swig of alcohol without ever breaking eye contact, and tap Brimstone's chest with a hoof.

"You break every gun I give! I give you pistol, you smash it over head! I give you rifle, you step on barrel!"

"Never did need a *gun* to do my work. Can't aim the things anyway."

"*Mne pohui!* Back home, would be shamed to admit such a thing! Here! I will give you *last chance only!* After that, you are on fucking own! This is southern grade assault rifle with only minimal moving parts and big thick ironwork receiver. Is unbreakable! Once, I beat

hellhound over head for half hour with it. Still fired after stupid *heusos* bit my hoof!"

I could believe it, looking at that mangled appendage bound up with rough prosthetic wood on his front left leg. Brimstone took the rusty rifle in his mouth and tested the sights, before muttering his own muffled curse to himself and hooking it over his side within easy reach. He grinned at me, out of sight of Mosin, as he wandered off from the armourer.

"Unbreakable? Interesting challenge. I've wanted a reliable club for a while..."

"You break gun, then you worst gun handler in Equestria! Next!"

Glimmerlight was next up behind him. Seeing her, Mosin's mood did not improve.

"And you! Big red one brings guns back broken, that I can fix! You do things to them! Never come back the same way and often lose way I calibrate them. You get nothing fancy this time, old bolt-action for you!"

He tossed a very long wooden rifle to Glimmer, who caught it mid throw with her telekinesis before bringing it closer and immediately examining it under an obviously expert scrutiny. Chuckling, the Mosin tapped the weapon and outright laughed.

"Think you steal components and I not notice? Nothing worthwhile removable on gun this time! You use, you bring back."

She seemed to ignore him, before her eyebrows narrowed at the bolt loosely flopping back and forward under her magic. Her eyes glanced up with the anger of one who respects proper design. I could relate... damn safety railings...

"This long rifle is not fit for use by anypony, not even a slave! You say I take things but you don't even keep them fresh with components you old bastard! This rifle doesn't even have a safety!"

The earth pony rounded on her, a look of confusion on his face as he looked, not at the rifle but at her, and bellowed in mirth.

"Safety!?! Is not safe! Is *gun!*"

Both he and the raiders bellowed with laughter as he shoved Glimmerlight aside and screamed for the next one in the queue. Recovering quickly, she huffed and stomped off toward Brimstone. Watching them, I didn't even notice I was next before I felt the slave behind me bellow in my ear and shove me forward. Stumbling, I fell right into (and bounced off of) Mosin before he eyed me up (well... down...) with a great degree of curiosity, and began laughing.

"They must be desperate! Sending foal to fight in Stable! Tell me, little colt... or filly, not sure which... you handle weapons?"

What the hell, it was worth a shot. "Um... I'd like a battle saddle? I know... I know about them!"

Both Mosin and the other slaves bellowed with laughter as I felt his freaky wooden hoof slap me over the back of my head rather painfully. Whining from the strike, it occurred to me he was just 'slapping out of humour,' albeit very strongly.

"Oh, you are very ambitious buck you are! My colleague back at Mall, he would like you. Flamboyant idiot with no sense of proper practical weaponry. Always wants bigger things and enjoys kitting slaves out with perfectly fitting and fancy firearms. I keep him locked in armoury cleaning since he tried to attach sniper scope to flamethrower. No, you get this! Pistol befitting your size and age."

He tossed me a BB pistol. That accent intimidated me, the prosthetic hoof freaked me out, and the attention of a couple dozen slaves laughing and making jokes at my expense was one thing, but come on, this was ridiculous!

"But, sir... I—"

"Mister Mosin, I am called."

"Mister Mosin! I can't fight crazy robots or monsters with that! I... I'm not that young! I'm just small!"

"Could have fooled me. You get toy gun and you will enjoy it till you are big enough to have stallion's gun. Next!"

At least he hadn't bucked me away from him like everypony else in Fillydelphia did once they were done with me... I picked up the pitiful 'weapon' in my mouth (how unrefined! No saddles, really?) and wandered sadly back to Brimstone and Glimmerlight, feeling my chances of survival plummeting rapidly. Perhaps I could crawl inside a ventilation duct near the entrance and... and hide. Just wait till it was all over. Stables had ducts, right?

My memory quickly began to remember clambering inside the drain on my escape, before being bitten and chased by radroaches. Rapidly, the idea of being stuck in a cramped little area began to fade as a very safe one.

My eyes fell upon the thick blackness behind the great circular gate.

'Cramped little area' was describing the entire place I was about to go into. Even as the wagons circled off and descended the track again to leave behind the ammunition, I just hid behind a rock until all the raiders were done picking out their required supplies. Glimmerlight kindly levitated the box of BBs across to me.

"Don't worry, Murky. Just keep your head down and we'll keep you safe, alright? Chances are there won't be anything those raiders can't handle, I'm hoping. Now, let's get you some ammo and... ah shit..."

Inside the box, there was absolutely nothing but a small note. I didn't even need to be able to read the writing as I saw the crude drawing of a shadowy raider winking at me.

Suddenly I became very glad that we had time before we went in. I'd need it to stop shaking and recover. But amidst tears, fear, and failed attempts at reassurance, I could not fight the inevitability that I would have to go. The griffons had promised to shoot any slave who did not do the work.

The raiders were first. Screaming war cries they haphazardly charged into the great Stable door, disappearing into the darkness completely. Their bellowing became muffled and then strangely silent as they went further inside. Other slaves followed in small groups, nervously moving inside at a slower, more cautious pace. I saw Barb hang around, wink, and smile at me and then creep inside himself. His dull colours led him to vanish from view almost immediately, leaving just the three of us... or rather, just me, as Glimmerlight and Brimstone attempted to help nudge me along by going first.

I was alone. Certain death behind me and the horrible past of Equestria before me. I was still crying as I gulped, shakily stepped forward, and moved into the darkness of times long gone.

Grey.

The first few seconds inside were nothing but a sudden shock of stark terror pounding throughout my body! The stories had been right. All that was inside was a thick and horrifying darkness! It surrounded me, suffocating. If I hadn't been too scared to make a sound in the cloying dark, I would have screamed.

But quickly, my eyes began to adjust to the darkness. Feeling weak, gasping for air in the musty atmosphere of a place long sealed away, I tried to stay calm. It wasn't working. I had experienced small hidden holes all my life... crawled through ducts and even went into an underground bunker just a small portion of a day ago, but that was all temporary and I knew it was still near ground level. I had always known what lay just outside of whatever hole I'd crawled into. My place had been decided, an eternal place by my master's side.

This was different. A warm air, the polar opposite to the wasteland I had left and in some way lived in all my life, set my coat to sweat beneath my thick fleece almost immediately. Even before details began to form in my vision I could smell things, rotting and dusty, chemical and utterly alien. Any small surface I could glimpse was that same gunmetal grey. Every railing, wall, control panel, just... grey. My ears found a whole new range of sounds to pick up; 'from dull electronic humming, crackling static and sparking magical flares from control panels on each wall somewhere. If it weren't for the dead blackness, I might have mistaken it for still being fully functional. My hooves, so used to debris and unsteady surfaces, felt unsure on the smooth metal panels below me. And though I valued an ability to see well in the dark to escape bigger ponies... even my eyesight felt dulled to the point I could see very little in even this entrance hallway. Wires hung from the ceiling through vents that had corroded apart over the long years like cobwebs. Or were they cobwebs? I couldn't tell!

A whole new level of panic overtook me. My legs froze on the spot as the feeling of wandering into the failed past hit home. What was it like to live here... for that huge door to seal shut and forever trap you in the servitude of survival in a small home like this! To never see the sky, even if covered in clouds! To have nothing to shoot for, to escape from... to forever be bound to one little place for your entire life. The thought sent shivers down every nerve I owned as for the first time I realised why Littlepip, the Stable Dweller, had fought so hard for her freedom.

She knew what it was like to be trapped. That sense of entrapment must have been what drove her to escape from being like... like a trapped bird! Very quickly, panic began to set in, and I imagined the door shutting behind me. Of it rolling down from that great hinge and marking a new level of confinement for my life. That if I went any further, this Stable would just swallow me whole into an inescapable prison.

Echoes of murderous cries echoed in the air between corridors, as the raiders whooped and stormed down every one of the corridors. Three ways seemed to direct out of the entrance and its raised stair sections. The crashing and rattling of metal mixed with the sound of thick glass being pounded and beaten upon when five of them began tearing into a booth on the right hand side. The remainder began rushing, pushing other slaves out of the way as the group fought for space and purchase in this cramped entry hallway. Ponies ran every side of me, knocking me against railings I couldn't see, and I felt wires brushing like scratching tentacles against my mane. There wasn't any space!

My vision finally began to adjust even as we were swept up in the madness of the Stable raid. With no chance to investigate the area properly, I was knocked around, dragged with the crowd into the cramped metal rooms and pulled inexorably deeper into the past. I saw the colossal gears on the room from the interior side of the great door above me coated in rust and grease disappear as I was forced to keep up or be run down. A raider shoved me to the side into a hard metal wall, knocking my skull and dizzying me to the point I lost track of which way I was going. Harsh metal steps and walls surrounded me on all sides, solid

roofs and floors of the exact same panel design led my sense of direction to disappear amongst a whirlwind of activity of everyone trying to find the best loot. A dark metal nightmare, where I could do nothing but collapse to the ground and scream and shout and beg for them to stop and try to find somewhere to hide and... and what? Think? If I thought about all this being somepony's home in the past...

A mouth bit into my fleece and pulled me from the chaos into a side corridor. Light blue illumination led me to screw my eyes shut after becoming accustomed to the thick darkness until, mercifully, I found the source to be Glimmerlight's horn. Brimstone Blitz had pulled me from the rush of slaves moving into the main areas of the Stable.

"They're going to set off every trap and unsafe area in this entire place at that rate," muttered Glimmer as she stared down the thin side corridor that the main rush had utterly ignored, "like I said, stick with us. We'll lay low and go for the repair bays. Always some good stuff in there and *usually* much less dangerous than the primary atrium and living areas."

I shrank against the wall, seeking solace in the cold metal to give me something solid to anchor on, yet it throbbed under the surface with a subtle power that quickly led me to stick closer to Glimmerlight instead. Was this place alive? More and more I was getting the impression that Stables were entirely aware of those ponies hidden within them... or those intruding upon the relics they had steadfastly protected for centuries.

"Murky, you alright?"

Everything just felt wrong here, something had ruined this place. All those rocks outside, why had they covered the entrance? The door had been locked open, why?

"Hey, Murky?"

I just... I didn't want to know. I'd been dragged through the Stable since I had wandered in, had I travelled straight? Did they pull me around a corner? Which way was it back to the door? This was too much!

"Murky!"

Just... just too much! I dropped against the floor, curling up as I numbly felt somepony, Glimmer, shaking me and calling my name. But I didn't want to face it anymore... I just wanted to close my eyes and pretend none of it existed. I couldn't see, I couldn't hear over it all, every sight and smell down here was unreal and born of a past I feared. I wanted out, now.

Amongst the clacking of hooves on metal floors, screaming raiders, and crashing sounds of mad looting, I just fell into my most basic reaction and cried. Even while I felt Glimmerlight's hoof stroking my mane trying to help, I just curled up tighter.

"We're here, Murky..."

I shuddered. Too much... just... too much...

Lying on the ground, fearfully peeping out between my hooves, I saw that the Stable was constructed of matching components. Every twenty feet or so the wall patterns repeated, like it had been constructed modularly. Stairs leading up and down broke away at intervals while huge metal doors filled with warning symbols stood guard over their contents. I was wrong, this wasn't a dark void of nothing. It was a preserved and quickly rotting corpse of metal. Foul water leaked from pipes into corners and down stairs while occasional rattles of

doors trying to open on failed pistons gave an annoyingly regular metallic noise to the entire facility.

And that was just one corridor.

Under Glimmer's reassurances I'd somewhat shakily pulled myself to my hooves, following the pair. To say the 'lights had come on' was something of an overstatement, vision went only as far as the buzzing lighting units functioned, and the majority had failed. Where before there was a black void, there was now a hazy yellow glow that flickered and died more often than it was actually on. Combined with the red rust and dull grey, it provided a necrotic atmosphere to this place. What had obviously once been sterile had been worn down over time into looking like it had been made from scrapyard materials.

A screeching and agonised scream cut the air. Whimpering, I fell flat on the floor. The pair with me tore their guns out and aimed in either direction. The screaming kept going, distant and horrifying. It was like the old dwellers were still screaming in the Stable that had become their tomb. Glimmerlight took a shaky breath and glanced sideways at Brimstone.

"Brim... what the hell was that?"

The noises of the raiders had dulled down somewhat. Without warning, it came again. This time, it sounded hurt... then louder and higher, mixed with begging and pitiful wailing. Brimstone's eyes closed as he listened, before shaking his head slowly.

"Something that makes me glad we came this way. Let's just get some stuff and get the hell out. Quietly."

Without a word we moved on, Brimstone and Glimmerlight keeping their firearms handy. For the next ten minutes we wound through corridor after corridor, trying doors that seemed inoperable. Careful trotting took us around exposed power panels in the floor while an odd little river coming from 'upstairs' let warm water wash around our hooves before it disappeared into the lower levels. Glancing down the staircase showed that the level below held no light to see the destination of the stream. Still shaking and struggling to control myself, I moved on and spotted Glimmerlight and Brimstone pass around a corner. It was intersected with two windows so filthy and covered in dust that we couldn't see even the inside of whatever room it was.

"Think that's the canteen? You've been in more Stables than me..."

The big pony narrowed his eyes and scratched his mane with a hoof.

"No, but something isn't right. I've been in four Stables. Every one of them had the same rough layout in some way. This one isn't following that. I'm not sure what this is."

I hadn't been in *any* Stables to know. Letting my thoughts drift back to the ghoulish community in the crater, I tried to remind myself that that bunker hadn't been any different...

No, it had. That was a bunker designed to shelter and continue medical work. It wasn't a home, a place of memories. But then, neither had this place been, so far. Horrid rusting corridors and dirty windows? Where were the skeletons? Where were the abandoned toys and old beds?

Leaning forward and hopping up on my hind legs, I wiped the dust from the window, peering in as I cleaned it to get a better sense of where we were. Maybe it would have some RadAway for me to ta-

With a howling scream, the blood-caked face rattled against the window right in front of my nose. Screaming till my throat was hoarse, my fleeing was stopped only by running into the brick wall that was Brimstone Blitz. Not again! No! I'd had enough of ghouls!

I heard the laughter a few seconds afterwards as the door from down the hallways slid open and four of the raiders tumbled out, almost crying with laughter.

"Did ya see his face, mate!?"

"What a fuckin' riot! Good spot hearing them coming, Knife!"

The third raider had smeared blood over his own face from a shallow wound. Going by his bloodied axe, I wondered if he had done it himself. I lay on the ground, tears streaming down my face and hyperventilating as I saw Glimmerlight step toward them.

"Just piss off, you lot! This is hard enough without you all screwing around!"

The four of them just laughed all the harder, stepping just close enough to make a point, but, I observed, not so close that they'd be within reach of Brimstone. The warlord stood impassively, with a furious look on his face, presumably waiting for Glimmer's approval to no doubt kill them. The bloody-faced raider leaned forward. I could see scars all over him, all no doubt self-inflicted, going by the angled patterns to them. In a moment of disbelief, I realised that it wasn't just his face! He had coated himself with blood, for what? To psyche himself up?

These ponies were a far cry from Noose and Lemon.

"Hey, 'Ranger'! This is our turf down here, to do what we want! Only chance we get to have proper fun without the *traitor* ruining it. He knows we could just kill him down here, don't you, big guy? Or is it old man now?"

Brimstone snorted. "I'd like to see you try, Edge. I still remember you whining the day I broke your knee for touching one of my mares. Now get out of my sight."

I felt Glimmerlight rest down beside me. This was beyond either of us. Truth be told, hearing Brimstone refer to 'his mares' brought unsettling imagery of what he had done in his life before now.

Suddenly I felt even less safe, there was one more raider than I'd counted down here with me. The four before us only laughed more as they sauntered off.

"Fine then! Just don't get in our way, the atrium is ours now. Don't come near or you'll learn like those two little slaves who tried to take some of our loot!"

The origin of the screams suddenly made a lot of sense. It became clear to me that the Stable's own environmental dangers were not the only things threatening us in the dark down here. A quick agreement was reached to rest for a minute and check out the room they had just left after the raiders departed. Glimmer helped me inside, more due to me now shaking so much that I could scarcely trot. The room was pitch black, with all the lights having failed. The dull haze outside in the corridor wouldn't be enough to light it. Patting my back, Glimmerlight concentrated for a moment, and let her horn light up with blue sparkles around a gentle flow, proved that her name rung true. She smiled at me.

"Full of tricks, you'd be surprised at all the things I can do."

Amidst the azure hue, I took a quick glance around. Very quickly, I guessed that this was the repair bay. I had seen enough industry in Fillydelphia to recognise workbenches and tools, even if these ones seemed much better made, albeit somewhat utilita... utilitari...

Simple. They were simple and tough looking, I concluded.

Individual little stations were sectioned off from one another. I could imagine ponies sat in their own little zones in the small room, but many of them looked shunted in here haphazardly, like they'd crammed it with more than it was designed for. But what really caught my attention was when I looked at the whole room.

Just... grey. Every bench and tool, seat and locker... that same colour. Every artistic sense

I owned was screaming in violation at the dull life anypony here must have had. Without really knowing what I was doing, I moved up to one seat and sat back on my haunches before the workbench. The wall stared back. Perhaps this had once been a *clean* grey as opposed to what it was now. Covered in... actually, very little dust at all. It was *that* bland.

This wall really needed something... maybe a, hmm... perhaps a mu—

Glimmerlight broke the silence.

“Damn, whoever had a shop in here must have taken what they liked long ago. Probably before whatever happened to wreck the Stable. Brim, you find anything?”

The big raider shook his head. “Not unless you feel like another wrench. Just stock equipment, minus the fancy stuff. Almost like nopony ever used this place at all. Just stuck workbenches in here to store them.”

Turning, I saw Glimmerlight holding up a pair of pliers with a rather confused look. Only after a second did it click that the pliers still had their safety pins intact. They had never been used. Hopping down from the seat, I wandered over into the now-flickering light. Glimmer let out a long breath, swore quietly, and let it die. The all-encompassing dark took over the moment her spell ended.

“Well, I never claimed to be an expert at long-term magic. Anypony got ideas on how to solve this?”

I did; almost as quickly as I heard Brimstone about to mention it, I began feeling around in my saddlebag for one of the two prized possessions I carried. Sundial’s PipBuck. One hoof of a button later and we had a dull green flicker to see by. There was something odd about drawing it here, until I realised the PipBuck casing was that same shade of grey too.

Brimstone nodded with approval and he began bending the locker doors off their hinges to check their contents, but Glimmerlight stood almost in shock. She held various tools in her magic field, contrasting oddly with the green light of my PipBuck. I guessed that illumination magic took a lot more stress than a simple telekinetic hold on items.

“You... have a PipBuck!?”

Holding it protectively between my hooves, I just nodded.

“Sorry I didn’t say... but it... it means a lot to me.”

The tools tumbled to the ground as she almost seemed to fly over to me, her eyes locked on the wrecked device. I could swear she was quivering on the spot like a hyperactive foal.

“You have a *PipBuck*?” she repeated. “Ooh! Give! Can I see? I won’t break it!”

Slightly taken aback, I stammered a reply, before simply giving up and gently holding it out. Given the way she had treated me thus far, a look was alright, surely? She lifted it with her magic to float before her. The loose leather whip ties dangled idly while the broken hinges squeaked in the telekinetic grip. The noise echoed strangely in the isolated wing of the Stable. Briefly, I began to wonder where the other raiders and slaves were, I hadn’t heard anything from them for a while.

“Oh my... this thing has seen better days. You poor little PipBuck. Now let’s just take a look. Appropriate place this, PipBuck Technicians Bay of the Stable.”

She hoofed the switch I normally used for the radio, which brought a very quiet volume of Sapphire Shores into the room. Raising an eyebrow, Glimmerlight upped the volume until it was at a level ponies other than freaky taintborns could detect. Eventually, she laid it on the technician’s workbench and pulled a second seat over for me.

Behind us came an almighty crash as Brimstone pulled the locker clean off the wall to stamp the door inwards, trying to get at it.

Glimmerlight squinted one eye, raising the eyebrow of the other while turning and toying with the device.

“Been so long since I had a chance to work on one of these things. Father never did allow me near any of the ones we had in storage, unless it was to teach me about the operations systems. Gotta say, Murky... the fact this one is working at all is nothing short of magical itself. The spark battery is actually *exposed* to the air while operating, all the hoof locks are gone, screen protector is shattered, half the buttons seem to be disconnected, and of course, the entire underside has been torn off. I’ll bet somepony tried to remove this in a hurry without tools, actually.”

I whimpered, Sundial’s sad fate was still a hurtful thought in my mind I often preferred to try and forget. Had he died before the balefire? Just what happened to him around the time his PipBuck became such a mess?

“Aha!”

Startled, my eyes blinked and my ears perked as I leaned over before almost falling from my flattened seat with shock. There, in her hands, the screen was working! Very light green, it flickered and fizzed out a couple of times, but always came back. Arcane symbols flashed and scrolled around it, fading in and out; probably the symbol of the group who made them. Eventually, it settled into something resembling the idle state I had seen Littlepip’s sitting in. Glimmerlight could not hold her smile in as a hoof dragged me in for a little celebratory hug. I yelped at the shock, making her let go and pat my back instead. Was she taking no chances with me or... oh, I didn’t understand this whole social thing at all... what *was* she being to me? The mare had cared, but Glimmerlight felt... different. I mean, yes, she cared, clearly... but with the mare something had *connected* in a way I’d never dreamed. With Glimmerlight, it felt more like an entirely new sensation... to get to know something. What was that? Why did I feel stronger around her? More confident in her presence after only knowing her for a few hours?

If she noticed my thoughtful look, she didn’t react. Instead, her eyes were fixated on the PipBuck screen as the system properly booted up.

From behind us, there came a very sudden sound of pistons and moving metal. Half a second after it started, there was a sharp crunch of gears.

Both Glimmer and myself jumped in shock, as the dull mechanical sound suddenly shot through the room. Speakers above us on the ceiling buzzed loudly, creepily similar to Parasprites, before squealing loudly and failing. Biting my lip in fear, I saw the door to this blacked-out room jar and jump in its half-open housing before fizzing and sparking with blown fuses.

In the dead silence, we stared as Brimstone tapped it a few times before looking around outside. “Any idea, Glim?”

She shrugged. “Guess it just jammed on an automatic shutting script from being open so long... the hell was with the speakers though?”

I found myself gripping her with all four hooves in terror, somehow. “It didn’t sound nice...”

Rubbing her forehead, Glimmer looked up at them, before settling down again.

“Well... back... back in Bucklynn Cross, see? Sometimes the speakers announced a door was closing. Safety, y’know? Don’t worry, broken systems always sound weird.”

Glimmerlight sounded confident in her knowledge, if a little surprised, before she looked back at my PipBuck. Personally, I just wanted out. This place was filled with too many

sudden sounds, dark corners, and unknown secrets. I knew *they* would be in here somewhere. Glimmerlight, meanwhile, just seemed to find solace and comfort in checking my PipBuck.

"I thought that's all it was! All that was wrong was the matrix that controls the distribution of energy wasn't detecting the screen protector, so it disabled the visuals to protect... I dunno, the warranty or something? Just a little spark in the right place and hello! Now you can properly navigate more than just the radio and audio diaries, I'll bet."

Giggling like a filly, she squeezed me tight enough to make me yelp in surprise, before bringing the screen up. Try as the fear did... somehow her laugh helped banish the dark demons I was imagining in the corners.

"Now let's see what it has to offer, I'll run a basic diagnostic and see what it still has operating."

Controlled by magic, icons flickered and lists scrolled back and forth. I saw a little deformed picture of a pony with flashing lights and a sad face appear for just a second. Eventually, her horn's glow minimised in scale as the PipBuck lowered into my hooves. Illuminated by the glow of the active device, for the first time I began to properly feel a sense of ownership, rather than just carting around an odd radio that really belonged to Sundial. It was working for me! I could use it for... for... whatever PipBucks did! I could... I could...

...I couldn't read the words on the screen.

All the excitement flowed right out of me as I slumped out of Glimmer's grasp and sighed. My eyes trained lazily on the unknown shapes and features. I tried hoofing a few dials and buttons. Sometimes a bit of light changed, but it was just all a mess of hidden secrets to my idiotic, uneducated and illiterate brain. The radio would have to do... and all it was still playing was Sapphire Shores. (A ghoul could sing better, I believed.)

"Murky?"

I just let out a deep breath and settled down on all fours before looking up at her in the flickering light. Glimmerlight clearly hadn't forgotten what I'd told her about my reading during my big rant earlier on.

"I don't think I can really use it..." I shook my head. "Can't read what it says, it isn't really mine, it used to belong to Sundial after all."

Glimmerlight swivelled on the chair, looking down at me with her hooves resting together. Then, she smiled.

"You found it, Murky. Tech like this? It doesn't turn up every day. Don't feel that you're worthless to it. In my experience, rare artefacts choose the bearer as much as they choose it by carrying it with them. With all you've listened to stuff about the Stable Dweller, what did you call her... Littlepip? Didn't you hear about Lil' Mac?"

Lil' who? I shook my head.

"Littlepip's revolver? You must have missed that broadcast or something, I have an old wireless in the cells I got working on the signal before my sickness got too bad. She found that gun; one of the best, the DJ said. It's stuck with her through thick and thin, saving her life as many times as any companion or good luck. Yet I'll bet, from the description of that thing, she wouldn't be able to fire it from her mouth worth a damn. Does that mean she doesn't deserve it?"

Glimmer's magic picked up the PipBuck and gently attached it to my right hoof with the whipcord.

"I'm sure, wherever he is... Sundial would be proud somepony as gentle as you found it, Murky. Now come on, I'll read it for you. Do a rundown of the systems and see what he left you."

I didn't properly smile, just a little raising of the corners of my mouth. When had I last really smiled? When I caught out the Magister by taking his gun's battery? The helter-skelter? Littlepip's escape? It felt so hard, especially when the moment this PipBuck-induced train of thought ended and I remembered where I was. I lifted the PipBuck to allow Glimmerlight access.

"Now, a little spark here... magical choice there... here we go! Basic runtime diagnostic."

The screen blanked and flowed a mass of singular sentence lines in a dark green that I found hard to even see, never mind read. Glimmerlight's eyes seemed to have no trouble, flitting to and fro as she muttered the results to herself.

"Basic functions not intact... visual user interface active, as we know. Magical recognition set to manual only. Location tag is active, mapping spell has degraded. It's useless... damn. Location recognition spell is working though, just no map spell to overlay on. Radiation detection spells are corrupted. Probably only a huge level of rads would make it active... on full volume. Least it'll be a hell of a warning. Backlight on screen... oddly active, even though the screen wasn't. Spell fluctuating though, it probably doesn't stay constant..."

Her voice was levelling, losing her confidence and spark as she became a fast-talking monotone, following line after line of code, text, and symbols.

"Medical detection spells are completely gone. Stripped out, in fact. Organisation spell is gone too. Add-on port seems intact, maybe not too reliable though, it's rusted through. E.F.S. is just... gone. Somepony took the gem that powers it, cheeky thieving bastard. Radio is active, as you know. Huh... S.A.T.S. has one charge left, best save it for somepony who really deserves a good bucking. Why didn't these logs list all combat or utility spells together, by the way? Wouldn't that be easier? Poor show, Stable-Tec. Just, why not?"

The last question was directed at me. I could do naught but shrug and mentally wonder if she felt the same way about it as I did about a lack of safety railings. An unbelievably petty yet all-so-important and easy to miss little thing that—

There it was again. That strange feeling in my heart. One that felt like I should understand it more, when I felt like I related to that weird little pet peeve of hers.

I even realised I was briefly smiling, maybe she'd understand mine too, if I ever brought it up. Sharing it might even be... fun?

Shaking my head, confused and bewildered by the strange mixture of excitement and comfort, I began to realise something in my distraction. Where had the noises gone? I could hear the occasional shout now, far off and deadened by the thick walls of the Stable. They could be in the next room across and I'd not be able to hear them properly.

That thought struck hard. I was lost in a Stable... with raiders... in complete blackness... oh Goddesses...

Glimmerlight tapped my head, waking me from my stupor staring into the darkness.

"Hey, I told you! None of that 'thinking about pre-war' business, alright? I'll start telling you raunchy stories about my first wasteland bar crawl to distract you, if I have to. But here's something interesting to take your attention. You said this thing had diaries, there aren't any listed in the logs. They might be encrypted... but you accessed them. How?"

"I didn't, it just... um... beeped?"

Glimmer sat back on her haunches again, tapping a hoof on her chin in deep thought.

"Where were you? Anywhere near magic sources that might set it off by accident?"

"No... just on a control tower, a helter-skelter, and then in a bunker below the crater."

We sat in silence, staring at the curious device. I could only pretend I had an idea of what to ponder on. I watched Brimstone pulling old magazines on mechanics out of the lockers and stuffing them into his rather large saddlebags. Anything worth something went in.

Glimmerlight muttered as she thought, her hoof tapping on the workbench as though she'd lived here all her life. Perhaps it was familiar to her? I'd heard Steel Rangers used Stables as bases, had she once experienced life in a powered Stable? What had Littlepip done in hers? Probably a security mare, if she could fight that well! No sitting around in the dark for that action filly. That brought a smile to my face to help to help combat the terror. To imagine her here with me, giving me a tour of her home. Maybe I'd have a room to myself? With a double bed? What were rooms in Stables like?

I sighed, they were probably grey and very cramped. The thought of being sealed down here still—

No! No, no... not thinking about it, not thinking about pre-war! That's a route to a mental breakdown if I let myself think on it down here...

"Aha! Location!" Glimmerlight shouted suddenly, her hoof shooting in the air. She seemed to shuffle on the spot in delight, like a small dance of celebration.

"Huh?"

"You were up high, then down low! Haha! I see it now! Your Sundial is a sneaky one, Murky, he set the diary to react to the PipBuck's locator spell when height from sea level changed dramatically up or down! That way he would know that the PipBuck could only play its contents if taken and moved, rather than just being handled accidentally or tumbling about over the years on the ground. It's why it didn't go off in here, because we haven't gone up or down levels yet. If we go down far enough we'd probably get another one to activate."

She grinned widely, leaning on the desk with a triumphant look.

"It was so he could assure somepony would have it when his messages began. Wow... I need to remember that one, clever little buck..."

My appreciation of Sundial knew no bounds as I looked at the glowing PipBuck on my leg. He had done something to ensure somepony... I... would only hear it when I had proven that I wanted to keep and travel with it? The system wasn't flawless, but it made sense.

Perhaps, in the end, the PipBuck was meant for me after all. I had carried it through misery on the control tower, false happiness upon the helter-skelter, taken it into a desperate escape, and kept it safe through a horrid encounter in the crater in just a few short days. I had kept it with me, wearing it and protecting it in return for the moments of peace it allowed my fractured mind.

Sundial's messages had been meant for somepony like me.

Now I saw what Glimmerlight had meant. That items of significance had a way of finding the pony they were supposed to be with. This was my own PipBuck now.

Trapped in forced labour to go into a dead Stable, that was at least something I could hold close and take strength in.

Spending time flicking through my PipBuck's various pages with the buttons, I awaited Glimmerlight and Brimstone to finish their investigation of the room. Technically, I could have helped, but frankly, they would get on better without me freaking out if I found something upsetting. No, better sit in the corner and be a light source for the pair when they needed it.

Their efforts were not particularly fruitful, finding basic tools that were worth nothing alongside empty containers *meant* for PipBuck tool spares, but apparently they had either been taken already, or never been filled. As much as I tried not to, I couldn't help but wonder why a Stable's PipBuck tech bay was so under-supported. Didn't every Stable dweller have a PipBuck?

For that matter, where *were* the dwellers? Had they all escaped decades ago? Perhaps that was all that was wrong? The Stable had failed, so they left and lived happy lives in the wastes with no pain and... yeah, I wasn't fooling anypony. This place was going to be messed up. It couldn't have gotten *this* wrecked without some event.

"Yes! Knew I'd find something! No Stable ever comes without somepony wanting to talk!"

I looked up at Glimmer, delightedly holding a small device in her magic as she advanced. Brimstone had hung around the door, acting as a guard against any raiders wandering around. As far as he was concerned, the raiders were hostile, had already killed two slaves, and likely would do more if they felt they could get away with it. Thankfully, they seemed to have gone down a level, ignoring this quieter wing.

Glimmer's device, floating in front of my PipBuck, didn't look like much. Just a little serrated circle on a small rounded casing with prongs that would fit into something. Grinning, she lifted my PipBuck.

"Now we find out what life was like in this place. This is an audio recorder, Murky. They fit into things like PipBucks and thankfully, yours is intact enough to do it. Last Stable? One of these and a spare one in the repair bay gave me a passcode for the weapons locker. Was in and out in five minutes with no danger from the defences further in! So what say we take a listen?"

"I'm not sure..."

She clapped my back.

"Hey, didn't Sundial help? Besides, if it helps let us know what we're facing here, if anything *is* wrong, I'd like to know."

Sighing, I held out the PipBuck as she slotted the device in, hoofing one of the buttons before the audio began to kick in. I heard a young mare, bored and monotone.

"They say we've only got a bunch of these recorders, but frankly I got little else to do in a day but complain and keep re-recording this message, so what the hell if I use one. It's been... ergh... a month, I think, since we got the call to come in here."

Brimstone waved from the door.

"We can't stay here, the raiders know the location and we do have a quota to fill. If you two are going to listen, do it on the move."

Shrugging to me, Glimmerlight and I packed up what we could find and moved out after him. Brimstone took a route further into the facility, taking us past some old dead generators. One of them still hummed, I guessed some sort of back up, but otherwise nothing in here was active.

"Really it's all just a battle to not think. We've got enough problems in here without languishing on what's outside. Roots said he heard somepony hammering on the Stable

door after it locked. Bullshit, you'd never hear that inside here. No, all sterile and safe in Stable Ninety Three. Only it's not, fucking Ministries had to come romping all over this as well, didn't they? Now we've got Arcane scientists in the lower levels continuing all that weird stuff they did outside to cause this! I thought it was better us getting staff from the Ministry in here, smart ponies who could keep it running; but no! Now I'm just walking on metal boards not ten feet above fuck knows what messed up experiment! Oh they say it's safe, but 'safe' is what they told us megaspells would be!"

Glimmerlight's eyes went wide.

"Ministry equipment downstairs? Brimstone! Stop!" Glimmer shouted as loud as she dared as soon as the recording played out to this point. She rushed up, clearly trying to convince Brimstone that the better loot for meeting quotas (and apparently, gaining favour on to Protégé's medical roster for exemplary slaves) was below us. The idea chilled my blood as I stared at the PipBuck and the floor beneath it.

It continued to play as the two debated the issue.

"So they just expect us to hurry up and wait, to just forget that every damn pony we ever loved or cared about is dead or dying out there. We can't even leave if we want, seismic activity suggests the megaspell that hit Filly brought a rockslide down over the entrance. So yeah, this is our lives now, whether we wanted it any different or not. The Overmare, Windy Vane, got replaced within a day by the Ministry staff. The new Overmare, damned if I can even remember her name, she's changing things. Taken all the PipBuck tools so I've got nothing to work with! Says all the PipBucks need to go to their labs for repair now. I tell ya... the lot of us up here? If we weren't so damn lucky to be alive, we'd be rebelling against this kind of second-rate treatment to those freaky sealed off areas."

The generator room widened out into a larger hub. Brimstone had, after some thought, agreed to Glimmer's idea, so we scurried along walls trying to find stairs down that weren't flooded. I couldn't grasp what this mare must have felt, being trapped inside this sterile shell without any knowledge of the outside world. Even I had at least *seen* the world outside of slavery, for as much as Fillydelphia was quickly becoming my entire life.

It occurred to me that comparing my life to theirs was only a way to try and distract myself from the current situation. That wasn't a good path of thought to take...

"Well, back to sitting around, reading the same porn mag for the fourth time today, and trying to work out why in the fuck the PA system keeps shorting out. Peace out, random future listeners... oh wait, peace failed. Happy Stable life."

The PipBuck audio tape clicked to a halt. With a sad look at Glimmerlight, I ejected it from my PipBuck and let it just drop into my bag. Only after glancing back up did I find the pair muttering between themselves.

"Look, I know this place is different, but every staircase to the sublevels is flooded. If we're going down, we'll have to go to an entirely different area."

"Glim, the only other way is the atrium, where the others went. We're not going by the raiders."

The purple haired unicorn sighed, rolling her eyes and clearly eager for the long term benefit this could bring.

"You're their warlord! Even if you don't rank it any more, they fear you! Tap into that raider side of you to get us past, give them a good talking—"

"Glimmerlight!"

I squeaked, only resuming watching after poking my head out from behind the nearby generator.

"I will not take you and Murk, two recently sick ponies, through a raider base, however temporary!"

To my amazement, Glimmerlight didn't back down.

"What would you prefer? Being shot for not meeting quota because this entire wing has been stripped by some crazy Arcane scientists two hundred years ago? Brim, we *need* to get down there before them!"

Brimstone stopped and glared at her. Glimmer's back was to me, but I could only remember him saying how I had once looked like her when trying to convince him. Whatever it was she did with her expression, something must have gotten through to the big raider. With a mutter and a snort, Brimstone moved past us and began leading the way back to the main corridor the four raiders had gone down. Glimmerlight fell in step, indicating me to trot beside her.

In those minutes trotting, I couldn't bear the silence.

"Um... Glimmer? What do you think we'll find down there? Only I heard Stables were bad and—"

"Don't think about it, Murky." She tried to smile at me, but the oppressive atmosphere and her clear concentration lost much of her calming allure. "That message would have been overwritten if this Stable had survived very long. I doubt they'll have had a chance to finish anything, okay?"

I fell slightly behind her as we squeezed past the generators into the side corridor following Brimstone. As much as she had tried to reassure me, I could only think about one thing she had forgotten. If it hadn't survived past the first generation... what was it that had killed the Stable and left this rusted and presumably empty corpse?

If the atrium was to give any indication, it wouldn't be able to any longer. The raiders had seen to that.

We had emerged on the balcony overlooking a central open plan room. I could see thick glass windows sectioning off many of the surrounding rooms to try and make it seem even bigger than it actually was. A small porthole window gazed down across it all. The room it was built into led to seemed to be accessible from the balcony, or mezzanine, that ran around all four sides of the atrium. Two staircases, one either side, led down into the main... courtyard? I guessed that to be the best term.

But the activity within was what truly drew my attention. Among the flipped tables and chairs, all around the rusted remains of metal furniture and fallen scrap, the raiders had made their home for the next few hours during the operation. Piles of even vaguely useful items were collected in the middle, surrounded by an armed guard. Four of the toughest-looking raiders there were watching that loot, one missing a good chunk of his face and covered in scar tissue. He stood atop the pile with an almost comically old shotgun. Behind him, I fought to stifle a whine when I saw almost a dozen slaves held prisoner in a side room, their sacks emptied and stolen of all finds. Most of them showed fresh cuts and bruising.

My appreciation of Brimstone and Glimmerlight allowing me to work with them rose

high enough to almost make me forget the fact that once ponies had sat, ate, and presumably laughed here in this large area together. Now? It was just a temporary hell for those slaves caught by the raider clan amongst the dark depths of the Stable. I wondered if The Master encouraged this to keep them in line. Behave and obey, and there wouldn't be any guards during these raids.

Brimstone bristled and growled, his hooves impatiently stomping on the ground as he too saw the plight of the other slaves. Glimmerlight just sighed and closed her eyes, and briefly appeared to shiver.

She had forgiven life for her time as their prisoner to be sold into this city, but I suspected she didn't forgive the raiders themselves. Even so, she had sought to stay happy and move on. Not for any riches could I have ever guessed how that was possible. How could somepony just forget so easily? What was her secret?

"Protégé will hear of this. He won't stand for it." Glimmerlight spoke quietly, beginning to creep around the balcony. Brimstone followed, with me bringing up the rear as quietly as I possibly could. Screams, slaps, and bitter laughter mixed with disgusting threats of violence. Brimstone cast his head over the edge very briefly to gauge their positions. Moving up, I hopped onto my hind legs to peek over the balcony again.

"Hey, where'd the boss go, Edge?"

"You know Barb, he'll be right behind you when you ask that. Nah, I think he went off to explore alone. Said some shit about the darkness being his domain in the depths or something."

The majority of the raiders were filtering in and out of the rooms, pouring sealed food and random tools or books onto the pile. Clearly they were interested in sheer volume and letting the slavers do the sorting. I could understand the feeling, just taking things and building your inventory was oddly satisfying. Tapping my goggles, I felt a little happy thought at my one small victory over Wicked Slit.

Below me, the raiders spoke again.

"Why's he going down there, then?"

"Shit, Edge I don't know! He's the boss! Said he had to remind somepony of a deal or something."

Oh, crap.

"Look, just get this stuff done before he comes back, you *saw* what he did to those other two, right? You wanting the same?"

He pointed his hoof across. Naturally, my eyes followed long before I even thought about what I was doing.

Seconds later I swivelled back on to the balcony, desperately trying to not throw up, and failing. Nothing came out. There was nothing *to* come out. My stomach, empty and shrinking, heaved and dryly retched. Staggering to the side, tears in my eyes ruined my vision as I fought to get rid of the sight. Barb was, well, messed up. More than that, he was... he was...

"That's fucked up..." Glimmer shook her head and voiced the word for me.

"Taught him too well." muttered Brimstone as he hopped down behind me.

Coughing into my leg to try and dull the sound, I caught a look at Brim's eyes. When had he ever looked so old? I'd come to see him as a grown stallion owing to the way he moved and his muscular mass, but the more I saw the weathered life of pain and sadism he'd led reflected in those looks, the more aged he seemed. He had to be at least sixty years old.

Half a century of raiding, murder, and strife lay at his hooves. That he had *taught* ponies to do... to do... *that?*

"How could ponies do that?" I was whining, I didn't care. "He didn't have to! There's no reason!"

Glimmerlight settled a hoof around me and she began to lead me toward the nearest staircase, down to sneak past the atrium ground floor and bypass the raiders entirely. Brimstone followed as gently as his colossal weight allowed.

"Because he can. The wasteland gives us freedom, Murk. Freedom to be better... or freedom to do the things nopony would ever dream of. Just because we can. I once heard somepony say he felt the world before had become so twisted and brutal that the wasteland was an improvement."

Behind Brimstone there was a dire squeal as two raiders took offence at a slave refusing them. A strangled cry cut through the air. Brimstone visibly had to control himself.

"If I met that buck now, I'd kill him for being such a fucking idiot."

"Keep those ears of yours peeled, Murky... you're a pretty handy asset down here, y'know?"

We were on the same level as the raiders now. The staircase had led to the back door of the canteen where Glimmerlight and myself were sneaking below the edge of the windows that opened into the atrium. It felt wrong to go closer to the atrium, indeed the raiders were little more than ten feet away, but the door leading to the raiders themselves was jammed one foot from the ground on the atrium side, likely meaning they hadn't worked their way in here yet. That, and it held all too big a chance of containing something to eat. We all direly needed it.

Brimstone had elected to remain in the stairwell to 'ensure' nopony got behind us while we searched for any food. What did Stable ponies eat anyway? I hoped it wasn't meat. Although carnivorous attitudes were common in the wasteland, I had never tried it (more out of neglect from my masters than choice) and I doubted the capability of my stomach to hold it.

That said, I could feel my limbs shaking and my head beginning to ache from lack of food, and especially a lack of water. Protégé's apple stew, which had rapidly become an icon of taste in my mind, was so long ago that my throat convulsed dryly at the mere thought of it again. If it came down to it, I might not get much of a choice about trying meat or not, if that was all we found.

"Hey! Hey lads! I got something! YEAH! WE GOT SOMETHING!"

The shout had made us freeze on the spot. Cold shivers ran down my back as I tentatively raised my head, trying to use a little awareness of hearing to detect the direction of this 'discovery.' I could hear hooves rushing about, but they were all getting quieter.

Relatively pleased that they were heading to the far side of the atrium, I peeked my head up, hoping my dark coat and dull woollen fleece would be camouflage enough. Glimmerlight stayed rested below me, biting her lip with a little worry for those other slaves.

"What is it!? Ere', give it ere'!"

The majority of the raiders clustered around a small side room of the atrium, one beside the stairs on the far side. Inside it seemed pretty office-like, perhaps some sort of... office.

(Once again I felt it was rather obvious I hadn't a clue about Stable life...) The raiders were throwing a couple of old bags away, knocking captured slaves out of their way and intimidating others to lift their find out.

A PipBuck.

"Glimmer, take a look." I whispered, lowering my head down so that only my goggle-covered eyes were peeking out above the bottom of the dull window. I had donned the eye protectors a few minutes back for little reason, but somehow I felt more secure with them on, despite the lack of them really doing anything useful. Glimmerlight instead crept along to the door leading out of the canteen and stuck her head under the corner to watch them.

"One of those hoof things! Shackles gave me a pass for him turning a blind eye last time I brought one in! Yeah! I'm fuckin' ready with this!"

Very quickly, I discovered how simply brutal life even as a raider was. He had spoken too quickly, too eagerly, and the reward too loudly. Almost half a dozen raiders leapt on him, tearing at each other to get it. (One mare's shriek of 'MINE!' made me almost whine from the sheer pitch.) Crowding into the small room, I saw the PipBuck yanked back and forth as snarls and curses filled the air. Other raiders crowded nearby, cheering them on. Part of me recognised the chance. Noise cover! I could sneak about quicker and get food and explore, and yet I just stayed rock still.

They terrified me. Even if I'd wanted, I couldn't I move my legs as I felt myself settle higher on the window. Their unrestrained brutality and complete lack of sanity when the bloodlust set simply made me worry too much about doing anything to alert them at all. They saw something they wanted and they took it.

Alright, maybe I did that too sometimes... but they killed for it! Shaking, I couldn't force myself to look away as blood splattered on the dirty office window pane of the office they fought in. The PipBuck was almost forgotten as it fell to the ground, but I saw light shimmer from it as the device activated amongst hooves having crowded over it.

One raider leapt for it, the purple glow of the machine casting an odd haze across her as I saw a large stallion begin stamping on her head to get at it. Even over the din, I heard the whine of something on the PipBuck starting up, before another, louder, and shockingly sudden sound screeched and tore its way into my ears.

The door of the office slammed down vertically so hard on rusty and creaky gears that it severed the back leg of one pony trapped under it.

Silence reigned for as long as it took the raider inside to start howling in pain. The sound barely made it through the thick door. The raiders seemed stunned, before they beat at the doorway and glass.

"Who closed that!? Get it open! I'm Barb's next in line so I get the shiny!"

"Why won't that damn thing open! Hey, stop fucking around! Edge is bleeding out! Hurry up!"

The lights went out. All of them.

Darkness once again flooded my vision and the Stable fell into the void. Trapped beneath ground with no light and a horrible growing whine through every wall and ceiling. Gurgling, hissing, and static flooded my ears as I desperately held them to my head and whimpered. But the volume only increased until my headache soared and thumped. Striking pains ran through my ears as warped and hideously electronic pony voices cried in shrill voices through broken speakers.

"Szzzzreeee-ignal detected... depressurisation routine... a-a-a-a-AAAAAActive."

The slaves screamed. Raiders swore and battered on the window. I could hear the thumps of them ramming something heavy against it. Threats, curses, and wails mixed with the electronic madness in the airwaves, but I understood so little. All that was left in my vision was the purple glow illuminating the silhouettes of raiders and slaves howling in agony, spasming and jerking like marionettes as they collapsed below the window's height one by one. Screaming, I turned and galloped straight into one of the metal tables, collapsing and crying out as I held my ears down. I couldn't see Glimmerlight. The mass of raiders were moving in a chaotic panic. Under the door, I could see some galloped into the darkness; into the unknown in blind terror. Others frothed and beat on the doors.

Even after the sound suddenly ceased, the noises kept ringing in my ears. Even as the lights came back on, and I felt Brimstone Blitz dragging both me and the stunned Glimmerlight away, every joint ached from the muscle-stiffening fear. Even as the raiders continued to shout at one another and throw blame, the office had gone eerily silent.

Even as the door opened... no pony dared go in to retrieve the 'cursed' PipBuck.

Within that room, they all lay dead.

"What in the absolute *fucking hell* was that?" Glimmerlight paced in circles around both Brimstone and myself after magically hurling her saddlebag on the ground in frustration. We had retreated back out of the kitchen, past the stairwell and onto a lower floor to avoid the rightfully enraged raiders. Past a few open doors that we immediately avoided, there was another long hub, like some kind of meeting room. Thick locked doors surrounded us but for one, open into a side room and the way out again back to the stairwell. Brimstone was standing impassively with that hard and practical thinking look, glancing around us, while Glimmerlight seemed somewhere between fear and bewilderment.

Me? I was huddled up and trying to fight the temptation to pull my fleece over my head and pretend I was back in my pigsty until I finally dropped dead of hunger. Fright and shock still clung to my body. and I felt tense and shivery. Warped electronic droning and voices played again and again in my hearing like a spot of light that won't disappear from your eyes no matter how hard you blink. I wanted out... so... so badly... I didn't want to die down here! Not like that!

"Stables are screwed up, but that was like the thing actively went out to kill them! What the hell *is* this place? What could do that? What did it even do to them? It looked like they couldn't breathe."

Brimstone watched her each time she moved around past him, eventually adding his own, calmer input. I wondered what he had seen in those four other Stables.

"Aye, something just doesn't feel right, even for a dead Stable. Somehow, I doubt those idiots jumping around caused it. What was it the voice said?"

I sat up, sniffing, mumbling quietly. My voice was quieter than I could ever remember it, hoarse from screaming. At least... I hoped it was from the screaming. I had only dared bring one of my RadAways with me as an emergency.

"S-signal... detec... hnrk, detected, depressur... something."

"Signal?" Glimmerlight stopped dead, bringing a hoof to her chin. "Wait... it activated after they turned on that PipBuck. But you turned yours on and—"

Our eyes met immediately, gasping almost in tandem as simultaneous dread realisation

set in. That door back in the PipBuck repair facility. The buzzing speakers before the power shorted in that blacked-out room. My PipBuck reactivating had been tracked and reacted to, just as the one in the office had. Only the power loss had saved us. That device on my right hoof... it had almost killed me. It could still kill me! Scrambling, I tried to remember how to switch the power off, but what might make it do something to be 'tracked' again? Oh Goddesses, would separating it from me do that!?

"Turn it off! Glimmer, turn it off! Please!"

I thrust it at her, it could bring this Stable down on us any second! Taking a few quick breaths, Glimmer grabbed my hoof in both of hers as she sat back on her hind legs, sparking up her horn. Clattering on the floor, Brimstone galloped and laid his hoof over it before Glimmer could make any magical contact. He quickly hoofed Glimmerlight back gently, looking back and forth with an unflinchingly serious face. I could see he was beginning to sweat in the oddly hot depths down here... we all were. This place just didn't feel natural.

"Control yerselves! You're both scared, wee fears getting bigger because of what happened! Think about it or you're going to get us killed. The Stable detected a PipBuck turning on, what makes you think it can't detect one turning *off* as well?"

"I... I don't know..." Glimmer trotted back, running a hoof through her short mane as she tried to keep her head together. "Well... it didn't detect us using the audio recorder. It must be tied into when the PipBuck itself does it. The recorders, this type anyway, I think they only draw power, not play through the PipBuck itself. Just don't use the PipBuck... don't activate anything on it, alright?"

I was shaking so much my legs were wobbling visibly and led to me having to keep trotting to either side to stay balanced. This Stable was more than just a hole to the past now. It was *alive*, watching and waiting for a signal to pounce. But *why*? How!? Glimmerlight was clearly thinking the same thing, settling down with her head in her hooves.

"C'mon Glim... think think *think*," she muttered. "Why would it do this? Wouldn't take a magical computation core to do it, no, just... just reprogram the fire sensors maybe? To scan for a different signal? Aargghh! I can't think straight down here! It's like being drunk but without all the happy times! Brim, I don't care what you say about keeping me safe, minute we get back I am taking that nice tan buck in the far shop cell and I am going to spend the night with him. I need *something* after all this."

She noted Brimstone's raised eyebrow.

"He can't stop staring at my flank anyway!" She protested, as though justifying.

"Aye, nothing to do with you lifting your tail by 'accident' when he's around."

Glimmerlight rolled her eyes. "Hey, I'm trapped in fucking Fillydelphia! In case you hadn't noticed, being happy is a pretty damn rare commodity in slavery! If I get some mare flunk or buck work to help the times pass, then I'm going to take it."

"And that is different from your life outside Fillydelphia... how?"

Brimstone's voice didn't raise once as he deadpanned the line. Glimmerlight startled back slightly, pouting.

"I... well... okay, not much! Look, I'm just annoyed, alright? I tried to get *away* from underground bunkers holding back my life, and now another one is trying to kill me! So I'm sorry if I seem a little *on edge* right now!"

Her words were cut short as she flinched back and looked sharply behind us. I felt a crawling fear up my spine. I'd heard it too.

White noises flooded down the hallways we had just come from. We heard distant clipped electronic voices layered with muffled screaming. Twisting and echoing around us faintly, my own whimper of fear added to the terrible chorus. Somepony else had to have blundering into something that activated a 'signal.' Fading, the electronic white noise bounced from wall to wall lightly before being replaced by an ongoing background hum and the sporadic hissing of pipes from all around.

"This place wants to kill us all..." I muttered, squeaking on 'kill' as my voice cracked.

Glimmerlight turned quickly, grabbing me by the neck and looking me dead in the eyes. The mare was terrified, just as I was, but she was stronger than I, more confident at keeping a level head, despite her frustrations. All the same, although I heard her words... it was hard to concentrate and properly listen.

"No! It's not going to kill any of us! Just keep your head, don't touch anything, and don't use your PipBuck! The only thing we know is safe are those audio recorders. So... so we'll try and find a bunch of them... and... and then just get the hell out. We'll take our chances with the slavers. You hear me, Murky?"

I didn't, I couldn't. I just kept jumping at each sudden hiss from behind a wall or above the ceiling. Lights flickered still, not allowing me to get used to anything with my night sight. It was just one ongoing claustrophobic and rusty metallic terror. No, it wasn't metal... it was organic. The pipes and pumps were its veins, carrying the pressure, magic, and water to power the Stable. Somewhere the heart was deep down in the old labs and the mouth was what we had cantered right into. Now it was just... just digesting...

"Murky! Snap out of it!"

Glimmerlight shook me hard enough to get my attention through stint of my lash wounds aching at the sudden movement. Her blue eyes stared into mine, her hooves holding onto my head to keep me focused on her alone.

"It's just a machine! Scary, yes! But it's only doing what its been programmed to do by some idiot who didn't do things right! The past is filled with mistakes... but that's all they are. Mistakes. Errors. Wrong calls. The past isn't bad, Murky, just... unfortunate. But we need you in the present right now."

I stared at her azure eyes, somehow still sparkling with life even down here. Why hadn't they just left me, anyway? I'd been nothing but a burden thus far. What made her keep wanting to help me? Why not just go like everypony else...

For once, I was almost glad that I had a natural tendency to follow instructions. Nodding silently, I fell into trot behind her obediently, with my head lowered as I would to any master. Glimmerlight seemed to hesitate, before cantering on toward Brimstone. I could hear him whisper quickly to her, presumably they hadn't accounted for how noise travelled down here to be audible to my unnatural hearing.

"Murk's not right in the head, Glim. See how he just followed because you told him to?"

"Murky," she corrected, "is just... hurt, Brim. Look what he did for us. He just needs somepony, it's like he's lost. Was the Stable Dweller really that amazing to see and... inspire?"

Brimstone made a neutral sound, before shrugging.

"Aye... that she was. Enough to make him take a run at the wall. But he's lost that confidence, Shackles isn't going to let go of him. He's got his chains in deep..."

Glimmerlight went silent, casting only a periphery glance back to me with a sad smile (I turned away, pretending I hadn't heard... Brim had been so right) as we trotted slowly

across the open area and around old metal desks.

Gradually, I began to realise this place was a school. I could see small scraps of yellowed paper on some of them beside thin sticks of charcoal. Not even really thinking about it, I started dumping many of them into my saddlebag. Up at the front on the teacher's desk, I could see a huge growth of mould that only afterwards I recognised as an apple after two hundred years.

My mind ricocheted around as I tried to distract myself. Thinking of what to draw when I got home or what these little symbols on the blackboard meant. Why did they repeat so many times in the same line? Sighing, I turned away from it and came face to face with a drawing.

Crayons. I'd once owned a set as a foal until another slave had made me cry and stolen them. The sense of loss hit bitterly as I stared at a picture of a few ponies. They weren't very good; foal drawings, probably, showing lots of multi-coloured ponies all happy together. Below them everything had been coloured grey. It took a second, but eventually I realised that this was by foals who had been born after the door had sealed... who had never known for themselves that the ground had been green outside. The first generation who wouldn't know the true green of Equestria for themselves.

Sniffing, I peered closer as I heard Glimmerlight and Brimstone begin hauling open desks and searching for, presumably, recorders. Probably best I didn't help... most likely I'd only mess something up and make them angry at me.

Sitting back on my hind legs (the trembling of the floor from generators below this level making me squeak in surprise at the unexpected feeling on my backside) I leaned into the drawing, using the flickering light as best I could to view it. Part of me was tempted to use my PipBuck light, it had been safe earlier, but right now I didn't want to even touch it.

The ponies I had glimpsed were all lined up at the bottom, made of geometric shapes with scrawled colour between the shaky lines. The foal who did this must have been very young, but it was so filled with smiles and innocent nature. If... if only he or she had known. Sniffing again to try and hold it all in, I offered up a muttered prayer for their souls to Celestia and Luna above. Please let it have been quick, whatever happened. Please not what I'd just seen and heard...

Filling the rest of the picture were just two ponies though. One small and one larger. The smaller, the foal presumably, was hugging into the larger, who had a hoof protectively around the other.

Their mother...

But she was ruined. Water dampness had destroyed her likeness and wiped it clean of all the detail but for the general outline of a grown mare. However, the foal seemed so safe with her... so happy. Just being there with the pony who brought you up, took care of you and helped you grow as best they could in a bad place like a Stable... or a slave pit.

"Murky?"

Glimmerlight had moved over to sit beside me, sharing my glance at the picture.

"Is this why you're crying?"

"Cr-crying? I'm not..."

I was. I hadn't even noticed, but amidst all the fear and danger of the Stable I had missed the tears entirely as too regular a reaction. A small damp patch before me on the floor was proof enough of that.

"I just... the picture. That foal had their mother there for them... until the end..."

"You know, Murky... you never told me about your mother, other than what happened." Her voice was incredibly gentle, quiet and still as I felt her hoof rub my back lightly. "What was she like? I don't think you even said her name..."

No... please, Glimmerlight... don't ask...

"Maybe if... if you told me about her? Got it off your chest?"

Just stop, oh Goddesses, make her not ask...

"So what was her name? Was she nice?"

"Yeah... nice..." I mumbled to the floor.

"Mm... mothers often are. Y'know, mine wanted me to be called 'Glimmerknight' if I became one. My father always joked I'd be Glimmerwrite if I became a scribe like him." She chuckled, clearly trying to encourage me. "I told them I'd be Glimmerright-out-the-door if they tried to force me. Heh, so, what's her name? Mines was Candy Floss. Yeah... a Paladin."

I mumbled something again, too quiet to be heard.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

Again, I muttered it at the floor, creeping back and lowering my head a little before looking away. My eyes were burning... I didn't want her looking.

"Diiidn't quite catch that." Glimmerlight bent down, trying to get a look in my eyes.

"Nothing..." I muttered as I sat up again, wiping my eyes and gently touching the picture again.

"Murky... what's wrong? Is it embarrassing? Because I once knew a stallion called Buck Flank and well, you can't get much worse than that, right?"

I didn't answer. I silently begged her to stop asking. It was starting to make me remember, make me think about how I'd...

I clenched my eyes shut and shook my head. I couldn't. Not right now.

"Alright... alright." She spoke slowly. "I... I can see it's pretty... y'know? I'll give you a few moments, okay?"

Glimmerlight seemed about to hug me again, but apparently thought better of it and left me alone with just a pat on the shoulder. She looked back a few times, concern and confusion on her face.

My eyes rested on the picture of a mother. I'd... I'd come close to having to admit... no.

Almost without thinking, I drew my journal and tore a page from it. I bit a charcoal stick in my mouth and went to work. Lines became curves became shapes became...

...life... I wished.

Taking some of the fallen adhesive on the floor, I tacked my own picture beside the foals. Of my mother holding me and protecting me from the life I was about to inherit from my birth. Mom was... Mom. That was all she had been to me in the short time I had known her.

Come to think of it, the same went for this foal. They had only known his or hers briefly before the Stable ended it all for them. Without really knowing what I was doing, I placed my drawing beside the foal's on the wall. I felt... right.

Sucking up my sadness as best I could, I got to my hooves.

"Sorry, Mom... I'm so sorry that I—"

"Hey! Murky! Get your tiny hiney over here, we got another recorder!"

Biting my lip, I glanced at the picture one last time, struggling to shove back the truth in my mind, before turning and cantering away from it as fast as I could.

Behind me, the two mothers held their foals. They were always going to be their mothers. No matter what their children learned or forgot about their time with them.

Clenching myself to gallop at top speed, I reached for the recorder button and hoofed it.

Beep!

All three of us stood and held our breath, but no alarms or messed-up electronic pony voices appeared. It was as silent as the Stable could get.

That alone terrified me. If there were still two dozen slaves and raiders out there... why had they made no noise?

Beep!

Brimstone had found it in the side room. Wandering in after the pair, I'd found them on a raised section of an odd office, one that had a small set of stairs leading into a lower floorspace about four feet down from where we were now. The lower level contained mouldy couches and a ton of spilled filing cabinets. Most curiously of all, I saw pottery lying either intact or smashed on all of the surfaces. We stood on the higher section with a very official-looking desk. Beyond the sofas on the lowered section, there was another small door at the back with a terminal resting on the wall at the side, presumably for locking it.

With Glimmerlight pushing up beside me to hear the quiet recording (I suspected to try and comfort me over earlier by being closer too) and Brimstone peering *over* my head, I felt a little on the spot as the recorder clicked and began to play.

"What is that infernal beeping, Sandy Sculpt?"

"I'm afraid it's just this recorder, Overmare. It's one of those older types that have a weird beeping before, and I think after, any recordings are taken or heard. Now, I suggest we skip past this and get to business now before the storage spell fills."

"Fine, whatever. Now look here, Mister. I don't care what the habitants of this Stable say, they are not getting any knowledge of the lab contents. They are secretive under the Act of Ministry Intelligence Safety, as passed by her majesty Princess Luna on their formation. So you cannot—"

"Damn the regulations! We're in a Stable! Have you seen any zebras!? Everypony is terrified, Overmare. They are beginning to fear you're using them somehow, or creating weapons. We all saw the light as Cloudsdale went down. We don't want weapons any more. Which is why you should go public to them, allow access to tour, and show them that what you have isn't insidious or warlike. Even if it's the Ministry of Arcane Science's secret hideout in a Stable for the future, we have a right to know!"

"Yes, indeed, we are in a Stable, Sculpt. A Stable that is within the lands of Equestria, broken or not. As such, we abide by the instructions provided to me by Scootaloo and—"

"The instructions provided to Beatbox, you mean."

"The instructions provided to any Overmare, if I may correct you. My replacement of her was entirely routine based on my status within the Ministry of Arcane Science. If you wish to replace me then simply wait for the next scheduled election in eight years."

"Bullshit, Ma'am! You know as well as I the scientists will all vote for you, and they outnumber us!"

"The wonders of democracy, my dear Sculpt. Now I suggest you drop this."

"I will not. Look, Ma'am... the people are restless. They are afraid. If you don't throw them a bone they are going to end up looking for answers themselves. Your reluctance to show them what is being done in their Stable, to take their PipBucks in for maintenance and reinstall half the electronic systems, fire detectors, and PA broadcasters? That all adds up to one very dangerously speculating population. Hell, some of them complain of weird feelings that your scientists are showing off behaviour which isn't... consistent. They don't like them."

"If they threaten any of my scientists, I assure you there will be steps taken to defend ourselves. We are no threat to you. Our research is peaceful, only secret because of the regulations. Just calm down and everything will be fine. Normal residents of the Stable can go about their lives like in any other Stable. Now, I have important business to attend and you have a class to teach."

"Fine. I will be back about this, Ma'am. In the meantime, I need permission to access the maintenance lockers for more recorders. The class are going to try them out to leave messages for the future about what it's like to grow up in a Stable."

"Granted. The code is Twilight Sparkle."

"Typical..."

"Watch your tone. Have them back before tomorrow."

Glimmerlight was already scanning a wall. I quickly realised it was a map of the Stable, showing each floor in detail of layout and description. The floor plans two levels below us were completely blacked out.

Glimmer traced a hoof over the routes, before smacking the map itself in joy.

"Aha! I got it! There's the route to those scientist areas! Come on, Brim! Let's see if we can get that jammed door. If you can pry it open I'll try and work it out."

The pair of them cantered out of the office as I continued to listen.

"I don't imagine you'll have a problem of this recording being public, Overmare?"

"Not at all. I tell nothing but the truth. Tell the people they can relax. We are no threat."

"Fine... they won't believe it, but fine. Now if you excuse me I'm going to get back to my sculpting... as per the name, har har."

"You really aren't funny."

Beep!

"Oh... that infernal beeping again. Sculpt?"

"It just does it as the spell is running out, that's all. If you listen back it'll beep for a bit then stop. Now goodbye, Overmare."

The audio ceased, only the beeping continued as the storage spell continued to stay active. Lowering the PipBuck and breathing a sigh of relief, I glanced around Sandy Sculpt's workplace. There were a dozen smashed clay pots around, small statues and a little revolving table in the lower segment. I'd seen statues before, but never the process involved in making clay ones. Moving a little closer, I stepped down into the lower segment of the room.

Beep!

"Oh shut up..." I muttered, no wonder the Overmare had found this annoying. But my eyes were drawn from art piece to art piece. Sculpt had lived up to his name for sure. Even broken and degraded over time... these were incredible. There were ponies, dogs and even a huge dragon as tall as myself. How I wished I had a big dragon like that to look out for me!

Beep!

Beep!

Rolling my eyes, I fought the temptation to smack my PipBuck. Idly, I wondered if Protégé would like one of the statues, before picking up a more complete one of a unicorn buck and gently placing it in my bag too. Perhaps that would restore his faith in me, and give us an easy ride after having so much trouble with the haul.

Beep!

I sighed, willing that recorder to just stop. Snarling as best I could (not very well), I looked down at the recorder.

“When are you going to stop playing you stupid piece of ju— huh?”

The recorder *had* stopped. In fact, it had stopped about a half minute ago. I felt my face twist in horrified realisation...

Beep!

The PipBuck clicked and activated its own internal power source for the speaker.

“Damn, thought this thing wasn’t going to start again, Sundial here...”

My body reacted before my mind even had time to function. I galloped for the stairs back up to the door, not even hearing myself screaming for Glimmer and Brim! My hooves skittered, fell, and got back up to try and dive for the—

Screaming metal slammed down ahead of me, as the door to the office tore from its mountings and closed hard enough to make sparks leap up from the frame.

“HELP!” I screamed, but I didn’t think anyone could hear me.

Horror washed over me. I pushed at the door, but I might as well have been pushing a mountain. Every muscle in my body felt like it was clamping up in fear, more so when the speaker above the desk hummed, popped and broke into white noise. A clipped voice erupted out.

“S-S-S-Signal deeeeEEEEected!”

Static washed into the room as every light on the floor cut immediately but for the glowing green of my PipBuck. Whooshing pipes and humming generators kicked into action. Panic controlled my every emotion as I beat at the window, waving my glowing PipBuck. I saw Brimstone and Glimmerlight race toward me.

Why had Sundial’s message activated!? Then it struck me through all the panic. My eyes turned back to the small four feet of stairs hidden in the darkness of the lower part of the room. Glimmerlight’s words echoed back to me. It had been controlled by height.

I had gone down just far enough from normal levels.

“Murk!” Brimstone’s voice roared above the electronic filth the speakers were spraying into the room. “Get away from the window!”

“HELP ME! PLEASE! PLEASE, BEFORE—”

“De-De-Depressurisation... routine active-active-active-ACTIVE!”

I screamed myself hoarse. No words came out, just a long and terrified wail as I bucked and struck the thick glass. I felt it shudder as Brimstone Blitz slammed one desk after another into the other side. The noise filled with a high-pitched hissing as the voices of dead ponies screamed clipped numbers and pressure values into the room through the PA system.

A whining burst into the room as the air became deathly thin. My face was soaking with tears as I tried to stay upright. Dizziness overtook me in the black void of darkness, leading me to stumble and fall. Blasts of noise sent sears of pain through me. The volume increased and static washed into the room, immobilising me with soundwaves assaulting my sensitive ears. My head felt like it was going to explode! My... my lungs... I couldn’t breathe!

Something in the ceiling was whistling as the depressurisation was carried out.

A blue flare went off outside the window as Glimmerlight began tearing at the terminal and screaming something to Brimstone. What was she doing? Was... was she... I couldn't tell. I couldn't get any air. My lungs burned, and I felt like my brain was swelling.

I fell. Hooves skittering, my head thumped off the ground hard enough for me to almost pass out from the impact. My lungs struggled in their sickened state, before eventually falling back to small hiccups of motion.

I lay there waiting for the unconscious state before death. My vision blacked out as Glimmer's magic failed. I heard nothing but a loud ringing, as my hearing was overwhelmed completely. I lay still.

And yet, just as the sickening sensations struck me they didn't accelerate into the savage intensity that had killed the raiders. Half blinded, with my head thumping and my ears ringing, I simply lay there. Minutes passed, and I wondered why wasn't I dead yet. Was the Stable taunting me? Giving me false hope that if I stood up the horror would continue? Oh Goddesses... just let it end now while it doesn't hurt any more...

It didn't. Instead I was left to simply lie and slowly breathe through raspy gasps. Air had fed back in slowly, my skin felt tingly as the air pressure also began to return to normal, but all too ready to pounce if I moved. I resolved to lie still, before the Stable thought I was alive to depressurise me again. Please just let me die quickly, I didn't want it to happen again! Just... just play dead until it happens...

Tnk! Tnk! Tnk!

I blinked, looking around through the blurring darkness.

Tnk! Tnk!

The noise continued, a dull thumping that seemed so far away. My head hurt... I had no balance as I lethargically swivelled around on the ground.

"...urk...!"

I'd heard a voice. Darkness wobbled in the edges of my vision as I rolled about before finally spotting a blue star reflected through the glass. Focusing my vision, I finally saw it. Glimmerlight's illumination spell. Brimstone was tapping the window hard enough to make enough sound to reach my damaged ears.

"Murky!"

In a rush, hearing returned fully. Falling against the fence, I felt every joint scream in pain from the pressure changes and my panicked spasms on the ground.

"Gli... Glimmer?" My voice barely squeaked out, sounding far away, like I was underwater. A sneaking worry crept in that I had burst an eardrum from the sudden drop in pressure, evidenced by a constant crackling and painful thumping in my right ear.

"Murky! Listen to me, quickly!"

"Glimmer... help me..." My voice was raw and dry.

Her face screwed up with sadness. Behind her the massive form of Brimstone loomed in the darkness, his harsh looks lit only by her magic. Glimmer's hooves were up on the window, thumping to keep my attention every time I hazed and almost passed out again.

"I blocked the signals of the depressurisation system to the room, Murky, it was in the fire response system! But this door won't open because of the pressure change safety protocols. The door at the back, that's open. You have to go quickly, before the pressure sequence restarts!"

It took some time for all that to process, I was still amazed to be alive! Glimmerlight must

have caught it and reversed it right on the threshold before unstopplable damage to my body had occurred. How long had I lay believing I was dying while they tried to get my attention? Even so, I felt as sick as I ever had as my lungs ached from over-exertion in the low-air environment and every inch of skin tingled from... from whatever low pressure did to a pony. I genuinely wondered what it had done to me. I felt like I'd bathed in acid.

"Murky, please, you have to go now! I don't know how long this will hold the systems."

Glancing back, I saw the pitch black door leading out into the unknown, an entirely dark corridor behind this one into lower levels. Trembling, I whined. Alone in the dark with little hearing, no, no... I couldn't deal with that! I... I just couldn't! Not in a Stable!

"I can't! Glimmer, I just... I'm so scared..."

She was crying. Actually crying as she pressed her face close to the thick glass. I just wanted to lie down and curl up, rather than go into the dark on my own. Into the past by myself.

"I know, Murky. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry! We'll try and find you as fast as we can. But... but you have to be brave! I know you can do it!"

Everything welled up. I struck both my hooves on the window, clenching my teeth. I couldn't look them in the eye.

"You don't even know me!" I had to fight to not scream in hysterics, my ear was stinging on every noise. "I'm not like that! I'm just a cowardly little slave... I don't even know what I've been doing since I failed! The Master has me, I only followed Brimstone because he stopped them hurting me and I... I thought it was the only route I had left to maybe survive, find others and... I don't know how to be on my own! I can't do this..."

Pressing my forehead against the glass, I sniffed hard. Small tears fell from my eyes onto the surface, where they trickled down like tiny drops of rain.

Glimmerlight didn't let me look away. She thumped the glass hard enough that it likely hurt her hoof.

"Yes you can, Murky! Yes! You! Can! You tried to escape Fillydelphia, and you almost made it! Don't listen to all of them! Don't listen to Shackles! You can do it, Murky. You saved my life because you stood up to do it. You took a risk, and it ended up saving Brim, too. You're more than you give yourself credit for!"

Stomach clenching up, I looked away, eyes closed. "I just... I just..."

"I know it's scary, hell, Murky. I'd be pissing myself if I didn't have you and Brim around. I *will* try to find you down there, Murky. Trust me, I will. We're not going to abandon you after what you did for us."

Looking up, I saw her face. She forced a smile onto it.

"I know what it's like to have everything seem to go wrong, for your hopes and dreams to come crashing down. I'm a slave too, remember? But you have to find something to strive for, to keep going for."

In the end, I knew the truth. "I don't have anything..."

"No, Murky. You do..."

In that moment, a flare of her magic caught my attention, as I looked up and into the loving eyes of my mother, holding me as a foal and assuring me it would all be fine. Memories flooded back to me as I witnessed the picture I had drawn not ten minutes ago. The slaves had shoved me around and hurt my wings by pulling feathers. My masters had whipped me for being too weak to pull the carts. But at the end of the day, there was always my mother waiting there, holding me gently and softly singing me to sleep...

I staggered back as it all weighed down, before falling forward onto the glass, my eyes locked on the picture. I... I missed her... truly missed her. I wanted to go back to my mother so badly. More than anything, I just wanted to see her again. Forget Littlepip and everyone else, if I could just hug my mom one more time and let her know I was alive... that her little Murky Number Seven was still fighting for that freedom she dreamed he might have...

Glimmerlight softly pressed her hoof over where mine was.

"It's going to be hard, Murky. Scary... dangerous... but never forget she is waiting for you. I've heard you talk, watched you cry and listened as Brimstone told me what you've done. About your sickness and everything else. You've been through so much; no wonder you're at wit's end. It won't be easy, but you need to keep going, Murky. Never, ever forget... she's out there waiting for you."

There was a pause as it all finally sunk in. Like a tiny light in the dark, it was something for me to reach out for. Something to hold.

Something. That's all I needed.

"I'll try..."

"That's all slaves like us can ever do Murky... we'll come for you. I *promise*."

Shivering, I nodded and turned my head to look behind me at the thick black and grey beyond the back door. Terror clenched my heart, my ear was barely working, and every joint ached. Trotting backwards, I finally turned fully to the door and stood before it. With one last longing glance backwards, I moved on. As I disappeared into the black, I heard Glimmerlight's parting words with my one good ear.

"I've not known you more than a few hours, but we're going to stick together, all of us. We need to in our kind of life. Take confidence in your friends, Murky, you've got some at last. We *will* find you. Good luck..."

That was what I had been missing. The thing that gave anyone the confidence to carry on.

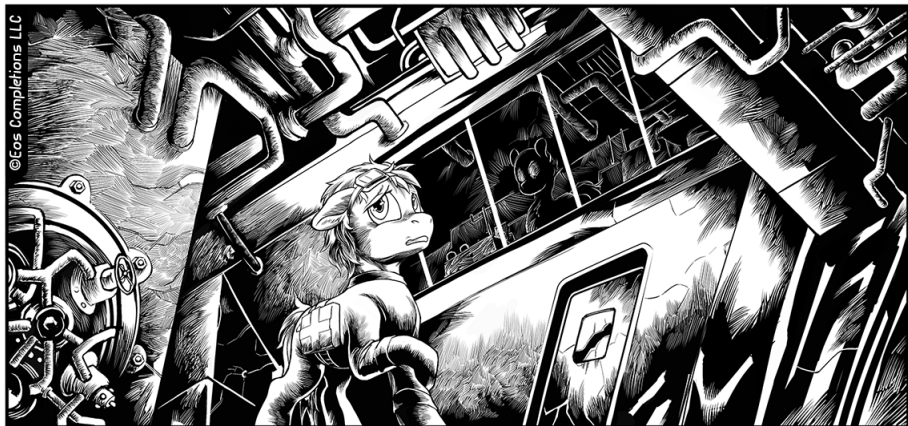
It was knowing someone else believed in you, even if you didn't believe in yourself.

Now, as I descended into the dead Stable's bowels alone, I finally realised what that feeling was I'd been sensing since I met them.

It was friendship.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Confidence Boost – When you can't go it alone any longer, take strength in those around you to help bring that hidden courage of yours out to shine! You gain +1 to Charisma.

Behind Closed Doors

"Because in Stable Ninety Three, everypony entered... but nopony would ever leave."

"What was it like to realise you had friends?"

Nothing like I could ever have imagined.

From the beginning of my life, even with the care of my mother, I had never been a part of any group of friends. Sure, I'd heard of the concept here and there, but generally all I experienced was a group telling me what to do, rather than an individual. 'Friendship', to me, was not a state I had any reason to be in, for my eternal born duty was to stay away from the groups and merely wait till they decided what they wanted from me.

I'd had a lifetime of things like being chained to a post out in the soaking wet weather and shivering from the cold as I only got to watch others laughing and sharing drinks around an indoors fire. I'd had endless nights of seeing other slaves huddled together for warmth, sharing food between themselves but roughly bucking me away from them if I tried to join their little herd. Just so many repeated incidents featuring friends arguing over how many caps I was worth at the slave markets.

Those sorts of things eventually drove me to simply stop wondering about friendship. It all seemed to be about being equals. I wasn't an equal. I wasn't born to be one, and as far as I knew I wasn't meant to be one.

The concept of friendship though, it soured in my mind. It became nothing more than a designation of groups that I was never meant to be a part of. I didn't believe it was a bad thing; I knew ponies could be nice to one another. I had just never expected that such a group could ever include me. Who in Equestria would want to be friends with a skinny little pegasus slave so incompetent he can't even do what his cutie mark denoted his talent as? What good pony would ever take the time to want to get to know somepony who cried at the drop of a pin and whose body was so messed up he couldn't even fly or live more than a day in there without RadAway? Why would any master ever want to be friends with his

slave?

Even after meeting ponies like the mysterious mare in Fillydelphia, I don't think it really clicked. She was an oddity, somepony I had been blessed to meet amidst the long slow life I had been leading. But she was not a friend, not then.

"So, what changed?"

I suddenly felt that connection. Or link, or spark, or something! I couldn't tell exactly what it was, but all of a sudden something had changed how I looked at it. I had found two ponies who had not abandoned me, abused me, or taken advantage of me. Even Brimstone Blitz, the Great Raider Warlord, seemed content for me to hang around them, if under extreme warnings. But Glimmerlight...

Sorry, this is going to sound pretty terrible, but she really was a little glimmer of hope for me. From the moment I met her, she had been nothing but a positive influence and a determined optimist. I had only known her for perhaps six hours and yet she treated me like a friend she'd known for years. Perhaps she was right; ponies under such extreme circumstances had to bond together to take what support they could. Even just knowing Glimmerlight was there, that she had reminded me of one good reason to keep trying, that she had promised to come and find me... it stimulated me into going on just that little bit further.

That bit further into the dark.

My mother once told me that friendship was the single greatest achievement of Equestria before the war. It had bound everypony together in a unified purpose and wondrous peace. Sitting curled up beside her while listening, I had just been a skinny little colt sketching in a journal about the same size as himself. The idea had seemed nice, but at the time, all I had wondered was that if everypony worked together, who decided which ponies had to... had to be the slaves...

I... wait, sorry, just... it's hard to think back on her then.

"Do you want to stop?"

No, sorry, I... I'm fine. Just—

Right, right, I'm good.

I grew up seeing slavery as the only way of life. Can you imagine how awful that feels? To look back on the first however many years of your life and realise what you spent it believing? To be such an indoctrinated slave, that even when you want to be free, you can't quite stop doing what you're told?

Well, all I know is, the mare was the first one to make me realise that ponies could stand as equals. She'd treated me as one, and showed me we could care. Littlepip showed me we could be free. But it was Glimmer who showed me that helping one another under stress, and working together to find a way through it is the way ponies are *supposed* to act. Even if I didn't properly understand friendship or what it entailed, it was her that made the difference at the critical point. She showed all it could offer in one simple little moment to help me push on. Be it for my mother, for freedom or now to want to return to ponies who had called me a friend, I had that reason to hope.

That was what friendship quickly came to mean to me.

I was injured, terrified, and about to face all my fears alone, but she gave me hope to keep going, survive, and find the path to freedom once again.

A long time ago, my master in Manehattan had told me a story while drunk. A librarian by trade, he sought to bring books back to the ponies of today. It would have been idealistic if he were not a raging paranoid alcoholic. Sipping his liquor and flamboyantly stumbling around his collection of pre-war books, he had proudly proclaimed that 'the dark of the past would only be repeated if we didn't learn from it!' I hadn't paid him much attention while attempting to clean the room up behind him. That, and I'd been trying to get past him having forgotten to feed me in four days. His distracted rants were my time to steal from his kitchen.

Screaming to the clouds above, he had erupted in a frenzied tale of Princess Luna being banished to the dark side of the moon where she could no longer see the world that she had hurt. She had been 'trapped in eternal darkness for a thousand years' and bereft of the sun or the sky. He told how the ordeal left her a crushed vessel of evil, ready to wreak havoc upon Equestria. I still remembered how he had dropped his glass, grabbed my little face painfully hard, and whispered in hushed, disturbingly psychotic tones. He told me that the pegasi were trying to do the same to all of us on the surface. That after two hundred years, the cracks were starting to show. That trapped in the darkness, we would show the worst qualities we had.

The story had passed from my mind as simply a hatred of my wings. But now in the present day, I wished I had paid him more heed.

Stood within the darkest hole Equestria could ever build.

There was no power down here for the lights. The Stable was in pitch darkness. I'd once tried turning off my light, and I hadn't even seen my hoof in front of my face.

I might as well have been Princess Luna on the moon, like my old master had said. Like her, I was isolated and surrounded by the unknown; in my case with only a malfunctioning and pitifully small PipBuck light to see by. Even my natural eyesight in the dark failed to help me much. With absolutely no ambient light to see by, and the PipBuck's one too unstable, I couldn't focus at all. With courage as highly strung as one overstretched wire on a musical instrument, I had trotted through dead corridors and black voids. Maze-like, they endlessly winded around. Every ten feet the pattern repeated in the modular design, a lazy effort by my artistic eye, but right now it only helped to give me the impression that I could be going in circles and not even know it.

The sense of claustrophobia was rapidly settling in. Walls I couldn't see felt closer than ever. Once already I had lost my way, and I couldn't have found my way back to the office if I tried.

Not that anything was helped by a dead ringing in one ear. The blast of white noise in the office had, I thought, destroyed my sensitive hearing somehow. Burst ear drum? Biological shutdown? I didn't know enough about ears or pony bodies to know. All I knew was that it hurt badly, and the hearing from my right ear was substantially worse than it once had been.

Every single step had been an effort. Sweat was clinging to my body from the stuffy underground heat. There was no movement of air. Just a humid and musty aura that stunk of chemicals and oil. (How had Stable ponies gotten used to this?) Sometimes, I would randomly gasp as I felt the air pressure change, before screaming in terror and galloping backwards. After a few heartstopping moments of terror, I eventually realised that this area was not reacting to me. Perhaps the ventilation ducts were blocked or broken? There were strange currents in the air, like some impossible breeze or air pressure zone. It was better

than my other theory, that the entire corridor had once initiated its deadly purging of life long ago and was still showing the side effects.

Sighing, I settled down against the wall and curled up on the damp floor. Clutching my ear gently, I silently willed the sound to return. I prayed deeply to the Goddesses, I didn't want to go deaf. Don't leave me with this now!

Pressing my head against the wall and whimpering, I eventually realised that there were little streaks of water from above ran down the edges through cracks and breaches, dripping over my goggles. It didn't help to keep my mind off other bodily problems I was having.

My throat was dry and swollen. The temptation to gulp down my RadAway to quench my neglected thirst was overwhelming, held back only by the knowledge that that was my only lifeline should I stumble upon a magically contaminated area. Stomach churning, I felt the ache as hunger threatened to become a more immediate threat. I'd spent so long on adrenaline and fear that mere sustenance requirements were forgotten too easily. Now I was paying the price.

If it weren't for the horrific concept of being left down here, I might have just wanted to curl up and cry at the entire situation. Instead, I rather pathetically turned and attempted to lap what water I could dripping from the walls, praying with all my heart it wasn't contaminated. A sharp taste of iron entered my mouth but the liquid at least stopped the burning feeling on each breath. Now to just...

Turning, my eyes peered through the thick goggles and saw only three feet of blank corridor before everything turned into the void once more.

That looming, intimidating sight set my heart racing, as I felt my body scream at me to follow one simple, logical command. Get out of here.

Blank corridors, endless darkness, horrible things waiting in it, lethal ponies stalking its halls, and only two friends out there looking for me. Even as I tried to grasp the horror all around me, the light on my PipBuck sparked brighter before beginning to fade away briefly between bursts. Feeling my legs tremble, the darkness seemed to creep closer on every flicker of my PipBuck. I tried to force myself to move; to get active before the shadows crept close enough to take me forever in this metal prison of the past. I tapped my PipBuck, shaking it to try and get the light to work better.

"Come on... please!"

A little jostling later and Sundial's PipBuck brought light back to my world; at least, two feet of light.

Keep going. Just keep moving, don't stop and think. Tramping further, I felt each step with my hoof before placing weight down. Panels shifted uneasily on rusted connections, and I felt some of them bend under me. The continual water damage had, over two hundred years, given the construction of this level a noticeably fragile state. The thought of it breaking open and dropping me into an eternal darkness below was fresh in my mind while I crept further forward. It was so silent down here, insulated away from the raiders' temporary camp above.

As much as I hated to allow my mind to think on the past, the endless monotony and directionless journey was setting my mind to lazily wander against all of my best efforts. I tried to keep thinking about Glimmerlight. In six hours, I'd gained a closer 'friend' than I'd had in my entire life. But something was still unnerving me about her. Something I had noticed but not dwelt on.

Both Glimmer and I had been through hellish lives. However, while mine was a tragic

monotony and inevitability of a sad end, hers was one of depressing loss and crushing pain. She had left against her parents' wishes, lost all of her friends to rampaging raiders who, in turn, had sold her on to slavery. Having been on the receiving end of a few raiders for less than five minutes, the idea of being properly caught by them chilled me to the bone.

That was the problem, however. Her attitude was *too* carefree for all of that. I knew ponies could get over some harsh stuff, but something felt different about hers. She seemed effortlessly happy and whimsical. Glimmerlight smiled in Fillydelphia, joked with a raider, teased slavers, and carried a positive attitude with boundless humour.

Were Brimstone's words that she was simply somepony truly special all there was to it? Really? Even by my weak standards, I couldn't imagine anypony going through all that and being so unaffected. Even if it was sheer strength, something had to keep her going, and honestly, I was pretty interested to find out how she did it. I could probably use that sort of help.

The light flickered again. Dying for a few seconds. I felt my breathing quicken, and the darkness began to close in, until I could only see a scant few feet to any side of me.

"Oh come on. Please don't, please don't! I... I can't see anything!"

Suddenly, the sound of rending, shrieking metal tore through the cramped environment. Screaming, I hurled myself away from the sound before crying out and clutching my ear. Wailing from the pain spearing through the right side of my head, I felt my balance disappearing, leaving me to stumble and fall until the disorientation disappeared.

Quivering in a heap, I tried to hold the ear as closed as was possible. It had been a door. A door I hadn't even seen coming or moving in the darkness. Its rusted shriek on opening beside me had almost immobilised me by sound alone, never mind the sudden shock. What was *wrong* with my ear?

The door jammed, before continuing to rise. That was something I hadn't encountered yet. Perhaps somewhere inside it I could simply hide under a bed and try with my better ear to listen for Brimstone's big thumping gait?

Looking around the doorframe into the black void inside, I-

Eyes stared back at me from a faint outline of somepony reaching forward through the door. The darkness itself was convulsing and forming into something unclear. Almost choking on my cry, I fell backwards, hiding my face and beginning to wail as I hid my vision from the ghostly presence! Its faint eyes having been staring directly at me, moving forward.

"NO! No no no! Please, DON'T!"

...nothing happened.

Trembling so hard that I could scarcely control my own body, I risked opening my eyes again to see nothing but the dull green illumination of my PipBuck that had restarted itself. There was nothing there. What was...

I didn't understand.

Reeling from dizziness, I pulled my tired and sore body to my hooves and trotted toward the dark room, holding up my PipBuck out in front of me as though the light would ward things off. There was... nothing.

Instead, I trotted carefully inside, turning back and watching behind me as I retreated into the room. What the hell had that been? Was it just my imagination taking over? Was this Stable haunted? Were ghosts driving the horrors being inflicted on raider after slave after helpless pony above?

"H-hello?" I hadn't whispered fearfully for more than half a second before I facehoofed at myself. Of course no pony was down here. What was going to happen? Were the ghosts going to leap up and respond?

Alright, no more attempts at sarcasm, because they were *clearly* helping.

I tried to shake myself out of it. I had to have courage! 'Courage, Murky!', I told myself. I had to think! It was just, uh, just an odd reflection of my PipBuck's light on something in the room! No! The PipBuck hadn't been on! Maybe just a thick smoke in the air? Was there still any? This was too dark. Where was I? The roof was the same, but the room opened up a lot. Almost squeaking in fear, I saw three other points of light until realising it was the reflection of my PipBuck in three long, horizontal windows around each wall, looking out into the corridor I had just been in as it wound around the room instead. I had been inside a room looking out on the hallway I'd just exited, and I hadn't even noticed in the dark.

Waving the PipBuck back and forth, it became more apparent this was some sort of kitchen. Or a canteen? Was that what they called it?

A boxy, metallic counter ran across one third of the room, the rest being taken up with permanently positioned industrial tables and thickly padded seats in a dark red. Small scraps littered the floor. I saw magazines still open upon the tabletops with rotten food left from spilled plates. Everything was metal, from the cutlery and plates to even the glasses, and were those metal *straws*?

I glanced behind me at that door again, just to be sure. I could only imagine myself seeing that figure again. Had it been a reflection? I couldn't have been! It had followed me out the door!

Momentarily dragging my mind back from panic, I realised something. This was a canteen. Canteens had food, right? Could any have been preserved?

Faster than I thought I could confidently move, I crawled onto a table to hop onto the kitchen counter. It had been too high to hop up on from the floor for me. Seriously, height considerations, Stable builders. Think of the little bucks and mares. How did Littlepip manage in her own Stable? That counter would have given even a normal sized stallion trouble.

Trotting past perspex displays and more strewn plates, I hopped down to the far side of the kitchen surface and began shoving the store room door. With a painfully loud noise, it squeaked and squealed open on rusty hinges to release the most foul stench I had ever encountered. I had hidden in a pile of corpses, but it was nothing compared to the stale, rotten, contained reek of an entire stockpile of food rotting for two hundred years in a sealed compartment. Whatever ponies back then had used to preserve food, it had only slowed the decomposition process to leave this mess behind it.

Sickly and sweet, my stomach rebelled, making me retch and dry heave before I could hold my breath and force myself to go in. Shelf after shelf of mangy, often furry and melted-looking food that had broken through degraded packaging littered the room on all sides. My hooves squelched and squished as they trod on things I didn't even want to look down at. Cramped and disorganised, the food storage was nothing more than a deadzone. Hope emerged as I spotted three fridges at the far end, and with a little work to pull them open, I got a look inside.

The first two were only repeats of the general storage. But finally, the mare of luck threw me a bone or, in this case, a small sealed tin of... well, I couldn't exactly read what it was. But a quick examination of the picture revealed what looked like little small things in a red

or orange sauce.

Shoving the can into a pocket, I quickly retreated from the foul stock room before I felt the need to breathe again. A quick scouring of the cutlery drawers revealed a can opener. Glancing around once again, I sat down and tried my best to turn it in my mouth. Clearly, the chef had been a unicorn.

With a sudden jerk, I felt my mouth slip off the handle and knock against my loose tooth. Holding a hoof over my mouth, I tried to stifle the frustrated shout in anger before thumping the cupboards with my other hoof instead.

Taking up the tin, I bit the handle more carefully and managed to pry most of the lid off. The smell was like the one life line I had been waiting for. It was fresh tomato sauce around the... huh?

What were they? Beans? If they were, they were some pretty oddly shaped beans. Sighing, I still managed to smile and almost nuzzle the tin at the thought of food. While settling it upright, I spotted a host of small cupboards near the end of the kitchen counter's locked gate. There was a big safe sitting below the cutlery. Something to investigate after I'd had my food.

Really, I didn't know what drove me. But before chowing down, I found myself climbing back over the counter to settle down on one of the musty old padded seats and place the food on an empty plate I wiped as clean as was possible. It felt wrong to just devour the scrap of food in this place. Not when ponies had once dined here properly.

It must have made me an interesting sight. Sitting there, chewing some sort of near tasteless beans from a plate, while lone in a dark and abandoned Stable lit only by one damaged PipBuck and surrounded by the aftermath of an event that likely killed everypony here. Like a ghost of the past, I simply sat and ate, feeling my stomach finally settle down from the small meal. Really, I couldn't help but smile. The tomato sauce was satisfyingly tangy and rich, and the beans gratefully soft and easy to chew to go down my swollen throat.

Actual sustaining food going down was a feeling I could not understate at this time. For one brief moment of calm clarity, it let me forget about the dark. About the pain throbbing in my right ear and the dry breathing from sick lungs. To pay no heed to my terror of real ghosts appearing before me, or the suspicion that my rather active imagination was just beginning to send me off the edge of sanity.

No, I just sat there and ate my beans like a good little Stable Dweller, waiting to go back to his place of work and continue the monotony of being enslaved to an underground world. Just for one moment, I wanted to pretend this was my home. That I didn't have to go back to Fillydelphia. That I was simply having my daily meal before I went back to whatever I worked as. The place would need a clean, but those broken plates could be undented right? That fork still embedded in its food and dropped hastily would just need a little clean.

Those balloons with some numbers on them would just need to be inflated again...

Around me lay the remains of this Stable's past. A quiet and forgotten place where ponies had once laughed and eaten, drank and sung, wished well and... partied...

Feeling myself welling up, I put my head down on the table, my hooves crossed around it, and shook terribly, trying to forget I'd ever thought about it.

was not alone. Without a doubt, I could feel something around here. Even as I trotted as quietly as possible, it was becoming more apparent that there was something lurking in the darkness down here. Sitting in the canteen had only been hurting me. Something about the evidence of pony life but absolutely no remains was just downright freaky. That, and I kept anticipating to look up and see faces staring in through the windows. I couldn't stay here, not if anything knew where I was, and so I'd decided to keep moving. The more I looked, the higher the chances of finding stairs leading to a higher level.

Up, always up, towards the surface... towards the sky.

But right now, the Stable seemed intent to reveal none of its staircases. Instead a growing fear of being locked down here forever with the drifting ghosts of the past was setting in. My mane itched and my skin crawled. Stopping in the middle of... of... where was I? Was the canteen back a corner and down the hall? Or, wait, was it to the left or right back there?

My heart was pumping hard enough to actually be a dull thumping to my one good ear. Every flicker of the PipBuck threatened to illuminate somepony's eerie form in the darkness ahead of me. I spun to look behind me on every other step, quickly turning again to check the way I'd come from. I did this multiple times if I heard something; a gurgle or tapping from nearby. Sometimes, I turned so often and so fast, I forgot which way I was meant to be looking in the first place.

A humming picked up from above me, vibrating the entire endless corridor before wisps of white noise and static drifted down the hallways. I heard distant voices, unidentifiable and warped. Part of my mind tried to scream that it was just some poor slave activating the Stable's killswitch again above me, but somehow it didn't quite stick hard enough to let the fear clenching my heart unwind. A PA system loudspeaker on the wall hissed dimly as I passed, like a broken gramophone spinning. Two steps later, it cut for no apparent reason, plunging me once again dead silence.

Squeaking when my hoof almost tripped over something, I cantered to the side, my PipBuck held out in one shaky hoof at the—

A red scooter, abandoned in the hallway, tipped on its side. As rusty as the walls, it looked to have almost fallen apart on the minor impact with my PipBuck leg. Glancing around for anything else, I found nothing but a fallen bell from the scooter. Not designed for hooves to pick up, its small size had almost fallen between two floor panels. Without really knowing why, I leant down and bit it, storing it in one small leg pocket.

Okay, perhaps I tried it once...

Bing bing!

Packing it away safely, I lifted my head up again.

This corridor really did just go on forever.

Turn after turn...

The same modular ten feet every... single... time...

A glint in the darkness made me perk up. I might have been fearful, but anything in this void was a thankful respite. Breaking into what kind of a slow gallop I could, I aimed for it, seeing my PipBuck light reflected in thick murky glass. Sloshing through some low water running down the hallway and kicking aside little metal cylinders on the floor, I threw myself against the glass, staring in. What was it? A way out?

It was a canteen with a dirty plate covered red tomato sauce, sitting on a familiar table in front of me.

Every muscle seemed to wither and die as I slumped against the glass, banging my head

on it at the sheer fruitlessness of my efforts to make progress down in the dark. Cramped corridors and thick air muddled my perception. Had I really just spent the last, uh, hour? Was it an hour? Oh Goddesses...

Thumping my hoof on the glass, I muttered nothings to myself. I wanted a direction. I'd always had one, however vague it had become. But down here, it was just endless trotting in a state of quickly fading trust for Glimmerlight to find me.

Nopony had ever stuck to their word with me; why would this be any different? I hadn't even properly been struck with anxiety over the dead past in here, other than my sadness at the canteen, and already I was cracking.

Guess friends weren't the big help that I'd hoped they might be.

My head bumped once again on the glass. Sighing, I opened my eyes to stare inside. Maybe I could just hide under a table.

There was a shape behind the counter.

Every muscle and litre of blood in my entire body froze on the spot. Like in some stupid reaction to freeze and hope I wasn't spotted. I didn't even blink as fearful tears burned my eyes.

Movement, not a defined form. Just occasional edges and shifting silhouettes as something moved around.

Sound floated through the door around the corner that led into the canteen.

"...get into the lower levels, they're down there! Put anypony who can't fight in their rooms safely! Get out the canteen, everypony! Get out! GET OUT! THEY'RE TRYING TO-"

It was interspersed by a hazed static and electronic screaming at a low volume behind the words. The shape flowed lazily back and forth, before a distinctly pony shaped head finally turned toward me, and then darted into thicker shadow, before disappearing entirely. The sounds clicked and fell silent.

What... the... hell?

Eventually, my muscles stiffly regained the power of movement. I wanted to run. To hide. But where!? I could run for hours down here and just, well, who knew what I'd find?

Turning, I quickly cantered inside the canteen again. If that *thing* left it, then at least it was the one place I knew it wasn't. But I just couldn't scrub the the sight of that head turning slowly toward me from my mind. It had been featureless, just a shade in the shadows.

I couldn't help it, I dived under the tables and curled into a ball. Fear stopped me from even whimpering out of a deadly thought of it returning. My eyes wouldn't close. What if I opened them and it was right there in front of me? Simply staring at the floor counters before me, the unceasing darkness hid everything not two feet from my head, and the utterly silent ambience, other than the occasional creepy vibration passing through, was just... getting to me. The thought of the Mall was like a homecoming. I wanted my pigsty with all the stupid Pinkie music in the air to remind me that she was still watching me forever. I even wished, not for the first time, that I were back in Slit's factory. Even the toxic atmosphere in there was preferable to the suffocating lack of space down here. But no, I couldn't get back to them. I'd tried to trot off and just ended back here. I was just going to curl into a ball and be as unnoticeable as possible until somepony came around, hopefully before I died of hunger.

Dying of hunger while lying pathetically on the floor of a canteen, dozens of feet

underground in the pitch dark of a place meant to sustain ponies. Sometimes there was no end to the irony of my life.

Staring for longer still, something caught my eye.

On the ground was an audio recorder. I knew that *hadn't* been there before! Crawling out, I grabbed it. To hell with being afraid of the past; I needed sound. Something! Anything! Some source of sensory input to stop my mind becoming as enclosed as the Stable around me before it drove me insane! Who knew, perhaps they would be telling where to go?

Jamming it into my PipBuck, I noticed the only remaining button was the play button. The stop button lay nearby on the ground, broken and unusable. If I started this playback, there was no stopping it.

I hesitated for a few seconds, before pushing it.

The static pierced into my ears, echoing around off the metal walls. Squirming and yelping out loud, I clutched my ear as the recorder's volume setting spiked. Eyes watering, I tried to hold my right ear shut and protected it as best I could until the stabbing pains went away from my head.

"...right, it's running. You ready Runner Bean? This is it."

"Sure thing Sculpy. We got the weapons from the armoury all here. They won't have anything so... hopefully this'll be pretty easy. Just gallop in, point a few guns, get them to stop all the weapon making, right?"

"Yeah... no blood. But we don't have a choice."

There was an unnatural pause.

"The audio log can't hear you if you nod, Bean. We need this stored. We need the proof for future generations in here, to prove we did this right. That we didn't kill anypony. They have gone too far, taking all the damn Stable apart to 'fix' things that didn't need fixing. The PA system glitches and the draining of inordinate amounts of power that we need for hot water and lighting are just too much! They're doing something. The Overmare keeps telling us not to worry, but they wouldn't keep it secret if it weren't anything big. We have a right to know, and we need to find out."

"You gonna narrate this entire thing?"

"Context, my friend. Context. People must know why we did this as much as what happened. We must survive down here and secrets do not permit that, not when it is something that could endanger our Stable. Our children need this of us, their keepers, to ensure their survival. That is what the Stables were for, why we in Stable-Tec built them. Now these Ministry of Arcane Science lot come in, usurp our authority and seek to ruin the safety with their meddling and research. This record is that future Stable generations will understand."

"Hey, Sculpy, the others are waiting. Everypony on the top levels is heading down to their rooms below, out of the way. We need to move. Now."

"Alright, I'll be two seconds."

His voice became lower. Clutching the recorder closely, my ear ringing and feeling swollen inside, I glanced around me at the quiet canteen. Just what had those Ministry Scientists done to the Stable to cause all this? How messed up were those ponies to make such technology?

"One of the foals managed to creep through an air duct last week, a filly called Snowy Gust. She got into the science areas on a whim somehow. Only thing is, when they sent her back out, she couldn't remember a damn thing. Why would you need to wipe the

memory of a child? That little filly would never have understood any of that stuff. They need to be stopped. I can't watch the foals I teach go through this sort of... horror. You don't mess with memories. It never works."

"Hey! Sculpty, dude, come on!"

I heard a scuffling, a click of some weapons, and the sound of Sandy Sculpt trotting.

"Right, thank you all for meeting here so quick. They watch the atrium, but this canteen should be pretty safe till we get close enough. We don't need them locking us out."

Wait, the canteen!

"Well, you lead the way Sandy. You're the one recording this for whatever reasons. We'll get down there, and get back up as soon as we can to the atrium to negotiate once we've made sure it's made safe. Lead on."

My heart leapt. If I just paid careful attention to their sounds, perhaps I could follow the recording by listening for turns? I needed to get out of this void black area of the Stable; they could be my only hope. Overcoming my fears had to be done. I needed to do it sometime, to be able to stand up strong if I were to ever escape.

"Alright, everypony ready? No stopping now, it's make or break for us."

"Right!"

"We're in!"

"Let's do this!"

"YEEEEAH!"

"With you!"

"Right behind you."

"Okay, bucks and mares! We're going to head down the main hallway, see if we can get some distance covered before they spot us. Move it!"

Pushing my exhaustion to the back of my mind, I galloped toward the largest corridor again. The sounds of hooves clattering on the ground through the audio recorder sounded like they surrounded me, only faded and hissing with poor sound quality. The darkness ahead parted as my PipBuck's light reached it, creating a little island of visibility around me that provided the only warning of any obstacles.

"Hey everypony, don't activate your eyes forward sparkle! They'll pick it up on their security terminals if you do. We'll just navigate manually. Left!"

The rushing sounds shifted, harder strikes as the dozen ponies rounded. Without even thinking I copied them, finding myself darting round a sharp bend of the Stable layout. This could work!

"And remember to— YARGH!"

I tripped, falling head over hooves as something collided with my front legs.

"Urgh... who the hell left a scooter here. Hey, Tulip Bloom! What do you think you're doing riding around here?"

"I'm sorry, sir..."

"Just-argh, go back to your room, quickly. No! Don't stop for your scooter, just leave it, go now! Keep going, everypony!"

Wanting to nurse my bruised leg, instead I fought to get back on my hooves and gallop

onwards into the dark once again. Corridors passed on either side, was I hearing it properly? Had they turned?

"Right!"

But there was no right!

The dull rattling of metal gears shook the corridor, before that tortured grinding that every single door in here made picked up. Almost invisible on the grey walls, the door slid open as I ran directly at the wall, before slamming shut behind me. I was definitely in new territory now. This place seemed cleaner, more preserved. Perhaps the water hadn't leaked in here?

"Come on, everypony! Keep up!"

A thick *clang* sounded in the recording. A few seconds later, my own hoof struck a loose panel that made an identical sound. I was falling behind! Praying to my hooves to move faster, I sprinted as fast as I possibly could to catch up!

"Sculpy! Are we doing the right thing?"

"We're not going to hurt anypony! But they won't listen to reason anymore. We have to intimidate them somehow into telling us what they're up to! Parts of the Stable are starting to act weird after they get involved! Left!"

There was a left ten feet back the way. Had I overshot it?

"Right!"

No no no! They were getting ahead!

"WAIT FOR ME!" I screamed as I turned and galloped back and around the corner. There were three or four right hand turns to choose from that I could run past! Was I lost?

"Crap, Sculpy! Gloomy's fallen behind, that battle saddle's weighing him down!"

"Oh for— we're down the second right, Gloomy! Hurry up!"

"I'm coming!" I shouted in response.

Without hesitation, I dove into the corridor and immediately fell down a short flight of steps. Shouting out in pain as I struck the ground, I tumbled and rolled into the next corner's wall, below a window, curling up before the bone rattling impact. Staggering and woozy, my balance was utterly shot from the impact. The darkness seemed to blur and shift in my dizzied vision. Shapes moved and flowed back and forth like... like the group of ponies I was following. A clammy sweat broke over me as I realised I couldn't remember the way back up from here. I was entirely at the mercy and direction of the past.

"Hey, what are you lot doing?!"

A new voice, educated and refined.

"Shit! Grab him!"

"Wait, what? Get off me! GET OFF!"

The sound of cans and tins crashing to the floor rattled around the Stable. They skidded across the floor away from my hooves as I trotted unsteadily into some sort of medical bay. Dented trays were strewn around my feet, my own hooves clattering through them even as the same sounds echoed from the recorder.

"He might warn them! Gloomy! Take out that camera before they spot us! Somepony grab him! Hold him down!"

A gunshot rang out, and I covered my ear as the sudden boost in volume and static made it ache. Above me, I spotted a broken camera hanging by a wire from the wall.

"Lock him in the storage unit. We'll come and set him free later on, don't panic, but we can't risk you doing—"

"You have guns! What are you DOING!? We-we aren't dangerous!"

"That's all we want to check, sir. Now please, get in and we'll come back for you!"

A thick metal door stood locked ahead of me. Placing my hooves on it, I felt how securely it was rusted into place.

"Please! I-I don't like confined spaces! NO! Noooo!"

The lock descended with a stark clunking sound. Even as I felt the orange and browned lock, it occurred to me they never had been able to get back to him.

Whatever killed the Stable was likely on this recording.

"Let's keep going. We'll head to the Memorial Room and cut through the back passage.

The cameras they installed don't cover that way until right at the end."

There was only one way to go. I waited for the group to move off before joining them. It took me a few seconds to realise that I'd drawn my empty BB pistol in my mouth without even knowing, as though I was with them.

Running with the ghosts of the past to try and save the Stable that had already died long ago.

More voices broke into the recording. No, lots! Around me, the Stable opened out into a giant room, much like the atrium. I couldn't help but wonder in awe; how large was this place if I hadn't even found the science levels yet? Looming giants towered in the dark ahead of me, massively thick and tall pillars reflecting only a vague light from their distinctly non-metallic surfaces. The green of my PipBuck revealed them on all sides.

"Everypony! Stop working and get to your rooms! Just stay down and quiet until we give the all clear!"

Shouts and stamping in all directions echoed off the walls from my PipBuck, giving the sensation of the noise existing in all areas of the room. Tramping across the oddly soft floor, it finally occurred to me what the tall objects were.

Trees.

Giant indoor trees, thick with frozen sap and rotted wood from years of neglect and starvation in the dark. The ground below me was thick with dirt, loose and dry like the crater. Small round and rotten objects bumped against my hooves or squished with a thick goopy green substance if I stood on one. Apples.

This was where they had grown food. An underground... what were they called? Oar Chart? Or Chand? Sounds from the recording drifted between the trees and off walls as I heard ponies dropping the baskets that lay around me. Hard bucks to grab what they could shook the area. Momentarily curious, I gave one tree a half buck, before screaming as my hoof became trapped in the rotten wood. Pulling desperately, I fell out of it atop a basket full of rotten apples, catapulting it up to land right on top of me. Feeling something runny and bits of goopy apple collapse all around my head, I was suddenly very appreciative of my goggles. Shaking off the revulsion, I threw it off, almost slipping on the residue all over the loose dirt. Shivering with the slimy rot and mould covering my body and head, I staggered back against a tree, shaking myself clean or rubbing myself against it to clean the worst of it off.

"Alright, Sculpt! I think that's everypony out of here. Why did you send them away if we aren't going to actually shoot, anyway? Hell, I don't think I even grabbed ammo."

"We don't know what those scientists have cooked up, Runner Bean. I just want everypony to be safe."

"That Stable-Tec mantra still going, eh?"

"Always."

I might have felt proud of Sculpt to have such a noble intention. But really, I was spending most of my time trying not to throw up. Now that I had something in me to throw up, it seemed to be relishing the opportunity after the vile apples had coated my body. Even that was just trying to distract me from these giant crooked dead husks that once were trees. Standing in the middle of the wide room, I realised that the walls were too far away to see in the dark.

For all I knew, I was standing in a dark haunted forest outside. The feeling of displacement grew, an oddly open space within an enclosed area. Conflicting thoughts of being outside were mangled with the reminders that this dark place was still under... how much of a mountain now? Shaking my head and whimpering, I immediately ran forward to catch up with the recording. For a horrifying few seconds, no walls appeared. Only more trees. I had been in a Stable, but now I was in a forest at night! Was I even going the right way?

"There's the Memorial Room, the far end! Let's go, I don't think we have much time left before word gets out!"

"Wait! The living areas are just beyond it. If we rush right in we'll be trying to get to the staircases with every Stable resident in the way. Give them some time. Take out any cameras near the main exit, make them think we're going that way, if they've even realised. Then get into the Memorial Room and bunker down for a few minutes."

"You're the boss."

"No, I'm just a concerned pony. This will turn out right, Bean, I promise. Now everypony, rest a minute or two, but don't make much noise. We don't know who may overhear. I'm gonna go check on everypony."

The recording seemed to pause, but I could still hear ambient noises in the background of ponies settling down on the dirt, chomping on apples. I ceased my galloping, as a lack of direction took over. I didn't want to run off before they moved on. Wandering back and forth, I discovered there were actually multiple orchards in this underground forest, divided by large and rectangular openings. Around the edges were overgrown walls and the occasional jammed door. They were barely visible, only if I were right under it and shining my PipBuck upwards.

Settling down next to a tree on all fours, I sighed; I'd lost my direction again. Hopefully my perception of 'the far end' was the same as the recording. I tried to imagine all the concerned ponies around me, clutching their weapons as they grabbed the occasional apple. I could hear a couple murmuring to one another nearby, the thump of somepony bucking apples from trees, and occasional, nervous clicks of weapons. Part of me wished I could see them, see my ghostly companions on the quest to discover just what was going on in this Stable.

The thought stopped me. When had I become interested in finding out about the past? It *always* scared me. So why was there this strange feeling of—

Something cantered between the trees.

Hiding behind the tree in a heartbeat, I fought to stop myself whimpering and I poked my goggled eyes around to watch.

It was in the trees, in the same room as me. *It was right here.*

Moving and grazing, the blurry shape drifted between trees and flowed around bends. All sound seemed to deaden. The recording lost volume, gradually being replaced by a warping

static that drowned out the normal audio. The closer it came, the greater the distortion. Like black wind, it wisped around and to each tree in turn. Never a single clear shape, bouncing from the darkness and blending in as though it was a living shadow.

Then it disappeared. Had it really? Where was it now?

Every part of my mind screamed otherwise. It had to still be here. I moved out from the tree, glancing to either side and shining my PipBuck's light. Each one of my legs was shaking so hard I could feel my whipcord-tied PipBuck sliding down to my hoof. Drips of sweat from an oddly humid atmosphere poured off of me.

The *'thnk'* of something striking wood reached my ears.

"Aiiee!"

Squeaking, I dove behind another tree, crouching behind the thick roots, as a sudden, wooden sound clopped down through the forest. Ahead of me, a tree swung lightly back and forth.

It was there...

Like a dark smudge on my goggles, it circled the tree. That pony shaped head reared up, looking around.

'Run, Murky.' My mind was bucking my own brain to obey. 'Turn off your light!' But I couldn't move my hoof.

The shape drifted closer to the ground, moving to another tree. I was in clear view.

'Murky, *run!*' But I was frozen in place.

Moving steadily closer, the head turned, watching me across the forest. There were no eyes just the silhouette of a pony against the lesser black around it.

Gradually, almost anticlimactically, it drifted further away and disappeared through another rectangular door to the next apple tree facility. I couldn't take my eyes off of the doorway. I worried that if I blinked, it would suddenly come back. What if it came up behind me when I moved on? Gradually, tree to tree, I shuffled and scooted forward, using every ounce of ability to sneak that I knew to get close to the door it had gone through. I needed to see that it had properly disappeared. Peeking around the edge, there was nothing but another rotten grouping of the trees a few feet into the next section. There was such pitch darkness that I simply couldn't see any further past the first few feet.

My world was nothing but a small radius around me. The feeling of vulnerability was really beginning to set in. The PipBuck was still flickering too. Sometimes I felt like it was my only source of life to—

The PipBuck died briefly.

It flew past me back into my room. So close, that all I saw was a shifting of darkness so subtle only my fear ridden nerves spotted it.

I screamed. Falling back, my hooves flew up to try and ward it away. At my cry, it rounded off, a pony's vague shape appearing, eyes staring for the brief second before my own closed. The PipBuck screamed in static. Hooves flailing to try and get a purchase, I bumped and fell for a few more feet.

I lay there and watched it go. With another *'thnk'*, a second tree shook... then another further away... and two more in the distance, beyond my vision.

Then silence.

I had to pull my goggles off to rub my eyes dry. Even as the static from the PipBuck gradually died down, I just kept shaking and shivering against the wall, even as some more sounds of faded tree hits echoed lightly through the orchard, before dying off completely

again.

"Kzzssshh... right, we ready? Far side, we're off. Let's get to the Memorial Room and move on from there."

I didn't want to move.

"Hey, Gloomy? What's wrong?"

The sound washed in faded static at the response. I didn't want to move. So scared... I was so scared.

"We're all scared, Gloomy, but we're all here for you. We'll find out what's down there and then we'll go back to a better life. Just stay with me, okay?"

Getting to my hooves, something about Sculpt's voice was reassuring. A teacher by trade, his words held great poise. Almost fatherly. Something I'd never known.

"One step after another, Gloomy. That's all any of us can do."

Warily glancing around at dead trees and black mist, I began to trot towards the far end of the forest.

"That's it. Now let's go."

The Memorial Room was never going to be good. The past looking upon the past? That was, well, double bad. Or did it cancel itself out? I was never very good at maths. As a colt, I used to say 'one, two, three, lots!'

As I approached the doorway, I stopped briefly, despite the cantering in my recorder still playing. What number had lots been? Four. What came after it? Ah...'loads!' If only cynically, it settled my nerves to concentrate on the idiotic dumbness I'd been plagued with on my youth without a proper education. Well, that implied I wasn't still an idiot. What pony my age couldn't read anyway?

That precise lack of skill was being shown in my trust of the recording, for the room ahead of me held an elaborate sign above it. Unable to read the words, I was wandering into the unknown.

Inside was a low ceiling. The vague shapes of furniture around it stood out to me, but I stuck to the wall nearest the door for now. I still had no idea what was in here. To my surprise, though, someone had glued wooden decor to the steel walls, giving this room a very low budget version of an antiques look.

"Alright everypony, settle here a minute. I'm going to try and see if I can tap into the cameras, make sure everypony else is settled before we go. If we're being forced to go into the living areas to reach the science level's doorways, I do not want anypony caught in a worst-case scenario crossfire. Bean, can you get that terminal going?"

"Sure thing, bo— I mean, Sculpt."

"Right. Once you're logged in, use my clearance to synchronise all the PipBucks of the residents. Not the scientists, we don't want to warn them."

"Um, why?"

"If we're all synced up, it means that we all have access to each other to send warnings or an all clear. But more crucially, it means that anypony can be tracked at any time on the same PipBuck transmit signal."

"Again, why?"

"Proof, Bean! I don't want any rumours floating. The residents can watch our

positions on their Eyes Forward Sparkles and know we didn't do any killing or anything, they'll have our records on their PipBucks."

"Fine, fine. It'll be faster if I just make every PipBuck that enters signal range do it."

"Whatever it takes, Bean. Thank you."

Casting my PipBuck light around, I could see the terminal he had used. A brief inspection (banging my hoof on the casing) revealed it to be long dead. I pilfered the drawers below it, finding little but a few old books and massive folders of papers. A multi-tool sat at the back end. I'd seen one before, for working with nuts, bolts, and washers. Grabbing it in my mouth, I added it to my saddlebag before, without really thinking, adding the two books as well. We were still trying to loot things after all, and it was Protégé we had to please.

Taking the time to hunt around, my PipBuck cast illumination over a few classroom tables. I wondered if foals came here to learn about the world they had left; perhaps a Stable version of a field trip? Through the forest, into the past? The thought was oddly alike with how this two year job with Fillydelphia worked. Out of the slave pits and across the wastes before being thrown into a Stable. Yet somehow, I didn't feel like I had left Fillydelphia at all. The slavers were still there, always watching the only way out, to get us back in the wagons.

The ponies on my recording continued to mutter about who was where and how safe they were. Yet, as I trotted into this 'memorial', my light shone off of various glass objects in, casting a glow over the wall to my right. With this, I witnessed something entirely new.

Art.

For the first time in my life, I witnessed art.

Arrayed along the walls; framed paintings, pictures, photos, sketches...

With my mouth agape, every sense seemed to deaden as I trotted down the wall. Contrasted against the horrid grey and darkness, I now saw colour, shape, and form! Ponies, drawn beautifully with a myriad of expressions, clustered in groups of lavishly detailed singular portraits. This was one place of beauty within the void, and I realised that these had been drawn by ponies before the balefire. One held green fields that glittered in the sun, and pegasi roamed freely beside earth ponies and unicorns. It had a small town made of thatchwork roofs and white constructs sprung up in a valley between hills. A huge circular town hall marked the centre. Without even having to think, I knew that if I were alive then, I would want to live there. In that place of meadows, rivers, and beautiful multicoloured tents that made up-what was it? A market? I doubted I'd be very good at haggling. Ponies only ever told me what I was to give them, not the other way around.

There were other huge vistas of cities. One was obviously Manehattan, another Fillydelphia, and the last, shifting to nature, displayed a dark forest. Trotting from each to each, it made the artist in me envious. Dragging my sketchbook from my saddlebag, I flicked through images that paled in comparison to these masterworks. I'd never encountered anypony else's proper drawings before.

Maddeningly trying to work out how they'd gotten the light to look like that or how they got such consistent shapes, my eyes flicked from painting to drawing to even photo. Even beside my fear of the Stable, while clutching my little scrawled journal close, I felt a little fear that I'd never be as good as all this.

Everything I drew came from the heart, but it just felt like what I imagined in my mind was never what really came out. Did they feel the same way at a higher level? Was I the only

pony artist who felt that way? I wanted to meet them, ask them a thousand questions on how their art was so beautiful, so well formed so...

...free.

But despite my envy, I could not hide a small smile creeping across my face as I witnessed the work they had left behind for ponies like me to find. One had the Goddesses, Celestia and Luna, arcing around one another in the twilight sky. The next, multiple pegasi wearing identical blue and yellow costumes, soaring in perfect formation around cloud buildings. Even through my fleece, I felt a little twitch on either side of my torso at the wondrous sensation of limitless freedom before me. So much so that I almost tripped over a display case.

Its glass was long dusty, but utterly preserved. About half a dozen of them filled the middle of the room. Regaining my posture, I wiped the dust away with a hoof, staring inside. Lots of little cards filled with tiny writing taunted me, but there were racks of medallions and colourful ribbons, like amulets. They were perfectly preserved, glinting in my PipBuck's light as I saw gold encrusted battleponies embedded on them. One particularly fancy one had the Sun and Moon symbol while a great many bore the symbol of a giant apple, carved from jade crystal and bound with red ribbon.

Standing up with my front hooves pressed against the glass, I could not deny a part of me wanted them. They were so pretty. That blue one would go really nice for Glimmer to thank her! Oh, and that one with the ruby, I was sure the mare would enjoy it. I could get little ones for all of the ponies who had helped me! These things were jewellery right?

Unfortunately, the glass was too thick for my weedy front hooves to lift or move. Banging my BB gun against it, I realised, would break my teeth long before it shattered. A small lock was at the side, but I had nothing to deal with it. Returning to the desk, I hunted around the back of its cupboard door, but found nothing much. Just some old stained mane gel, a bunch of bobby pins to hold up one's mane, and a screwdriver for no apparent reason.

Wait...

Grinning, things finally clicked in my head, like a lock coming open. Bending forward, I picked up the screwdriver. I knew what to do with it to get it open!

"Letsh she hat lock!"

Approximately forty five seconds of efforts later, I realised that banging the screwdriver's handle off the lock was not going to work. Nor was trying to lever the length through the arched metal of the padlock. These things were useless!

Yet even as I fumbled, there came yet another '*thnk!*' from behind me in the orchard.

My voice's pitch broke, and I dove behind the memorial case with yelp. Whipping my head around to the doorway, I saw a blackened shape standing in it; the tree behind it shaking. Whimpering, I tried to just simply hide with my back to the case, hooves pressed to either side of me to be as flat against the case as I could. It made no sound, no smell, no presence. Yet somehow I knew it was coming into the room.

My hooves skittered on my PipBuck, trying to turn off the light, but instead it began to project furious static, blocking the recording! The closer it came, the louder the static got. It was louder than it had ever been, shrieking and rasping no matter how hard I buried the speaker to my belly to deaden it.

I heard the lock of the case I was hiding behind clink, as though somepony were testing it to make sure it were closed. My PipBuck light finally died, plunging me into pitch black where I couldn't even see my own body beneath me.

A background ambience, like an unsettling a feeling in the air, got thicker, as though the atmosphere itself was moving and condensing as the static got louder. It had to be coming around the case! Willing my terrified and frozen limbs to function, I scooted away down the other side of the long case, past the back door of the room and rolled into the next line of displays. I just managed to stifle my whimper, as my wings ached at the ground contact from the roll. The electronic drone from my PipBuck dropped a little as I put distance between me and... and *that*. Only now did I feel the wetness from my eyes dripping all over my face. Wiping my eyes with a hoof, I curled up under the case as best I could.

It must have been only a minute, but it felt like hours as the warped sound grew and faded intermittently along with the occasional sound of something in the room moving or being adjusted. I risked a look out.

There it was, by the desk. Pony shaped, but indistinct, more like a gap in the darkness in the shape of one. I couldn't focus on the outline this time; it was as though my vision slid right off it.

Without so much as another sound, it simply seemed to fade. A moment later, I heard the trees being struck again, then nothing.

It took me a good five minutes to build the courage to even step outside from under the case again. Limping back across, feeling every ache I'd been carrying, I rubbed my tender back and looked around before one thing caught my eye. Or rather, an absence did.

Every single one of the medallions was gone.

Very easily, it struck me. It had heard me attempting to steal them, so it had taken them. To protect them from the would be thief. I had offended the past; now it was trying to stop me doing more! My mind raced, was it coming back? When it got its valuables to safety would it return to deal with me?

A whole new respect for care of the past in here overtook me. I couldn't take *anything*. Back in the canteen, I had stolen from the food locker. I'd found it looking around there. In the forest room, I'd disturbed the apples it must have believed were still in the basket, so it had begun bucking trees and searching for me. Now it was protecting the jewellery...

Never in my life, not even in the moment of realisation that I had failed in my run for the Wall. Not even under The Master. Not even when I had been locked in the rad-chamber by the Magister. Not *ever* had my heart felt so cold and tight with anxiety and fear.

I wanted out.

Unwilling to spend my time near the door, I moved deeper into the Memorial Room. The far wall would do for now, yes, nice and safe away from where that monster had gone. Artwork softened my terror as I passed a portrait of six mares, the same six I'd seen everywhere. Wait, if they were there, that meant...

Yup. *She* was too. Grinning like a mad pony off of the portrait at me. If I ever learned to colour pictures, one thing I knew was there would *never* be any pink in them.

Sorry, Glimmer, some things are just that important.

I watched her eyes carefully as I made my way past from the right, confirming that they didn't move. Perhaps I could finally begin to believe she wasn't out to get me. Pinkie had her front two hooves on the front of the painting, as though she was standing up on something. In fact, she was in *front* of the painting. Staggering backwards into the case, my eyes locked on her as Pinkie emerged from *out* of the painting like a lifelike pony!

Only after I saw she wasn't moving did I see some joker had continued the painting of her front hooves over the frame. Well, I didn't find it funny.

Turning away from her (mostly, I checked a couple of times more, just to be sure) I continued to move toward the far end. Slowly being revealed by my PipBuck, I found the magnum opus of the room.

The Memorial Wall.

I didn't need to be a historian to know it. Long dead wreaths lay across the floor before a marble shrine. Candles sat unused on tall bronze sticks, while upon the shrine itself was everything that mattered.

Old toys, pieces of jewellery, crude foal drawings, and even small clocks. But more than anything, photographs. Layers and layers of them all across the wall. Each held a scrawled message on the wall or over the photo itself. I felt so small before this monumental image of what the Stable residents had lost. Beautiful mares laughing with their bucks. Little "baby's first photo" images. Military snapshots. Personal photos. Pictures that were simply awful but obviously used because they were all that was left. Even pets. I saw a dog, rabbit, and even a red coloured balefire phoenix. Had they normally been red before the war? For some, there were only written notes, many with a little cutie mark sketched on them. A photo frame, three little sparks of magic, clouds, a chocolate bar...

Ponies back then had such nice cutie marks.

I felt my hind quarters bump onto the floor. The shrine rose easily four times my height, maybe more, right to the top of the room and covering the entire end wall. Individual candles had once been lit here in little holders all across the marble steps leading up to the wall itself. Every square inch was covered in something between the embedded marble pillars upon the smooth rock wall.

Everypony upon this wall had died in the balefire.

Little tears began dripping. I tried wiping them, but it was no use. They just kept coming. I didn't feel horror, no. Instead, there was just a slow, haunting, and lingering sense of tragedy at seeing the personal impact of the event I had to live in the aftermath of. Two hundred years later, and we were still feeling the shockwaves.

It only felt right. Digging into a pocket, I placed the little bell from the scooter on one of the marble steps beside a pretty looking red candle, similar to the scooter. I hoped the foal would appreciate it. That, and the thing that was haunting this place on its own agenda. Part of me hoped that this one little act might relieve some of the guilt of having tried to steal their most valued possessions.

Hearing the recorder remain silent but for the ambience of their break and meaningless chatter, I just sat there for a while, staring at each picture in turn trying to guess their names. Trying to not think that every single one of them had died in the baleful fire that consumed their world, while these lucky few were trapped down here safely.

"I'm so sorry..."

"OH SHIT!"

Jumping almost my entire height off the ground in shock at the recorder restarting, my legs whirled uselessly, trying to run in mid air before I collapsed to the ground in a heap.

"Bean! Get everypony moving!"

"What's wr—"

"FUCKING MOVE!"

Masses of sounds were erupting from the Memorial Room. Ponies were shouting, swearing and screaming in panic. Guns were being loaded. I heard safeties click and hooves clatter.

"They- I can't believe it!"

"What are they doing!?"

"Keep moving, get out before—"

An electronic voice crackled through the recording.

"PipBuck signal detected. Depressurisation routine active."

Screaming of my own right, I hurled myself towards the back door, seeing it open normally. Recorder or not, those words were too fresh in my mind.

"EVERYPONY RUN!"

I could only assume they had rushed for the back door by the way their hooves kept clattering on metal and not dirt. The horrifying sound of the door slamming shut behind them echoed loud enough to send me careening into a wall. My head slammed on a metal pillar, sending white spots all over my vision, my balance reeling from my damage ear.

"Everypony got out?"

"Just! Princesses fucking backsides. Sculpt, what was that?!"

"I don't know! Keep moving! I saw on the terminal, that's activated everywhere!"

"They're trying to kill us! I... I don't know, but—"

"BUT WHAT!?"

"It's Stable wide! Everywhere but the science levels, if we use our PipBucks it locks down and kills us!"

"No, Sculpt! We sent all the residents to their rooms!"

"Oh no... what have they done?"

I pushed myself further from the door into the dark corridor as their galloping took on a pace I could never match. It wasn't needed. Suddenly the floor wasn't there, and I roughly fell down the next flight of stairs. My knees and head got scuffed and banged, but through some minor miracle I landed at the bottom in such a way that I could unsteadily gallop on. Panic drove me. I could hear it in my ghostly companions' voices. Screams for families were audible as it became a mad rush for the living quarters. Half-falling dizzily and half-leaping and galloping, I descended to the next level and rushed out into a massive set of corridors. Dozens of rooms passed by me, undoubtedly the living areas. Each had a window and one hard closed door.

The screaming started.

I had found the residents.

"Sweet Celestia, they're trapped!"

"Get them out! GET THEM OUT!"

"The doors are jammed! Oh fuck, I'm sorry!"

"PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine... active."

"HELP! TH-THE AIR!"

"NO!!"

They were in their rooms, every one of them, their huddled amongst crumbled jumpsuits. Frozen in time, and held by motionless environments, they were lying upon their beds or collapsed neat windows. As I saw them, I heard the banging of dozens of ponies on glass through the PipBuck. I galloped madly forward, tripping over masses of bags, trolleys and laundry dropped and overturned in the blind panic.

"MY SONS ARE IN THERE!"

"PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine... active."

"Somepony do something! Fuck, DO SOMETHING!"

Three gunshots rang out sudden and loud.

A windowpane before me bore three bullet-marks on it. The glass hadn't broken. Behind it lay one small skeleton near a cot, with a larger one nearer the window, it's dented PipBuck was still sparking blue light over them both.

"Nopony use your PipBucks! Take them off!"

"We can't! They took all the tools!"

"PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine... active."

Every skeleton had a thick PipBuck around their hoof. I saw a giant bench bent and strewn across the corridor.

"Everypony, grab that bench! Ready? Three, two, one, HIT!"

A dull *thunk* set a wash of static in the recording.

"Again! Three, two, one, HIT!"

Another one, louder, accompanied by the screaming of somepony nearby.

Then finally, the sound of glass cracking.

The window had been indented and bore a long crack, but the bench had also broken at one end. Stumbling over it, I kept going down the long corridor, window after window bearing the horrors within. The screaming never stopped as pony after pony banged on the windows and hollered. Many of the team I was following were crying as they shouted back. Shouts of love or regret. An entire Stable dying around me, yet, here in the far flung future, I was powerless to help them.

"I'm sorry!"

"PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine... active."

Above the chorus of agony through the PipBuck, I screamed.

"I'M SORRY!"

Tears fell from my face as I turned entirely around, seeing nothing but over a dozen unbreakable windows on either side with the murdered ponies within. What had those idiots done? What was worth so much that it was worth killing so many innocents over? Filled with an anger I never could have imagined, I galloped onward, even as I heard Sculpt.

"Those bastards! They're going to pay! They're going to fucking pay! I'm going in there!"

My own hooves matched Sculpt's step for step as we both hurdled the same wreckage and slid under the same fallen beams. We heard the same mare on our right, her skeleton still oddly propped on the window. We both saw the buck on our left relentlessly hammering at the window with his shotgun to save his wife. His skeleton lay around the weapon on the floor. We galloped together, past and future, to discover the same truth. To discover *why*.

Within the recording, I heard the door at the end of the corridor closing, as the voice droned once more.

"PipBuck signals detected. Depressurisation routine... active."

Sculpt's gasp of fear matched my own in shock, realisation of why the armed team were dead in this corridor too. The recording became hazy, distorted, and warped. Sculpt's breathing was all I heard as sound died out, as we both ran through the door that led to the science areas, and I staggered through the door he had been running to get below before it closed.

His ragged breath was filled with barely contained fury, before there came the sound of

him collapsing on the floor. Of him crying. I lay down, wishing I could somehow help the poor buck having just witnessed everything he had tried to save fall out from under him.

"This won't go unpaid. To any who hear this in the future, this was our failure. The moment we became lost in the dark. My family and friends lie dead not feet away from me. But know this! I will not let what they have done go without incident. Whatever they were doing, it ends now, even if it kills me. Justification be damned. Secrets and lies were never what ponies were meant to have. The Ministries brought these dark days upon us even before the bombs dropped. I've lost... I've lost everyone."

His composure broke, before his voice took a steely, savage turn.

"They will pay..."

The recording clicked...

...and ended.

I lay beside the door for some time, just trying to calm down. It wasn't entirely possible, as my chest heaved and my dry breath stuttered under snuffles. My chest was burning, enough that I downed my RadAway as a precaution. Mercifully, yet horribly, the burning feeling died down. How long had I been down here that my irradiated lungs were acting up again on their own with no radiation?

Now ahead of me lay more stairs, angling down ever deeper. What was this, a fifth floor? I felt a million miles from anypony else, from Fillydelphia and from the clouds. Trotting steadily and slowly, I moved into the last depths of the Stable. There was light here, but not from any panels above. Terminals littered every room that I passed by, each active as they cast little islands of green light in either small rooms or the bigger, widened hallway that I was entering. Smashed chalkboards and broken vats had smothered the floor in shards of ceramic or almost solid, but still sticky, liquids. Feeling my hooves needing tugged up from some of it to the floor in places, I prayed this wasn't anything toxic.

Clearly, these were the science levels. All my imaginations of some giant mad laboratory were broken as I found little more than offices and shared work tables, haphazardly fitted into a Stable not originally intended to fit a science team. This might have once been extra living areas. The larger room up ahead may have been a storage area, perhaps? Canterng from green light to green light, I hopped between illuminated islands as I made my way in.

I wasn't even at the main room up ahead when I began finding the corpses.

Strewn over tables or collapsed in doorways, each dusty skeleton was surrounded by clear bullet-holes. Whimpering, I staggered away from them into a side room, only to find one that had hid behind her desk. An image of a foal in a picture frame lay on its side, scarred by a passing round. The terminal flickered loyally, awaiting input that I could never give. I took a long and slow breath, trying not to get overwhelmed, before cantering out into the hallway again. Little brass shells at my hooves pinged and skittered away when I moved past. I quickly galloped on, closing my eyes as I saw more and more; an unending cycle of remains, all of them trying to move the same way I had done before being brought down.

Reaching the main room, I finally opened my eyes and—

My hooves thankfully got to my mouth before the scream emerged.

It was in there, moving idly between desks in front of a series of odd machines and copper constructs. Unable to focus, I could only see the vague presence of the haunting

spectre floating around and over the middle of the room. The 'head' cast itself around to each glow of green light before making its way toward me.

I had nowhere to go.

Crouching behind one of the desks, apologising constantly under my breath as I was forced to move a skeleton out of the place it too had tried to hide in, I shivered at its passing. The static had stopped once the recording ceased, mercifully giving me silence to hide.

Unfortunately, it meant I had no way to track it. Unable to constrain my curiosity, my head, goggles firmly on, peeked out. Was it coming any close-YES IT WAS!

I pulled myself back sharply, it had only been a few feet away, that head turning quickly as I'd made my move. A low dirging ambience began to soundlessly make my head stuffy and my ear ache as I *felt* it wash over the desk above me. My goggles were steaming up. The urge to scream, to holler and beg for mercy was becoming too much.

Finally, it was over. The pressure in the air seemed to pass away. Shaking so much my loose tooth was chattering painfully, I raised my head over the desk. How had it not seen me? Did it just not care?

It was moving away. Down another passageway, I saw the contrails of darkness shifting ever darker through a terminal's distant glow. But upon the desk was something new.

Another recorder.

It was different, more modern (as best as I could identify, which pretty much involved how shiny it was) and bore the same connections for my PipBuck. Ejecting the last one, I placed it within my saddlebag and clicked the next into place. I was beginning to suspect it wanted me to hear these. Was I the little future ghost sneaking around to its perception as much as it was to me? How did ghosts see? Was it as afraid of me as I was of it?

Click!

"Personal journal of Lead Arcane Scientist Night Breeze, starting day one. I, apologise, if this is a little breathless. We just—"

A dull *thoom* echoed in the background, ponies screamed and a great amount of commotion sounded in the recording. Wandering from my hiding spot, I entered the main room, surrounded by the clustered groups of pony remains.

"Well, that was Fillydelphia. It's gone now. We barely got in here on time. Technically we didn't have a pass, but we rushed up and the Overmare let us in. A kind soul if there ever was one. Now we've got to start developing ways that this Stable could support us all."

She paused. Her voice sounded authoritative, even if terrified; the air of somepony used to getting her way was obvious. If she'd told me to do something, I'd probably have leapt to it.

"Sorry, this is just- I'm trying to give myself things to do. Trying not to think about what's going on outside. The very thing we tried to prevent. I tried to get Ministry Hub Leader Aurora Star down here, but we couldn't find her! I... I think she was still in the city. But right now we need to get set up in here and get back to work. She left very explicit instructions in the event we got separated. I am to make this Stable into a place of hope however I can. Create arcane technologies that we could reconstruct the world when we open. Aurora's theory of stored memory will be my first aim, as will the continuation of my own research into giving greater natural immunity. We will be ready for when the time comes to confront the wastes in a hundred years. I should go."

The recording seemed to end, yet the PipBuck kept playing.

I heard something, vaguely, like a pitter patter of hooves. Squeaking, I whirled, expecting to look right into dead eyes. But all I saw was an empty science chamber around me. Perhaps just that thing moving around again? I wasn't disturbing anything!

Cantering further in to get more cover, I moved amongst the workbenches in the high room. Little orbs rested on them, most grey and dead. A few shone dimly of all colours in the spectrum. Occasionally, some glowed as bright as my PipBuck with incandescent swirling power within. I didn't dare touch them. I didn't need any more ghostly visits. My mind *seemed* settled, but I could feel I was on a knife edge. That all it would take was one thing to push me over the edge into a blind horror of what was going on around me. Skeletons: dead places, ponies killing ponies over something I didn't know. I was one realisation away from something awful, that I knew for sure. Without the thought of Glimmer and Brim searching amongst these levels somewhere, I may have been lost to the darkness some time ago.

"Right, day seven, I think. I've had to make some adjustments in this place. For one, I'm now the Overmare. A regrettable decision, but frankly I had to. She was lovely, but incompetent. Allocated the wrong resources, and made shifts so inefficient that the Stable would barely last twenty years, never mind a century. What was Scootaloo thinking when she sent the Overmare invite to her? We held a vote, with the greater scientists and many of the more intelligent Stable residents voting for me. Some may say it was a rigged vote. I just call it a confident one. I've taken control of the Stable systems and transferred PipBuck control to the scientists. We helped invent the things before some of us moved to the Ministry, so why not? The theories we brought are adapting well. So long as those residents don't get in our way we'll be ready to combat the wastes decades ahead of schedule, it'll give us time to get used to using this stuff. Got to go."

The audio seemed to cut again. Presumably she kept her diaries all on one recorder.

While listening, I trotted over to the walls, looking in on experiments set up in adjoining rooms through interior windows. The overall shape of the Stable was beginning to form in my mind. Multiple levels, each with one big room and a ton of adjoined spaces surrounded by corridors and peripheral facilities. The top level had the atrium, next was the schoolhouse, then the apple trees, and now this.

Where was Glimmer? She would understand what all of this was. I just wanted to find her and get out. Get back to Filly, start planning the escape. All this was just a distraction, a meaningless job that would never change my life other than to terrify me. At most, I wondered if anything in here might help us escape. Perhaps there was some sort of invisibility spell? Something to sneak by the guards into the wastes with no problems!

Yet around me there was no such immediately obvious thing. The giant machine I trotted past seemed to hold little trays meant for cupcakes, like a baking tray? Was that what my old master called them? A quick size comparison told me that they were the same shape as the orbs I had just seen.

"Week three. Research continues well. The memory transference process is becoming a little tough. No doubt this is the problem Aurora spoke of. Apparently Twilight Sparkle herself proclaimed it to be impossible without an external power source large enough to... well, I don't know. I'm finding the same problem. We can create loops temporarily, even residual talent, but nothing like what Aurora proposed last year. But I will make this work. Memories have power. That's what it all revolves around. The past can teach

use and empower us as we remember the important times and elements of it. That's what she told us, over and over. Memories. Hold. Power. What is it that drives a pony forward? What makes you who you are? It's the experiences you had. But what if we could play around with that? Ergh, I'm having to withhold the information from the residents. Simple reason, really. Chief Aurora Star told me that the Ministry had found evidence of a Zebra informer amongst the Ministry of Wartime Technology in Fillydelphia, and many of the Stable residents worked there. As such, all research is now withheld only to those ponies working on it and myself. Regardless of what the residents think, I'm not going to release information. Aurora Star died trying to protect our work. I won't disobey her last request to me before we parted. All the same, those residents are getting restless. That paranoid moron, Sculpt, he wants a recorded meeting about all this. I won't endanger our way of life to satisfy pointless curiosity. This is sensitive work. We don't need ponies without our intentions seeing it. Who knows what they might make of what we're doing here?"

The 'Clink' of something touching metal came from behind me.

Spinning on the spot, I whirled to look behind me. Behind the tabled, I saw a wheeled terminal trolley gently rolled to a stop. My blood froze, and I looked around; I could see nothing. No static came from the PipBuck.

This wasn't good. Cantering nearer to the wall, I slid behind the huge machine. A way out. I needed a way out of this room! Glancing out and around, my eyes fell on a scaffold staircase haphazardly built to the balcony, lit in the pitch black by three nearby terminals. It led to another room at the far end up one level, also only visible from the terminal inside it, casting a haze through the window. If I could only get in there, it had less ways to have to look for anything coming. I could bunker down for a bit.

Lowering to the ground, I felt a sensation that I was not only being watched. My head flicked around at the drifting movement I sensed. No, definitely more than watched.

I was being hunted.

Calling on every ounce of stealth I had, I cancelled the recording and turned off my light before doubling back. If they had seen my light (and of course they would have) then they may not expect me to move backwards. Did ghosts think like that?

Heart in my mouth, I began the slow creep forward in the dark. Only little islands of light guided my way, beacons that I could not enter for fear of being noticed. I had to stay in the dark. The same dark that was slowly scaring me witless. Gently pushing a seat aside, sneaking below a desk and crawling between the struts of a scaffold construct, I gingerly made my way to the stairs from the other side. Checking every angle, I saw nothing. I cursed my ear, if only I could hear properly!

Hoof by hoof, I began to move up the stairs, hoping against hope that none of them would creak or flex. My eyes scanned the room below as I moved up and out of it. Each desk lit by the active terminals revealed nothing. Was it just my imagin-

A shadow passed by the end of one desk.

The panic rose inside me. Something was definitely down there, where I'd just been. Quickening my pace, I cantered off the stairs, every little creak and rattle feeling like a gunshot to give me away. As soon as I was able, I quickly headed into the room. Higher level equipment surrounded me, filled with fancier materials that shone from the terminal's light. Glancing at the screen, I saw an old stain across it.

Blood...

Hooves clamped over my mouth to contain the shriek, I back-pedalled away from it, falling over the edge of a bed and landing on my PipBuck. Hard. The recorder wailed at the disturbance, fast forwarding madly until I finally hoofed it to try and make it stop! Instead, it merely resumed. Now matter what I hit, it wouldn't stop.

"Urgh, week five. You have to wonder why the residents get so worked up and paranoid. What do they think we're working on in here? Weapons?"

Grabbing the musty blanket from the bed, I wrapped the PipBuck and my leg in a shred of it, trying to dull the sound. I could hear it, but nopony else could. Shivering, I pressed against the bed and cradled myself with my front hooves. It was all beginning to catch up, the sheer tragedy that had happened in this place. The horrid intentions of a few ponies dooming many others.

"Things are starting to heat up. Personally, I'm a little scared. The residents have gone quiet. I've ordered the others to stand watch and only go out if they need to. Some of them asked if we should take guns. I refused. No need of them, we are scientists, not soldiers. We—"

"Overmare! Overmare!"

"What is it? I'm—"

"Slinky Spot spotted the residents on the cameras! You-you need to see this!"

Shuffling and running sounds passed through the recorder as the Overmare apparently forgot to turn it off. I heard the noises of the same creaky stairs I had come up. Sneaking forward and peering over the window lip, my eyes traced them all the way to the bank of monitors I saw on the far side still sparking away.

"What the..."

"They have guns, Overmare. They're coming this way!"

"Get ready to lock down all doors, Spot. Don't worry, I'm sure they're just trying to make a statement. Not the best way, but even Sculpt isn't that insane to actually attack us. We're all ponies."

"Ma'am! Nutshell Cracker's still out there, he was going off shift! They're-they're going to run into him!"

"Oh no..."

I heard familiar sounds through the recording from the monitors the Overmare was watching.

"Hey, what are you lot doing?!"

It was the same scientist they'd locked in the storage room.

"Shit! Grab him!"

"Wait, what? Get off me! GET OFF!"

The sound of cans and tins falling rattled across the speaker, making me wince and hold my ear.

"He might warn them! Gloomy! Take out that camera before they spot us! Somepony grab him! Hold him down!"

There was a single gunshot.

Static washed in as the screen obviously went dead.

"Th-they killed him..."

No, they didn't!

"I... how could they, I..."

"Overmare? What do we do?!"

"I... I..."

"Overmare!"

"T-track their PipBucks on the security grid. If they come anywhere past the Memorial Room, set the Stable commands to lock their position in and vent the room."

"WHAT!?"

"They're coming to kill us, Spot! It's a last resort if they don't think better of this or we see evidence elsewhere. Just-just stay calm... oh Equestria..."

Everything was beginning to fall into a horrible place.

"Overmare! They're in the Memorial Room. They've just sent out a message to get everypony into their own rooms. That-that means they're coming right here, Ma'am. Doesn't it?"

"It does, Spot. I... I can't believe this. We're not doing anything but peaceful research in here! Why couldn't they just calm down and trust us?! It's just-just procedure to keep it secret in time of war! I... I never thought..."

"Overmare, they're about to move..."

"Out of the way, I'll send the command myself. Get me the records, track only PipBuck codes from those we've seen with guns."

There was some playing around and sounds of leafing sheets.

"I'm ready."

"They're about to move!"

"Oh Equestria... forgive me for this."

A hoof struck a button. Whining turbines sounded in the background. A science pony was crying in the background.

"PipBuck signal detected... Memorial Room. Depressurisation routine... active."

"It's done..."

"PipBuck signal detected... Living Chamber C5. Depressurisation routine... active."

"WHAT!?"

"It's activating on the living chambers! It just sealed Runner Bean's family!"

"What!? No!"

"PipBuck signal detected... Living Chamber G12. Depressurisation routine... active."

"Stop it! I... what's going on!?"

"I can't! It's like they've synced up all the PipBucks in the entire Stable!"

"PipBuck signal detected... Living Chamber A4. Depressurisation routine... active."

"PipBuck signal detected... Living Chamber E1. Depressurisation routine... active."

"PipBuck signal detected... Living Chamber A3. Depressurisation routine... active."

"By Celestia... what have we done?"

Living chamber after living chamber, it reeled through them all. The Ministry ponies sat in shocked silence. Curling up on the Overmare's bed and stuffing my face in the covers to stifle my whimpers, I finally felt the weight of the entire situation coming down on my shoulders. As the sequence finally ended, the scientists mutely tried to come to terms with it.

"It... it was an accident!"

"W-we can repopulate or..."

"Hey! What are you doing down—"

"You killed everypony!"

The furious rattle of an automatic weapon tore across the recording.

"He's got a gun! Sculpt! Please! Don't!"

Sculpt's voice was distant, but wracked with horror, sadness and fury.

"You! Killed! Everypony! All to safeguard your own sick designs or whatever you needed to hide from us! I won't let you do it! I WON'T LET YOU!"

Gunshot after gunshot. Screams, panic, begging, and rage mixed in one long cacophony of violence through the PipBuck. The Overmare had run. I heard the clacking steps as she retreated up here. Gunfire below kept track of Sculpt's rampage through the science areas. The Overmare's desperate breathing was close to the recorder. Eventually, I heard the stairwell again. Sculpt must have come up here directly.

"And you, telling me it was all fine! But all along you had the Stable primed to kill us!"

"I didn't! It was a mistake! The PipBucks were... they were... you were coming to kill us with guns!"

"We were doing no such thing! You liar! Your secrets and lies have killed my entire Stable! The last Overmare should never have let you in!"

"Everything we have down here is peaceful! Why can't you see that? Secrecy is just procedure! Look around!"

"I just witnessed my family die, all my friends and their loved ones, and you try to tell me that is procedure!? I... I just... it was YOU!"

His weapon roared. Sculpt screamed, that fatherly tone lost to incoherent grief at the loss of everypony he knew. I knew without a doubt the Overmare was dead. Only Sculpt's breathing took over, eventually succumbing to tears before the entire recording cut.

Nothing had ever been wrong. Not once.

"Wonderfully tragic... isn't it, filly?"

Every inch of my body froze.

"Even in a place with nothing wrong, ponies still find a way to let the horrors take place."

Daring to turn my face from the wet covers, I saw him.

He was sat in the Overmare's chair, his magic holding various trinkets around him as his slave knife sharpened itself on a little whetstone.

"Behind closed doors, locked in the dark, the place ponies were never meant to be in. Just as in the tale of Nightmare Moon, they succumbed to fear and hate. There never was anything wrong in this Stable. No flaw, no experiments, and plenty of supplies. More than usual, in fact. Add in a full team of Arcane scientists? Well, it seemed so perfect, but ponies were not meant to live in the dark, hidden from the light of Celestia's sun or the majesty of Luna's moon."

He advanced, flowing in the dark. Shadows twisted around his horn as the dark wreathed and became a part of him. Barb didn't so much trot as just drift. His long dark mane idly mixed with the black aura around him. Suddenly I saw why he kept it long and his clothing ragged. It meshed into his magical shadows to give the impression of an ethereal foe in dark places.

"In fact, this Stable is the perfect little analogy of the war itself, you know? Two sides, both afraid of the other, unwilling to see the other's viewpoint and terrified of what they might do. Fear driving their emotions to extremes, to do the things they would never dream of! To take steps they do not fully understand the consequences of, and then whimper and beg for salvation when it all comes crashing down around them."

He stopped, grinning that freakishly white smile at me in the darkness.

"Trapped in the dark, we reveal the worst qualities we have, so some say. Just as Nightmare Moon became the monster she was, do ponies living without freedom eventually give way to their inner demons. In the same way that the wasteland and cloud cover make sadistic bastards like me, this Stable created the paranoid division of sides. And you can see the aftermath right here. Their own little version of the war that ended in the exact same way. Both sides, all gone."

My voice felt miniscule against it all. "It's horrible..."

Barb chuckled, his form solidifying as he trotted closer to me, deactivating whatever spell had cloaked him in darkness. His hoof pulled me from the bed, almost like a friend pointing out a vista, he waved his hoof before him.

"Now we have but a lovely residence where the dark and memories come together! I would make it my home, if I could. This is a wonderful little office up here, the place where it ended."

"But, how-how long..." My voice whimpered, breaking and becoming shrill with fear. I began backpedalling, falling off the bed to try and stay away from Barb. His magic merely pulled me back in.

"Oh, since I saw you come into this floor with your little night light on. See, being able to move stuff around with your horn to make somepony think you're behind them is a *wonderful* talent. Something you pegasi could never do in the art of stealth, for all that light-hoofed nature. You enjoy the trip down here as much as I did?"

No. Without a word I turned to gallop away, before finding the door rapidly shutting ahead of me. Shadows around Barb's horn deepened, that stealthy magic aura of his affecting all it needed to in order to keep me in.

"Now don't run yet, little filly. We're still waiting for my compatriots to get back. My elite. The Shades. The betrayer had his Big Four, but I have the Shades. Always preferred to have something won before I've even started, y'see? They've been working their magic, literally, all around this place to find all its little secrets, trinkets, and belongings. You may have run into them on your way? This is their training, you see. Only so much you can do in the Mall. Brimstone's more direct methods may have worked out in the wastes, but my plans for Fillydelphia? Well, they need a little more subtlety. Which reminds me of your role in all this..."

Still reeling from the tragedy of the Stable, I barely even noticed the change in subject until it became more obvious.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, filly. Now once they're back, then we'll see about what we're going to do with you, my little dealbreaker."

He stuck to his word! I hadn't brought him anything from the crater!

"I... I tried! I really did! A mine, a blue mine, I picked it up for you but—"

"Buuuut?"

"...I had to use it."

Barb chuckled, the sound coming from all directions as he trotted to the side.

"A mine. Singular. Oh now, aren't you proud?"

He was so calm. No direct threats, just an honest word on what he would do, and the mindset to do it. More than Brimstone's rage, more than every raider's insanity, that coldness to simply do bad things terrified me to the absolute core.

"I'm no help to you, please! I won't tell anyone what you're planning!"

"Frankly, filly, I don't trust you on that. Look at you, down here alone with me and you can hardly hold the piss in you. If Shackles questioned you, do you really mean to tell me that you'd stay silent?"

Barb merely laughed under his breath at my despondent expression. He had me there.

"Now come on filly, my students are returning."

I was dragged to the main science floor again. Confused, I glanced around after being thrown in the middle of the room. What students? Where were-

Oh.

One by one, they slid from shadows. Some more effectively than others. Two of them I heard coming in while some were almost as silent as Barb. The Shades. Raider stealth experts, it seemed. Among peers, I felt outclassed. Each was clad in darker clothing, with dyed manes and coats of dark blues and greens.

"What we have here, my students, is a little filly who was hired to help us. I promised him induction to our group in return for some materials acquirement."

"I didn't—"

A raider bucked me across the side of the face. Choking on my scream, I fell, clutching my snout. Drips of blood landed on my hooves.

"Silence when the boss is talking!"

Barb just watched the display with a proud look. Unlike Sculpt, he seemed to love the word 'boss'.

"Now, this little filly didn't come through. He knows our plans and suddenly decided not to appreciate my offer. Deciding that apparently, his chances for escape lie better with the traitor."

A chorus of seething hatred echoed from the group around me. In the darkness it was hard to count. Five, perhaps? Trembling, I kept my head down on the ground, trying to stifle my bleeding nose with a hoof.

"I'm not unwilling to permit him another chance, you see. However, like any of the Shades, he cannot go unpunished. Back in the Mall, we would be stopped. But for once, here, we have an opportunity to dispense raider code properly."

Barb lowered himself to me, his thin eyes boring into my skull.

"You may see me do little, but that's the point, filly. I'm not like *him*. I don't need bluster, example, and visual threat. Oh no. No shadow is safe for you anymore. I do my work out of sight, find others to accomplish my ends, or even step in myself if needs be. Oh, you probably think I'm just a bully, picking on those I can't go for. Just remember to ask the traitor about the Massacre at Whitetail someday. *Fear me* filly. Better than being against me. You get punished, as you shall be by my own students. As such, I decree—"

He was interrupted before he could finish, or rather was drowned out. The entire Stable shook, and I felt the rush of air blow past us. The sharp rumble of an explosion came rippling down the dark passageways, and distant voices could be heard.

The sound had come from a few levels above, I thought, a dull sound. Terminals flickered and rolling platforms rattled as every one of the raiders looked to the ceiling. Dust particles fell along with slivers of rust. Barb snarled, as the explosion was followed by far off sounds

of thunderous violence and gunfire.

"They're a bit earlier than I had predicted. Kriss! Dirk! Shiv! With me! You two, deal with the filly, then join us in the atrium! Those idiots in the gang won't know what to do without us."

He took off, his horn shadowing over as he seemed to blend into the pitch black after a few feet and entirely disappeared. Behind him, three of the Shades faded more naturally into the dark. What was that? What did he mean 'they'?

"So, what do we do to him?" The mare cackled as her eyes ran over me like a predator.

Well, at least I wasn't the only one wondering.

"I dunno. Barb says kill, I kill. Barb says steal, I steal. I'm not much for leader-uh..."

"Leadership, you stupid oaf. Fuck, Chib, no wonder Barb wanted you in this team. He's got *no* worries about you trying to assassinate him and take over."

"Well, I just like doin' things, so what do we do to him?"

Her face turned to me. A thin and straight long mane drooped over one scarred eye. She had actually filed her teeth into fangs that glinted when she smiled sadistically at me. She may have sounded more intelligent than your average raider, but like Barb, it was underlaid with the same maddened mindset to hurt and abuse other ponies for the sheer hell of it. This was a broken pony, one who wasn't thinking sane thoughts. The kind that Brimstone had said raider clans drew in to use as enforcers. I could see the manic twitches in her eyes.

"I got something I been wanting to do to somepony for a while. Hold him down."

Chib's magic strengthened before he climbed atop me and held me down by his weight alone. The mare grabbed my head in her hooves, standing up to look right down at me, saliva dripping from her fanged mouth landing on my goggles.

"Don't, please! I-I'll do anything you wa— URRGH!"

Her magic prised my mouth open. A shard of glass from the wreckage lifted in her magic field.

"Barb doesn't like ponies talking back or interrupting him. I'm gonna make sure you can't whine *ever again!*"

I stared with wide eyes. My mouth!? My tongue? What!? No! I'd not be able to draw properly ever again!

"Say 'aaaah', little buck!"

"How about *you* say, 'lights on', motherfuckers!"

The pair twisted their heads around at the new voice ringing out, before everything turned white.

My eyes seared, and I heard the raiders scream. On sheer instinct, I drove one of my bottom hooves deep and hard into the buck's nethers. His scream went up to appropriately filly-like levels, his entire weight falling away from me. Rolling off the desk, my vision finally adjusted as I saw every light panel in the entire room had activated. Squinting, I finally saw my saviour galloping into the room, directly at the pair of raiders around me.

"Murky, get down!" Glimmerlight's voice was the most beautiful thing I had *ever* heard at that moment. Diving to the floor, I heard her long rifle crack sharply, followed by a bellow of agony from the stallion.

The other raider, the mare, rounded on Glimmer and began charging as she saw *my friend* reloading the single shot weapon.

The raider mare was fast, very fast. Only Glimmer's speed with the reload gave her a chance for a second shot, sending the mare diving behind a desk to avoid it. The raider

seemed to fade into the darkness behind the desks, shadowed from the panel lighting. Glimmer took to a tabletop, seeking her out.

Seeing the stallion standing back up again with a gaping wound in his side, I realised his eyes were on me. The wound didn't stop him grabbing a club and bucking the desk to the side to come for me as his companion taunted and occupied Glimmer's attention. Panicking, I fled, diving and rolling under the next desk as I felt his charge carry him right into it behind me. I felt a small measure of triumph, he'd be stunned! I could just run!

He had faked the crash.

The moment I stepped out of the desk, the stallion landed on me. He was slow to decide, but I had forgotten who these ponies were. Barb's students in the art of sneaky methods and misdirection. What I'd thought was him haphazardly careening into the desk had just been him leaping atop it!

"Kick me in the plums will you? I'll rip your throat out for that!"

He wasn't kidding. Knowing he could ditch stealth now that he was right on top of me, his teeth gnashed down, seeking to grab my flesh in a mad blood-raged frenzy. I heard Glimmer's rifle firing once more as she fought the mare, scaring her into cover.

It gave me an idea.

Batting his face with a front hoof, I pulled my empty BB pistol free and aimed it directly at the stallion's face. Diving to the side off of me, the stallion took cover with a sudden, rushed look of panic at seeing a barrel in his face. He wasn't the only one who could trick somepony else!

It gave me a chance to get up, only to feel the gun yanked from my teeth by his magic. This wasn't going well, I had nothing to actually do against him! I was a non-combatant, not a killer!

The stallion charged, the club raised high in his magic. He came right for me. Terrified, I backed away into the darkness of a side room. My little heart felt ready to tear itself free. I couldn't fight a raider! I watched him step into the doorway. Tall, broad, strong, weathered. He'd never listen to pleas.

Fearfully pulling my metal ruler out, I prepared to do all I could. Mustering my scant courage, I let all the frustration boil up in me, and let out a blood-curdling war cry, far louder than I ever knew I could. One that sounded like it held the rage of a hundred violated ponies whose memories had been desecrated, one that grew to a keening howl.

The stallion stopped. His eyes wide, and his face drained of all colour, before he *screamed*. Turning and fleeing, my confusion barely had a chance to catch up with the reality. That hadn't been me that had howled. He had looked just like he'd seen a...

I turned, seeing *it* right behind me. Dead eyes, their shape even more vague than Barb's, resting within a listless and immaterial presence that I couldn't properly focus on, as though looking at something only vaguely remembered from a dream. Every muscle of mine locked up as it stared right through me.

...bing bing!

Even as the sound of a scooter's little bell chimed, the shade faded into the background and disappeared amidst the darkness once again. Standing there, eyes locked on the thick black. I didn't know what to think.

"Hey, Murky! Nothing big but... *a little help!?*"

Broken from my thoughts, I turned to see Glimmer desperately dodging shards of glass being hurled at her via telekinesis. Glimmer bore a few running scars along her neckline.

These ‘Shades’ weren’t playing around when it came to aim! The stallion had fled, but the mare was as lethal as they came, diving from cover to cover and using Glimmer’s slow-loading rifle against her. Alone, Glimmer would no doubt be overcome.

Rushing forward, I leapt atop a desk to look for something appropriate and—
“WOAH!”

Diving back down, shards of glass whizzed over my head. I saw Barb’s student grin at me, and tauntingly blow a kiss before the glass reversed and came right back at me from behind. Screaming, I leapt over the desk again, chased by the shards as they pinged and embedded into objects around me. I felt one piece dig into my right flank, stifled a scream, and fell hard from the desk onto the floor, taking out a skeleton with my body weight. Horrified, I kicked myself away from it, clutching my leg. Glimmer’s rifle fired again, forcing the mare to cover. If only I had—

Sculpt’s pistol sat ahead of me. Without a thought I grabbed it in my mouth. Feeling around with my tongue, it seemed the safety was still off. Staying low, I began to creep forward, kicking a wheeled platform out to distract the mare. With any luck, she’d—

Glass whizzed into and around the platform like a swarm of angry hornets, trying to hit a non-existent Murky Number Seven behind it. Elated at the success, I began making my move under the noise cover, and galloped low to the ground from desk to desk. Glimmer’s rifle *clacked* to load once again, before she screamed and audibly dove to the side away from the razor tipped projectiles.

“You honestly think you can take on a member of the Shades? Chib was the rookie, but just try me! I’ll take you both on!”

Well, try this for your sneaky business!

Hopping atop the desk, I appeared *right* behind her. No time to think about the morals of killing, I was saving a friend! My mouth pressed down on the trigger. The mare slowly turned to look at me, the mad grin staring right into my eyes.

The weapon just clicked.

Blood frozen, I pulled the trigger again and again, beginning to get a sense of how the Magister felt. She just made a coy look at me, her horn glowing and tugging the weapon from my mouth.

“Stupid buck. I’m a unicorn. Just a little telekinesis and bam! Your safety is back on!”

Using the distraction, Glimmerlight hurled a chair with her own telekinesis before galloping forward, firing to give herself cover. Aiming down the sights, she took aim at the raider’s head, another bullet flying into the chamber with little difficulty. Laughing hysterically, the raider turned to her.

“And the same for you! A little adjustment of your gun and-and...”

Her face drooped.

“WHAT? Where is it? Where’s the safety!”

Glimmerlight merely winked at her.

“Is not safe.”

She snapped the bolt closed.

“Is gun.”

And pulled the trigger.

Reunion.

A feeling I'd never truly felt before in my life. Not properly, anyway. But seeing Glimmerlight come to my aid, not out of guilt for me, but out of a conscious decision to save somepony she cared about, was a defining moment for me.

The raider had fallen. Her head exploded across the desk she had hidden in front of. Silence reigned, other than the tiny sound of the brass casing from Glimmer's round clink on the floor and roll away under a workbench. I felt my knees go weak. Hours of running through the horrid past and thick darkness finally began to catch up to me. The raiders had been the last straw before everything just finally said 'Yeah, that's enough...'

Exhausted, I fell to the side and slumped.

"Hey, hey! Murky!"

I dropped right into her hooves, as Glimmerlight leapt forward to catch me, held me upright again and began hugging me tightly. Not really knowing what else to take strength in, my own hooves grabbed hold of her as tightly as I could manage. Already I could feel myself tearing up again. She had come. She hadn't been lying. She had stuck to her promise. The first one anypony had ever kept for me.

"It's all right, I found you. I'm here now."

"I... I thought they... that I..."

"I know, it's alright now. We won't let you get separated again."

"We?" I wondered, where was Brimstone anyway?

Glimmerlight let go of me, ruffling my mane a little and helping me down off the desk. Shivering as my hooves landed in the raider's rapidly expanding blood puddle, we cantered away from the corpse. Nodding to the entrance, Glimmer put on as best a smile she could. From the look in her eyes, I could see she was rather drawn out herself.

"Oh? Brim? Got separated in the dark when we ran into one of Barb's scouting parties. I was going to locate him, but then I heard you down the hallway. Brim can take care of himself for a while. Better than when he's watching out for me. So! What's this find you got down here, Murky? I'm liking the look of this room! Creepy skeletons notwithstanding."

Biting my lip, I struggled to really know where to start. Sitting upon the floor, I told her about the story of the Stable. About the peaceful situation twisted into a horrific interior war through nothing but fear and accidents. About the way they had died and what happened to the scientists afterwards. Oddly, I found myself not mentioning the shadow of the past that had been drifting around the Stable. Ponies thought I was screwed in the brain enough as it was. As the recap ended, Glimmerlight simply sighed and shook her head.

"The sad thing is, this isn't unusual. For all their strength, the ponies inside the Stables were the fragile part. Back in the Rangers, we kept records of all discovered Stables. It's unsettling to think how many failed because of internal issues with the residents. But all this..."

She cast a hoof over all the workbenches.

"This is unusual. Most Ministries had their own internal bunkers and sublevels, so to see all this stuff in a Stable-Tec Shelter is pretty out of place. Especially as-oh my."

Glimmer hopped up, trotting across to the workbenches. Confused, I followed, finding her lifting tool after tool before finally raising half a dozen of the orbs and immediately scanning through the attached terminal. Tilting my head to the side, I prodded one of them and looked up at her.

"What are those things? Don't you own a bunch of them too?"

"I do indeed, Murky. Have you never heard of memory orbs?"

I shook my head, then nodded, then shook again. "Maybe. There's a lot of things I've seen or heard about, then just forgotten."

Glimmer floated up one of the memory orbs, peering into its depths.

"Basically, they are little orbs of magic that contain a living simulation of the past. Grab them in a magic field and *whoosh!* You're off to old Equestria. Ponies used them as diaries, means of remembering details or even as proof of past events. The spell itself can create them, if you know how, but most were just found from the stocks made before the megaspells. Wonderful things really. You can even extract memories permanently. So see something you wish you hadn't? Just get rid of it! You'll maybe remember some vague concepts, maybe some feelings like an old dream, but the details that made you feel bad just disappear."

The very idea made me shiver. To actually *see* into the past? I wasn't sure I liked that idea. Audio diaries had taken me to wits end in this place. If I were to actually see the events? I feared they might break me. Glimmer had begun work on the adjoining terminal, casting the occasional curious glance at the memory orbs that floated in arcs around her while she worked.

"If you *really* want to get into detail, memory orbs aren't just a series of pictures. See, ponies are all magical, unicorn or not. Earth ponies have that connection to the ground and their place in life, pegasi have the sky and weather embedded in them. And every pony's magical signature is unique, like our DNA."

"Our what?"

"DNA, Murky. The stuff that make us who we are. Magical signature is a part of our body and soul. Now, memory orbs contain an imprint of that signature, like a false copy of our own life and experience. That's why we see things from the creator's perspective when we watch them."

Unable to really help it, I had my front hooves up on the workbench, tapping a lime green memory orb between them. What did it contain? Was it a good memory?

"How do you use them, Glimmer?"

The white unicorn chuckled, turning her head away from the frantically clicking terminal and tapping her horn lightly. Oh, of course. I let the orb roll away from me, nothing for me here.

"Huh, now that's interesting!"

Lifting my head, I moved to watch the terminal Glimmerlight was working on, before witnessing my nemesis. Words.

Without skipping a beat, Glimmerlight read it.

"Paper fifty two, on the residual effects of memory orbs to their users. We have continued work upon what Chief of Staff Aurora Star theorised a long time ago for training of our military. That is, the ability to 'pre-record' situations within orbs to create experienced veterans before even going to war. This theory was proposed within days of the memory orb spell being approved and released to the unicorn public, but the effects simply did not stick. A user's magical signature could not correctly see it as true 'experience' in the way genuine life could. Huh."

She flicked a few more screens past. In the distance, I began to hear faded noises. Thumps and sharp cracks. What was going on above us?

"Apparently they succeeded, listen to this." She coughed lightly. "We brought Aurora's

prototype spell with us. Apparently, she shared her research with the Ministry of Peace under the watch of Surgeon General Doctor Weathervane for use as spell storage orbs. In the end, this was the breakthrough. When the medical staff figured out how to store pre-made medical spells within orbs, Aurora had a theory. If we could store spells, why not store a memory orb creation spell *in* the orb itself that activates upon the user, making *them* a temporary spell storage hub by storing it into their own magical signature. Wow.”

I was lost. Storing a memory orb inside an orb, to create an orb... inside a pony, using an orb to— oh Goddesses, why did it have to be me to hear all this?

Giggling, Glimmerlight patted my head as I laid it on the table before I got a headache.

“Simply put, Murky. They made orbs that would cast a spell on the pony, using it to imprint a spell into their own signature for a short period of time.”

I blinked, staring blankly. Glimmerlight rolled her eyes.

“Orbs that give unicorns new spells for a limited time.”

Oooo! Well why didn't they just say so? I was beginning to think scientists just spoke in fancy terms to hide their ideas from other ponies. Glimmerlight moved away from the terminal, dragging a few orbs into her saddlebag with her before moving onwards to the large cupcake tray machine I'd seen earlier. Now in the light, I got a better look. It had one large central chamber with the baking trays in it and a weird headset nearby. Seemingly just made of dull metal, it shone brighter from the series of gemstones of all colours embedded under the rim. Around the base, I could see a series of bones.

“Now if I'm right, and when it comes to memory orbs I usually am, this would be where they got unicorns to transfer a memory of using said spell into a bunch of orbs for use by others. Which means...”

She bucked a nearby cupboard, breaking the rusted lock on it. Spilling open, half a dozen small cases out. Almost squealing in delight, Glimmerlight lifted them with her magic and held them before her. Opening one, I could see a much brighter and almost unstable looking memory orb within that pulsed with a bright red light. It reminded me eerily of Red Eye.

“Aaand here's the prototypes! Let's see, we have a shield spell, handy. Three healing spells, *very* handy. ‘Create a door’ spell? Well, not so handy. And oh! YES!”

“What is it!” I shouted quickly, my voice raising. Could it be something to get us out? A teleport spell that would send us all right to Tenpony Tower!?

“Want-it-need-it spell! I've never been able to do this one! Oh, this is fantastic! Never again shall it be my round at the Roamer on break days with this little baby!”

Facehoofing, I could only nod in vague agreement as disappointment washed into my head. Sometimes, Glimmerlight really confused me. All that caring bound up in one casual and self-admittedly shallow package.

“Oh I could spend hours down here looking at all of this! Memory orb research, memory transfer theories and spell enhancement orbs! So many to look at, to learn from.”

I left her to squee over the orbs, hearing her chattering to herself about the methods and means. How did she know so much about them anyway? Why did she own so many back at the Mall? Shrugging to myself, I decided to have a look around elsewhere. Only now was the fact that the shadow had helped me beginning to set in. That, or had it simply wanted to get at the raider who had looted its place of rest? Picking the room it had appeared from, I advanced towards it.

The interior was little more than a basic office. Piercing through the fallen files and

folders, I wasn't really looking for anything, rather just wanting to avoid Glimmerlight's fascination with the past and memory. Neither of them were particularly nice topics for me.

Unfortunately, I could have chosen a better pastime. As I cast my PipBuck's light around the room, it fell upon the desk. A smashed terminal sat there, riddled with bulletholes that passed all the way through to the metal wall behind it, where they had dented the thick material. The inevitable waited for me behind it.

A mare, I thought. See enough skeletons and perhaps you might be able to not freak out at more. But finding just the one little story left was always hard hitting. She had been at her desk, simply working on helping ponies to learn through memory orbs when Sculpt had rushed in amidst his rampage. Was this why the spectre chose this room?

Shifting the Stable Dweller clothing to one side with a hoof, apologising profusely, I saw a small picture frame. Holding my spasmodic light closer, I got a good look. Suddenly, everything made a lot of sense.

A lovely older mare, ribbons in her mane and tail that now lay beneath me, stained and ripped. She was standing proudly beside a little pink filly riding her brand new red scooter.

I'd thought I was past this. That nothing could affect me after the hallway of death where an entire Stable had been choked to death. That after witnessing corpse after corpse with shattered bones from bullets I may have become accustomed to it. But little details, little memories...

"Murky?"

Glimmerlight was behind me, standing in the doorway. Not turning around, I held the picture frame in my hooves, just staring. Only peripherally did I remember that these were the same colours as the ponies in the picture upstairs. Shivering, I almost dropped it while leaning sideways onto the desk, feeling as miserable and lost as I ever had. Glimmer's hoof lay on my shoulder.

"Not everything in the past is bad, Murky. They had good times before it happened."

"They watched their world die. She saw her daughter killed!"

"Does that invalidate everything that came before? Accept the past. Remember the good and then just look to the future."

Soaking wet around the eyes, I turned on her, standing up on all fours.

"I don't know *how* alright!? I've never had to look to the future! All I've ever done is to be reminded what I'm to do here and now, all my life! A slave! You wonder why I hate the past so much?"

Turning, saw my cutie mark briefly and knew just why.

"Because if I ever did properly comprehend how much of my life and potential has been *wasted* since I was born into this, I'd don't know how I'd feel! I tried to kill myself once, I don't want to... to do that! I terrified myself!"

Spitting, I shook my head and mane furiously, trying to get my train of thought out of that road. Looking at the poor mare's remains, I just kept venting.

"Seeing other ponies like this, remnants and ghosts, it makes me think about my own life. Whether I'll have anypony who'll ever look back on my skeleton and be able to find anything worth mentioning. If I'll ever be more than just another nameless figure on some history book's pages of how many slaves died!"

Her telekinesis dragged me back around to face her. Snapped from my sudden anger, I looked up to see her standing tall before me. A serious expression came over her, before eventually calming. Around her, whirling orbs of light flew in blurring circles. All colours of

the rainbow.

"Listen to me, Murky." Glimmerlight advanced. "You're afraid of the past. *That* I understand. I can be too. I was scared coming down here to find you. Hell, I think even Brim was unnerved. That's normal. But do you really not know how to look back and find anything good? What about Littlepip's escape? What about the mare? Velvet's songs? The DJ helping you? Don't tell me none of that matters!"

She was right, but somehow none of those seemed to properly sink in whenever I tried to think of it. How happy had I been when I saw Littlepip flying without wings?

"So perhaps it's going to take somepony to *show* you."

The orbs span faster, before one, a small pink one, spun off and around the room before resting between us. Glimmerlight's head lowered. My mouth falling open, I shook my head.

"No, I don't want to look. I can't even view them! How do you intend—"

"Sometimes I wonder what your special talent is from that mark, Murky, what in the past gave you it" Glimmerlight turned to the side, lifting her crimson Ranger robes with a hoof to reveal her cutie mark. Three memory orbs of pink, purple and light blue. "But mine is that I can help those who cannot see for themselves."

"Glimmer, I... I don't like the past, please, don't."

"Don't worry, Murky. This isn't like before."

Fear demanded I shrink away, but her voice kept me rooted on the orb rested against my forehead and I felt consciousness rush from my body.

"Trust that memories have the power to help us."

I was not me.

Every instinct fought to close my eyes, but they were not mine to close. Trapped in another body, in the half a second it took for 'reality' to phase in and properly become visible to me, I had nothing but a sense of enclosure and claustrophobia.

I did *not* like this. Who was I? Why did my back feel better? My ear was fine, how? What was that on my head? Why didn't I feel like a buck?

Oh. That was why.

My 'host' (wait, my what? How did I know that word?) opened *her* eyes as I gazed upon the outside world. A spreading wasteland of shifting, unhealthy colour and an yellow overcast sky. Hardly the paradise I'd come to picture these days as my eventual escape location. I could hardly look around however; not only because the mare I embodied wasn't, but because I couldn't quite get over the fact that *I was a mare*. Not entirely something I was comfortable with. Everything felt different. I was too tall, my head was held too high. Why did my lungs feel clear? Oh Goddesses, I had forgotten how it was to properly breathe.

I couldn't be sure. Was my host's head spinning or was it just all this? Did I still have my own feelings? Why couldn't I blink when I wanted to? I didn't want to trot through the wastes with my head held high! Everypony would look at me! I just wanted to lower myself down and not be as open in my stance.

In an attempt to calm my mind, I focused on what was ahead. This mare was striding forward through a bleak forest of brittle wood. Mountains rested either side. Was this a valley? Whatever it was, in the fuzzy daytime of an overcast Equestrian Wasteland, the general difference between it all was very difficult to ascertain. The mare was tired, that

much I could feel, and she had a large weight upon her back. Wait, hadn't Glimmerlight said this was her memory? Was I Glimmerlight? The ramifications of what I might experience from things *she* had done rammed home very hard (and hopefully not literally).

But short of any professional buck hunting, instead the idle travels seemed to bring her into a heavily clustered wood. Part of me wondered if I should feel free. Was this the freedom that Protégé spoke of? To wander the world alone? The silent world around me just felt empty. Where were the wondrous things I had imagined and drawn passionately upon the walls? This was so lonely.

No, not alone. Not for long.

Very soon, she found a village. Small mud and reed huts reinforced with heavier wood supports, it camouflaged well in the woods. Covered fires and small patches where brahmin wandered to and fro made up the outskirts as ponies of all shapes and sizes began to stand up and watch Glimmerlight approach. Nerves demanded I run, or find the biggest one and offer my services.

"Hey folks! What's cooking for a long term traveller looking for a place to stay?"

Well, not how I'd have done it. Everypony turned to stare at me... her. Glimmer's voice rang out loud amongst the village as more and more ponies gathered. I saw foals hiding behind parents as larger bucks stood ready with clubs. Casually, Glimmerlight stood her ground as an elderly mare approached. Her cutie mark was the head of a brahmin while her sullen brown face and coat marked a life much longer than any I had known in the wastes.

"How did you find us? Creaky Hollow is unmapped. We take care of our own and live off what we can."

I felt Glimmer roll her eyes.

"Hey, look, I'm just wandering to find my place, wasn't working out back home. I'm pretty good with just about anything if you need an extra helping hoof. Got anything needing fixing? I do that pretty well, arcane science and all that jazz. Type of pony everypony should know. You'd be surprised at how many little bits of talent I have in this noggin of mine. Could even open a massage parlour if I wanted, honest."

To my surprise, she stared sideways at one of the big bucks approaching with a club. I felt her smile after speaking and lower her eyelids as she met his eyes, then cast a view to his, uh, rather well-built torso. Watching his face soften, Glimmer turned back to the elder. I could swear her smile was wider.

"I'm Glimmerlight. Seriously, though, needing anything fixed? I'd do it for free if it'd prove myself to you."

The elder scrunched up her face, looking around at the other ponies before pointing to a nearby shed with a few bits of metal coming from the roof. Small wires led to a large searchlight.

"We have the odd problem with timberwolves in this dry wood. Light scares them off but it broke last month. We lost three brahmin and... two foals. That and we can't purify the water without it. None of us can fix things, I don't even know if we have the parts."

Glimmer went to work. Respectfully canning her attitude in the wake of foal deaths, she wandered into the shed. Inside was oily and seemed to be filled with a slight magical haze from the malfunctioning spark generator. But as I watched, uh, experienced her work, I gained an immediate respect for her skills. Telekinesis redirected wires, plugs, and jump-started circuits with startling dexterity. The buck sent to guard her moved to complain as she tossed some components out. Tutting, she stopped him entirely, raising her hoof to signal

that he was to shut up and let her work.

Come six minutes later, and the generator eventually surged into life with a climactic whine, before settling into a more content low hum. Glimmerlight seemed to sigh happily, before turning to the buck.

"Seems somepony just didn't know how to keep one of these maintained. Really, half the stuff bodged in was just unnecessary. I mean, gaffertape, really? So, can I stay?"

She highlighted the last word while wandering past him and drawing her tail across his chin. Really? Was Glimmerlight seriously *this* flirtatious around bucks? She hadn't been here an hour!

That said, I quickly realised that I knew *nothing* about how to 'appeal' to anypony anyway. So how could I say whether she was right or wrong? Even quicker I realised I was only thinking all this to keep the feeling that "I" had just felt "myself" flirt with a buck. If I could have shivered, I would have. As she watched him wink back at her slyly, I got a sense of just how normal and relaxed this sort of activity was to her. I had no doubts that she had not gone to bed alone this night, but I couldn't feel apprehension or tightness in her body.

Briefly, I wondered if this was how it felt to have higher self esteem, but I had no frame of reference. I just felt jealous.

Why had Glimmerlight shown me this? To make me uncomfortable? I was trapped in somepony else's body, unable to move for real! I was more trapped than before! Trapped as a slave in Fillydelphia, then into an underground Stable, then into a memory? Stuck in her past with no control at all, a slave to her life! I was...

Being cheered.

The moment Glimmerlight had wandered out of the shed, it seemed like the entire village had gathered to applaud her efforts to help protect their village. Coming from shelters and huts, they gathered in a crowded circle about her. Families hugged close, the safety of the lights and purifier reassuring them in one swift motion. Jokingly bowing down on her front hooves, I felt Glimmer lifted by the bucks and be carried around in a small lap of the village while laughing. She was surrounded by screams of thanks and promises that she could stay. Even the elderly mare was cracking a smile amongst the many cracks on her face, as she nodded slowly. Dropping back to the ground, she was surrounded, appreciated...

I felt...

Happy.

Something had gone right. She was being accepted and welcomed as one of them through simple means of proving her worth, not as a slave or as somepony less, but as somepony unique for what she could do! Hadn't that been what she had done when I'd fixed her robes? Could my past actually have little moments worth remembering clearly like this? Could Glimmerlight make me a memory orb of Littlepip?

Foals bounced happily away from a pony I presumed was their teacher, chanting 'The bad wolfies won't come back!' over and over. They circled around her as though playing a game. Glimmerlight hugged one of them, a chirpy little young colt wearing an old floppy hat that was clearly too big for him. He squealed happily and he buried his head into her still long pink mane before returning to his mother with a giggle. For a second I thought I caught a glint of recognition. Perhaps just that motherly look anypony missing their mom would feel.

Glimmerlight was shown around, given a spare hut and told she could make a workshop if she wanted to help them out and bring her expertise to improve their way of isolated life.

One apparently safe from all raiders and gangs in such an isolated and self-sustaining area. Life, it was explained, wasn't easy, but it was a hell of a lot more peaceful and joyful than most places in the wastes could offer.

Happiness in the wasteland. Hope and friendships forming around her, potential memories to be had. The vision of a past I could never have. The home I couldn't go back to. She was filling in the gaps of my life through the gift of her own.

Even as I felt it all fading, now I knew precisely why she had shown me it. The same reason I liked to hear Sundial's voice. The past could give hope as well as terrify. I knew it wouldn't change my feelings immediately, but even as my consciousness drifted out of the hugging crowds, I knew something was different. I'd been pushed onto the first step to realise what it was like to be anything but in slavery.

I emerged on a sofa within a medical waiting room. Like waking from a hazy dream, I stretched and groaned as my own ruined body reminded me it once more had my presence within it. Gazing around at the darkness of the Stable, I began to miss the feelings of seeing an open world around me all the more. But no, it hadn't been 'freedom', not like Protégé meant. I had been entrapped to one path. Even if it had helped, no 'memory' was going to free me. But it was a beginning, a start to begin to realise what Protégé had so teased me with.

Feeling movement and a warmth close by, I shifted, finding Glimmerlight kneeling down beside me, waiting for me to properly wake before speaking in case she startled me. For all her flirty nature, she did know how to care, that was for sure. What she had given me was a true gift. That even if I was scared and upset by the past, I didn't need to fear every aspect of it. She smiled, stroking my rather straggly mane with a hoof.

"So, you understand?"

I didn't know what else to do. Something drove me. I couldn't explain why I simply leaned forward and tightly hugged her.

"Yes, thank you. Thank you so much!"

For once, my tears were not from the pain.

"Don't worry, Murky. Take a second. Your first time is always a little tiring."

Lying back on the waiting sofa, I glanced around me at the medical bay. Apparently it was just around the corner from the science room, the same way I'd seen the spectre disappear to before I'd gone in myself. Glimmerlight had come down this way, finding her own route. According to her, the memory orb had ended about ten minutes ago. I'd just been so exhausted that it had actually put me out. She had carried me here to rest it off until my mind recovered. Looking up at her now, I saw her holding one of the spell orb cases and wondering.

"I noticed your ear was in a bad way. Well, we both are."

"How did you know?"

Glimmerlight just grinned, looking around the orb case. "I am not a healer, but I can spot someone holding something a lot. I hadn't reached the *healing* part of my initiate

training before I left Bucklynn Cross. But hey, I can diagnose a few things by sight, basic triage, that sort of thing. As I said, you'd be surprised at how many little talents I've picked up. Don't expect me to go identifying illness though. All we were trained to look for was internal injury and to best judge who got what potions first. But with this, well, here goes."

Her horn glowed. Curling up on the couch, I watched as the orb floated out of the casing, drifting toward her horn before glowing brighter. A hazy blue aura, solidifying like the rings I'd seen around some planets in books, it began spinning, before the entire orb dissipated. Glimmerlight sighed, staggering backwards and grabbing her head.

"H-how did that feel?"

Without a word, Glimmerlight held up her hoof and with a flash of magic, I saw a scrape simply fade and knit together once again.

"Just like a memory orb. Kind of a weird sensation, really. Like I've always known how to heal with magic. Here, before it fades, lean forward."

Obedying, I moved my head forward, feeling her horn move closer to the ruptured eardrum, if that even was the problem. I was no medic. But a cooling, tingly, and itchy feeling overtook my ear and most of that side of my head. A numbness faded in, then nothing. Before long, I realised it wasn't numb. It just wasn't hurting any more. A headache that I hadn't even known I had just disappeared with a gentle sensation.

"Wow..."

Glimmerlight smiled, dealing with various scrapes, bruises, and cuts. "I can feel it fading already. I don't think these prototypes were designed to be particularly long-lasting. Just a proof of concept they made with limited materials in this Stable. Given my affinity with memory orbs, I can't help but feel I *should* take some of these to study. No doubt the Ministry of Arcane Magic Hub in Fillydelphia has the full records and greater forms of this, if it even still exists. But just in case, we need at least one of these now I know they work for myself! This technology shouldn't be forgotten. But Red Eye doesn't deserve it. Those six were the only prototypes I could find. But I've kind of been getting the impression that this Stable doesn't really want anything taken. I hope it understands."

Her head cast back out to the dark hallway. Her horn's light and my PipBuck mixed into a turquoise aura around us, but despite the light from the science room nearby, the corridors were still a deadzone. Glimmer's eyes tracked back and forth. A clearer head now, I could still hear ambient sounds. the Stable, residents or not, was still very much alive.

"Call me crazy, Murky... well, okay, I am, but even more so, I don't think this Stable's all that dead. I can, well, *feel* memory orbs. Nothing unnatural, just that I can sense their magical presence, the spell that drives them. They're my *thing*. But in this Stable, I can't help but feel it moving around sometimes. Moving memories, drifting around."

She turned back to me, biting her lip for a second.

"I can't help but wonder if perhaps their research had some *other* effects on the final events in here. Anyway, let's just stay safe in here. Brimstone will be here soon, he knows where I went."

Casting my memory back, both the Overmare and Sandy Sculpt had been obsessed with that. What was it the Overmare had said? Memories have power? Hadn't Glimmer said the same thing? This was getting too big, too philo— uh, fillysop... ah forget it. Too fancy. Sitting up, I shook my head and quickly regretted it as my vision spun wildly. Feeling Glimmerlight prop me up, I sat back up on the couch, my hind legs dangling off until I got my balance back. It took me a second before I saw Glimmer looking at me weirdly.

"What?"

"Uh, you sure you're comfortable sitting like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like that."

"I dunno. Just feels normal to me—"

A crash sounded down the hallway. A pattering of hooves and a frenzied shouting. I recognised Chib's voice. Apparently he'd brought friends.

"It was down here! A fucking ghost, I swears!"

"Chib, there's no such thing. Can't believe you ran from that runt."

"Not from him! Like some-some shadow!"

Chib's voice was strained, protesting as though he'd been doing it the entire way down. The other voice, however, was almost mocking.

"You *are* a shadow. You're a Shade student under Barb. How can you be afraid of the dark? Look, we can't delay much longer. Barb needs us in the fight up top! You want him to think we're avoiding it?"

"Isn't that what we're doing by helping Chib here?" A third voice added with a knowing tone.

"QUIET! You never know when he's listening! We're going back up top as soon as we get the fancy loot down here. Now, you get the medical bay, we'll get the science room."

I killed the light just as quickly as Glimmer turned off her light spell. Where was her rifle? A glance to ask later and she just shrugged, mouthing the words 'no ammo' to me. I felt her stand beside me. There was no way out, but at least we were together.

"Hey! Look what we got here!"

Four raiders. I recognised the dark figure of Chib, still sniffing in fear as he glanced at the science room. But the other three were coated in something that looked disturbingly like the coats of other ponies. Fresh blood ran down the edges of the 'clothing.' Some poor slaves, no doubt. I wanted to retch.

There was one mare and two stallions. Each carried some bladed implement; presumably all guns were being used in whatever battle was going on above. Against who? Slavers? Was Barb seeking to make this place his dark lair permanently? A Stable was certainly defensible.

The lead raider strolled forward, getting a slow grin as he saw we were unarmed.

"Now ain't this just perfect? Chib gets his revenge and we get a little mare to share. Hah! Fantastic. Think we should keep her? We could put the runt on a leash! The Clan pet—OW!"

The mare had snapped with her teeth at the stallion's neck, growling and drawing blood.

"We are not a Clan! That was the *traitor's* word! We are under Barb now!"

I try to be brave, I really do. But hopping off the couch and pressing against Glimmer for any support I could get was just how I responded to these things. They had knives and spiked mouth clubs! Glimmerlight patted my back lightly just once, before fixing a stare at them.

"You guys really don't want to do this, y'know?"

"Oh? Why's that, bitch?"

Shocked, I saw Glimmerlight grinning at them, that wide joyous look.

"Because you're going to force me to use my special weapon."

A different atmosphere took over the room. Backing to the side away from her, my eyes looked over her clothing and bags. Had she found something? Some old magical energy

weapon? Maybe a different spell orb!

“Hah! You’re not fooling anypony! So what is your *weapon*?”

“Oh, it’s a good one. I got it right here with me. It’ll blow you right down, all four of you.”

“Yeah?” Their eyebrows went up in mock surprise.

I hoped so. Perhaps it was a spell I hadn’t seen? Could she shoot lasers from her horn? Or magic bullets! Maybe she could blast a huge rainbow beam! Smiling a little, the confidence in her voice reassured me as I saw her wink down at me. Oh yeah, Glimmer had something special planned!

“Yeah, you don’t stand a chance. All four of you? Psh, nothing.”

“Well bring it!”

“Okay!”

“Good!”

“Fine!”

“Well do it!”

“Okay...” Glimmerlight shook out her mane, planting her four hooves solidly down, taking a slow breath.

“Go get em, Murky!”

My eyes shot as wide as they could, my jaw dropping while looking in abject shock first at the raiders, then Glimmer, then back again and back to Glimmer. Stunned for a second, the raiders burst out laughing.

“M-me? B-but Glimmer!”

She grinned and rubbed my mane without taking her eyes off them.

“Oh, don’t be so modest. You can take em!”

The raiders were already crying with laughter. “Oh yeah! He’s sooooo threatening with that little ruler poking out of his pocket! Hahaha!”

“Hey!” Glimmer protested. “Pay some respect, Murky here would tear the lot of you apart. He survived the Pit!”

“Ooooooh did he now?”

“Yeah, watch out, here he comes!”

“Uh, Glimmer...”

“Just wait till he gets his hooves on you, like a little rabid wolverine!”

“Glimmerlight?”

“Never seen anything so deadly in my life!”

“GLIMMER!”

My shout cut everypony into silence as I hopped up to her ear.

“What. Are. You. Doing!?”

From the door, the raider in front tapped his hoof on the ground impatiently.

“Yeah, what’re you saying, stupid bitch? We’ve seen the runt try to fight. What’s your plan, get him to distract us, then run for it?”

Glimmerlight just patted my head, before turning back to them, her grin turning to a laugh.

“No, actually. I was just keeping you distracted while he got behind you.”

“...he? Who?”

The raider stallion turned, bumping directly into a dark red *wall* of muscle almost twice the height of him. Very slowly, the raider’s meek face looked up, and up... and up...

"Hi," said Brimstone Blitz.

"We can't stay here. We're leaving. Now." Brimstone was cutting no corners as he stepped out of the (thoroughly destroyed) medical room.

"There's still a lot I can gather from these terminals, Brim." Glimmerlight was frantically moving through the side science chambers, sifting through diary after diary and murmuring details while Brimstone had cleaned house. "You have no *idea* how amazing the technology they've been working on is! If we could get this out to the wastes and finalise it, we could get properly trained ponies building again! We could—"

"If we stay here, we're dead. Now **come on!**"

"Well then give me time! I've got the prototype orbs, but this terminal has the spell on it, I need to get rid of the files so Red Eye can't—"

Brimstone smashed the terminal clean off the desk to end the argument before it had even begun, making me squeak in shock. His move stunned even Glimmerlight, as the terminal itself slammed into a nearby wall and broke into a thousand tiny pieces. She just sat still, blinking for a second, her hooves hovering in the air where the keys had been.

"...that works too."

"COME ON!"

His voice brokered no argument. Taking off after him, I struggled to keep up with the massive raider and his huge strides. Running down darker corridors, lit only by scant PipBuck light and an illumination spell, Brimstone led us to another set of stairs. What was going on above? Oh wait, friends now! I could ask!

"What's going on, Brimstone?"

He must not have heard me over the clattering of all our hooves on the thin metal scaffold stairs. This staircase clearly had been scratchbuilt into the Stable after it had closed. Up three floors, on each one the sounds became louder. Heavy weaponry roared, the clattering of metal and roars of... what were they? The floor was shaking and smoke was already drifting in through some of the floors we had passed.

"What's going on!?"

Diving into a corridor, Brimstone finally heard me, turned, and then immediately snapped around and dove across the corridor into the adjoining room. Just before I followed, a projectile *whooshed* past me, trailing smoke. Seconds later, a concussive blast reverberated up the hallway that sent my sensitive ears into aching spasms. If I hadn't had them repaired, that would have been immobilising. Just what had that been?

Glimmerlight ducked back against the wall and peered around.

"Oh no..."

Poking my head out under her hooves, I witnessed a demon made real, stood amongst a burning corridor. Angular, wreathed in fire and ash, it came galloping down the hallway, its hooves sparking on the metal floor. Shaped like a pony but made of dark metal, it continued its charge, a huge rotary cannon screaming, strafing lines of devastation all over the corridor. The sight made me flinch back, whimpering in the corner as I prayed it would just pass. All I felt was Glimmerlight grabbing me.

"Move, Murky! Move or you're dead! You can't hide from them!"

Screaming at the top of my lungs in sheer terror, I followed her as we charged into the

main corridor to where Brimstone was. A haphazard glance led me to see the metal beast stopping to unleash hell into one room. I heard hoarse-voiced ponies screaming and gurgling as the weaponry tore them apart so violently that I saw parts come flying out of the doorway. Up ahead, Brimstone pounded through the chamber, bulldozing into a rusty door to collapse it and knock it out of place enough that we could force our way into the next corridor. Behind us, the sounds of metal hooves on the floor resumed, coming closer after the demon had dealt with the raiders it spotted.

"They're coming! Just gallop, go!"

I saw Brimstone spin and grab the old assault rifle from his back. Clenching the mouthgrip, he unloaded the entire load of rounds down the corridor. Sparks flew, walls charred, and the floor plates kicked up as the sharpened armour-penetrating rounds hurtled down the hall with deadly force to destroy absolutely everything *other* than the giant, almost unmissable, figure that stomped toward us. Glimmer cast Brimstone a narrowed glance.

"You weren't kidding when you said you couldn't aim."

"Shut up. Move!"

Following Brimstone through, we rounded into a firestorm. The entire corridor was filled with smoke flowing from broken wall panels and furiously burning pools of oil. We had went from the cold dark to the fiery light. Squealing, I hopped back as sparks landed on my woollen fleece, lighting it until my hooves desperately patted it out. My mane felt frazzled already, and my eyes stung under even my goggles. I was reminded oddly of Fillydelphia with the fire and rust, only enough to give an odd sense of familiarity before I felt Brimstone's teeth grab my fleece and hurl me through a room's window.

Crashing over somepony's old board game and collapsing the table below it, I felt the pieces digging into my body painfully. Landing in the heap upon the floor, I groaned and staggered up, watching Glimmer and Brimstone climb through after me. Behind them, masses of small explosions took out the majority of the wall panels, sending shrapnel pinging all over the corridor and into our room. I cowered, covering my face as the whizzing metal sprayed around us. I felt one bit embed itself in my journal by my side. What shape was the surrounding area like? Where did this room go? I didn't know! This was too fast, too violent. I had no idea what kind of area I was in, or where I could go!

Brimstone grunted in pain, staggering. I saw blood pooling on his side where shreds of fragmentation had penetrated his thick hide. Sobering up at the sight, I saw we were in an office. The window had led from the corridor, but the door ahead of us, the only way out, led into another corridor entirely.

"Goddesses damn it, I really hate those big guns. Keep going, it's coming!"

We ran through the door. Behind us, through the window I had been thrown through, I saw the massive steel pony glance in at us, before bracing itself and diving through the window. Turning, it aimed at us while we ran through the door.

Yet even as it swung those weapons around. The room we had just left let out an electronic scream.

"Eyes-Eyes-ForZZZK-Spark-kle-kle-kle signal detected.

Depressurisation routi-KZZZ-"

The room's door between it and ourselves slammed shut so close to me that it almost took my tail off. A second later, the rocket fired by the demon slammed into it, denting the thick metal. Somehow, I couldn't quite feel thankful for that hideous routine even after that.

Brimstone seemed to know the way he had come down, leading up around another

corner. Before I knew it, we were back in the atrium, entering via a previously closed door into the canteen. Galloping for the door, I saw the huge pile of loot was completely abandoned, and partially ablaze. Scar marks of weapons fire puckered the entire floor while the bodies of raiders lay in various pieces.

“Murky! Stop! The area up ahead is sure to be covered!”

Glimmerlight’s words gave me reason to stop and roll under a table out of sheer habit. I watched them look back behind us through the door as it slid closed. Up ahead, I could hear furious gunfire, going two ways this time. Brimstone Blitz snarled.

“They must have brought half their fucking force to get by the small army Red Eye posted outside. Had to dodge two more on the way down. There’s about four scraps inside the Stable. Must *really* want this place.”

“Of *course* Brim,” retorted Glimmerlight, “a Stable in their neck of the woods? Only just discovered? The Steel Rangers would move the sun and moon if they thought they could capture it from Red Eye!”

“And fuck every slave inside it, right?”

“Yeah, they think like that now. To them we’re just looters and scavengers like anypony else.”

Brimstone craned his head up, before scowling.

“Don’t suppose your standing will help us?”

“If they knew who I was, they’d probably get even madder. What do you mean by scraps anyway?”

“Rangers, ponies hiding under what will be scrap metal if I get my way. Rangers are scraps, ghouls are rots. Just part of the way of life to name things.”

Steel Rangers. I’d heard of them, obviously. Everypony had. But I’d never seen one. Frantic images of the steel-clad pony bounding through fire, heavy weaponry spewing death ahead of it. Unstoppable machines of war by my perceptions. If they’d been designed to intimidate, the Ministry who built them had succeeded. It was hard to imagine there was somepony inside one of those things. If they’d taken out Red Eye’s forces then...

Wait.

Time seemed to slow. To stop. Every sound faded. Only my heartbeat remained.

If Red Eye’s forces had been taken out. That meant that there were no slavers watching us anymore.

We were outside the wall...

Staggering, not hearing anything properly, as though I was submerged in water, I wandered into the atrium. Around me, sparks and smoke swirled as the venting fans did their best on automatic. Above me on the balcony, shadows moved back and forth, edges of sudden light peeling off them into corridors. Were they the residents or just ponies firing at the Rangers? I could feel wisps in the air near me, but nothing could draw my attention but for one thing.

Ahead of me, the main exit that led to the Stable door room lay open. Almost imaginary, I could feel the wind flowing in from there in my mane.

Could I? Was it *that* simple? To come out there, face my greatest fear, and then just go?

Cold fear gripped me. What if Red Eye was still out there? What if I let hope get the better of me and The Master had brought reinforcements to decimate the Rangers and reclaim me? A thousand reasons to be afraid, and only one reason to try. One dream.

“Dare to dream...” The words barely a whisper from my mouth as I felt each hoof move

on its own accord. A second chance to try.

A low sound, one steadily growing in volume, made me turn. I thought it was Brimstone, a huge silhouette charging through the smoke, directly at me. The sound heightened in pitch as the keening scream of a spark engine began to pick up speed.

Glimmerlight crashed into me, hurling me to the side. A strafing burst of fire whipped past where I had stood so fast that it was little more than a single deathly wail than a series of shots. Sound returned, a sudden scene of abject carnage exploding around me as Glimmerlight and I dragged ourselves into the cover of a thick metal bench. The Ranger was being peppered from every direction, raiders on the balcony pouring fire at the thick armour. Most of the rounds fired by the rusty weapons merely pinged and whistled off it. Bracing itself, the Ranger twisted, its *huge* body swinging around a colossal pair of weapons, one a multi-barrelled cannon and the other a short but wide barrel. A belt of grenades fed into the latter. Starting the engines of the big saddle again, it unleashed hell.

Covering my ears, feeling Glimmer pressing herself as low as possible over me, the sound felt like the world tearing apart as the Ranger dragged itself in the circle, ripping the balcony from the walls as raiders and slaves fell from above in pieces. No single sound stood out amongst the firing, impact, and devastation wrought. Parts of metal fell over us, along with immensely drowning sounds of large metal plates tumbling from the walls and flipping over on the atrium floor. Behind us, I heard whoops of victory from somewhere, I never found out why. Every noise echoed back and forth, slapping my senses from every direction as I desperately tried to scream into Glimmer's ear about the exit.

A shadow fell across us. Brimstone Blitz rushed forward, a huge 'L' shaped piece of wall panel balanced over his body.

"MOVE! MOVE!"

We required no telling. Using him as literal moving cover, the three of us sprinted through the intense firefight into the main corridor.

"The way out!" I couldn't *not* scream it. "Red Eye's guards must be gone! We can get out! Be free!"

Up the main stairway we ran. Behind us, the battle continued. One Ranger against a dozen raiders that survived in the side rooms and balconies. The Ranger's presence was the only thing that had saved Glimmer and I from being targets from above. My mind was too focused. I wasn't meant for battle! If only the Rangers knew that we simply wanted out the way, wouldn't they be fine with us leaving? But no, just as the residents of the Stable had become corrupted by the dark to distrust and fear their neighbours, were the ponies of the wasteland sickened by the darkness of their lands to fear the worst and never assume. Barb had been right, as had my old master. History repeated itself, again and again in different ways, but always ending the same way. In the crushing of trust and innocence.

Well I wanted no part of it. No longer. I was going to leave it all behind, pass beyond my fear and take one more chance. Facing the past had done it, I felt that burning desire in me, the willpower to willingly take a chance.

We were going out there. We were escaping. Somehow I knew they'd follow, and they did.

Together, we ran into the great Stable door room. Together, we saw the sunlight streaming in.

Together, we fell as the Steel Ranger on guard's anti-machine rifle slapped into the ground in front of us. The concussive wave behind it blew me clean off my hooves, Glimmer

tripped as she fell over me. In front of us lay slaver after slave after raider who had tried the same. Who had tested this beast's stubborn defence of the way out.

Brimstone was not as simple to knock over. He whirled on the spot, diving at the Ranger and, using his entire weight, bent the barrel of the long rifle before tearing it clean off the battle saddle. Swinging it on the spot, he brought it crashing down against the Ranger like a club. The weapon shattered, exploding into its component parts, and yet the metal pony was not thrown down. Rounding off, the big earth pony rolled away, dodging the return hoof swipe, and faced down the Ranger.

"Stand down, raider. You are unarmed." A harsh voice, distorted by armour and replayed through the helmet. It was almost genderless. Female? Or was it lighter from the tinny replay voice?

Brimstone didn't even wait to reply. Time was against us till the other Rangers got here. Bellowing at a volume I had never believed he could, I saw the Great Warlord charge a Ranger just as big as himself in that hulking armour.

"For the Chapter, and the Ministry!" The Steel Ranger nobly screamed their own warcry and thundered forward.

What ensued was the most brutal clash I thought I would ever see. Glimmer and I could only sit as far away as possible as we witnessed metal against flesh, hydraulic technology against sheer power. Clashing hard enough to send a shockwave through the floor of the room, both rose to their back hooves, towering high enough that even griffons would have been cast in shadow, before the hooves began to swing.

Neither gave. Backed by the armour, the Ranger took Brimstone's charge like a solid wall, powering her own hoof around to force Brimstone to the side. Swinging his entire body, the raider whirled and dropped every ounce of his weight to throw the Ranger above him into the wall. Like a thunderclap, the power-armoured pony left a dent as deep as I was wide. Undeterred, she charged back at Brimstone, sending him careening into the railings by the doorway. Crumpling under their combined weight, the two crashed down to the next level behind them, rolling and slapping hooves hard enough to kill a normal pony into one another. Already, Brimstone's face was filled with bloody marks, and his body bruised around puckered scars. Cursing and stomping the ground, Brimstone swung up faster than a pony his size had any right moving, to buck the Ranger square in the side. With a sound like the Goddesses themselves stepping hoof upon Equestria, the armoured warrior flew over ten feet backwards with a deep indent in the side plate.

Brimstone wasn't done. Not giving his opponent one inch, frothing at the mouth and his eyes bloodshot and wild, he charged over, leaping and slamming both front hooves down on the ground. As much as Brimstone himself moved fast, the Ranger did too. With an unusual sound, she rolled the armour over the ground away from his slam.

Lifting herself up, the pair wrestled, wrapping front hooves around the other's to gain leverage. It suddenly appeared to me how matched they were in different ways. The Ranger had a mechanical strength that went on and off at unstoppable levels, but Brimstone's power was variable, able to twist and redirect in ways the Ranger armour never could. His savagery and experience was showing as he took advantage of the armour's joint limitations, while the Ranger used that sudden ability to surge power into movements to force back her opponent.

Eventually though, beyond all thought that beggared belief, Brimstone was actually forcing back a suit of power armour by sheer strength alone. With a twist and a shove, he threw the Ranger to the side, hurling her through the glass of the nearby control panel

room.

Somehow still moving, the dented armour plate restricting her movements, she held both of her front hooves together around a metal beam, using the armour's shape to hold the bar steady. With a mighty swing, the beam set a course for Brimstone's head.

Horrifically, it connected. The warlord collapsed to the side, stunned. Without mercy, his opponent stood, pounding hoof after armoured hoof down upon my friend.

I didn't know what drove me. Grabbing my metal ruler in my teeth, all I knew was I had to help him, however I could. There was only one place I knew of that I could hurt most ponies in!

With all my might, I swung the ruler up and under the armoured tail.

There was a dull clang. My teeth chattered, and my entire body shook as the impact came right back down to me instead. Almost dismissively, the Ranger cast its head backward.

"You *have* to be kidding me. Really?"

The back hoof shot out. About to scream, I felt my entire body dragged backwards as Glimmerlight caught me in her telekinetic net enough to at least pull my tiny weight away before it connected. I hadn't done a *thing*.

Only, I had. Those few seconds of distraction were her opponent needed. With a mighty roar, Brimstone Blitz, the Great Raider Warlord, the Scourge of Ponyville, rose up and took the Ranger with him. Stunning my every sense, I witnessed him rear up, lifting the entire Ranger with him in his front hooves, then twist and bring her down with the strength of a vengeful god.

The Ranger hit the floor so hard I felt my entire body kicked up off the ground by the shockwave, falling on my side.

And then silence.

Brimstone staggered across. I had never seen the big pony look so worn out. Yet in his eyes I could see a strength still, that fury that could drive him to go on and on. The Ranger lay in a crumpled heap. Glimmer hastened over, but from the angle of the helmet, it was clear this was done. She sighed, laying a hoof upon the breastplate.

"Rest with the great heroes of the Orders, noble Ranger."

I blinked a few times before it struck home. On separate sides or not, all Steel Rangers still shared the same bond and hardships they'd endured to be a part of that group. Glimmerlight's reverence for one of their fallen, regardless of intent, was proof enough of that.

Brimstone merely spat blood onto the grilled floor nearby.

"Thought the ones in this area had cleared out, gone to some other Stable near Ponyville lately to try and take it. Least that's what the slavers reported."

Glimmer shrugged.

"Perhaps these ones were still out on long patrol when the others left. Perhaps they were given the mission to retrieve the technology in here first then join their comrades. The Ministries were active in here, so we likely had records of it. To be honest, I wish I could have helped them. The memory orb research is better in their hooves than Red Eye. This is all just..."

Brimstone sat, nursing his face and moving each joint to make sure it still worked properly. By the sounds of it, some didn't, not that he seemed to care. But my attention was on Glimmer. She bent over the Ranger, her magic accessing a panel until the helmet clicked free. Underneath was a snow white and light blue maned mare, hard looking and rough

from days inside the suit. Her neck was twisted at an odd angle. Even as I watched, Glimmer closed her eyes gently, before seeming to sniff.

Friendship wasn't something I really knew, but at that moment even to me it was obvious what she needed.

Limping over, I leaned over to her, wrapping my hooves around her neck and squeezing gently.

Over her shoulder, in the dark of the corner, something shifted. Nothing anypony but me saw. A drifting darkness that flowed from vents and ducts, and never once approached the light. A vague pony shaped head watched as, even today, ponies on the same side were forced to watch one another die because of the fears and dangers around them making them be this way. To see the cycle repeat again, and again...

Feeling Glimmer hold onto me, I watched as the vague shape seemed to tremble, the lidless eyes falling on her bag that carried the research. Tensing, I expected the worst, to reclaim its property.

But hidden from my friends, I watched as it seemed to relax and slide away again. I could only hope that it had seen Glimmerlight as the correct pony at last to take their most treasured items that had caused all this in the first place. That perhaps, under her watch, the research so many died for might still mean something someday.

As it faded, I heard it one last time.

...bing bing!

We spent a minute or two using the second healing orb to allow Glimmer to do what she could for Brimstone. The prototypes barely lasted any time, but it was enough to get him moving properly again.

"Brim? Any ideas when we're out there?"

"Grab the armoury cart, I'll pull it. Get into the outskirts Filly, the areas Red Eye doesn't control, and use the buildings as cover until night falls, then get to the hills."

"Think we can do it?"

"If it kills me. I will get you out, Glimmer."

We paused just short of the door. Breathless, I fell against the wall. Much to my surprise, I felt Brimstone's hoof on my shoulder, back, and neck, all at once.

"...and you, little Murk. You've done more than you ever had to."

Words wouldn't come to me. Looking at the big raider who had once held me against a wall for insulting him, I saw him actually grin a little.

"I may not show it. But I try. You deserve this freedom, Murk."

Unsure how to react, I just tried to smile as well as I could, making Glimmer ruffle my mane again. I could sense that becoming an ongoing thing. She grinned and patted my cheek.

"You really have a big, beautiful, innocent, silly grin, you know that, Murky? You really should smile more often."

Chuckling, I felt giddy as I rounded to stare at the door. I could see nothing from outside against the contrast of light. Was this really happening? There were likely guards outside and a whole heap of danger, plus Barb and his cronies behind us somewhere. It would not be easy. There was every chance that some or all of us would be back in Fillydelphia if caught.

None of us said it, but there was every likelihood that not all of us would succeed or even survive.

“Ready?” Brimstone’s voice rumbled as he rolled his neck, ready to pull a cart.

“I was born ready.” Glimmer grinned, then stopped. “Wait, no. Actually, I was born horny. I got ready around my teens. But ready now! Eh, Murky? Attempt number two. Ready to dare?”

“To dream,” I replied, not paying attention to her confused look.

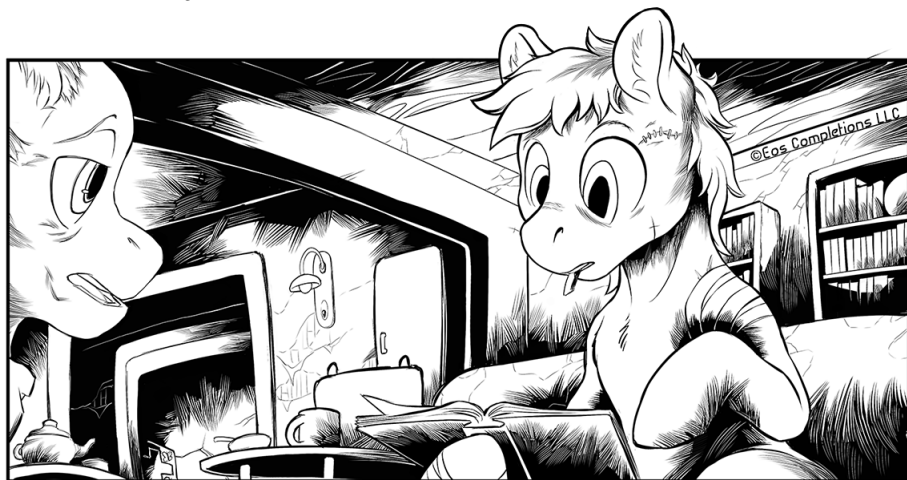
It was unspoken. We simply went. Three ponies, who had found one another in the worst of pits, ready to take a chance in a bid for freedom.

We galloped toward the light... together.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Galloping with Ghosts – Drifting from shadow to shadow, you are that thing that leaves those in the light wondering just what they are facing. Are you even real or not? Or are you simply all in their imagination? When aware of your presence, your foes now have a lower chance to detect your true position.

The Virtue of Freedom



“From where you’re kneeling, it must seem like an eighteen-carat string of bad luck. But the truth is... the game was rigged from the start.”

“What is it like to see your dreams within your grasp?”

A feeling like no other.

In my last attempt, born of desperation, I had launched myself into an impossible situation out of sheer panic and fear of what would happen had I stayed. It was little more than a mad rush into the unknown. It had failed because I had been too hopeful, too blinded by dreams and wishes of what I was going to do once *out* of Fillydelphia to have the presence of mind to actually do it.

I had been doomed to failure before I had even started, becoming nothing more than a game to the griffon guards wanting to check the sentries’ capabilities. In the moment of believing that freedom would be mine, Ragini’s bullet had torn my hopes apart. Rougher than ever, I was hurled back into the pits of Fillydelphia, my confidence shattered and spirit almost broken.

For me, a slave only used to obeying others, the idea that my strength would come from others willing to follow me or lead me through choice was bewildering. Sure, I’d taken inspiration from ponies such as Littlepip, Sundial, and the mare, but to have ponies willing to stay with me every step of the way? That was new.

Amidst Stable Ninety Three, I had been made to realise that the events of the past were not truly that which defined us. Memory held power, both to harm us and to help uplift ourselves. The Ministry scientists had sought to use memories to aid ponies in becoming better through skills and learning, even if it had been mired in the living memories of tragedy. Glimmerlight had shown me that the correct memory at the right time had the power to simply *inspire*. To remind us that we shouldn’t frown because it was lost, but to smile because it had happened.

To show us that our dreams were still out there, waiting for us to go and claim them.

Protégé had once told me that I didn't understand what freedom was. That I could never hope to have the strength to escape Fillydelphia until I knew what it felt like to think and make every choice for myself. From The Master through the Mall, the crater, Hearts and Hooves hospital, and the nightmares of a dead Stable, I had been pushing myself further and further to gain what confidence I could for the attempt I knew was about to happen. I had allies aiding me, pushing me along, sharing our dreams into one unceasing and unflinching need to escape.

A chance like no other. We were outside the walls. Steel Rangers had Red Eye's forces distracted. The cover of an entire city nearby with both the strength of Brimstone Blitz and the resourceful intelligence of Glimmerlight. I could feel it, everything I had ever truly wanted surging in my heart, telling me that we could do it.

We could.

But at that point, there was no way to know the truth.

To know that after this one chaotic rush, I would be homeward bound.

...sounds... just the noise of chaos around me, assaulting my ears...

"Shit! Down! Get down! Where did they come from?!"

"Griffons! They're hiding on the rooftops, oh Goddesses!"

"Murky, just watch the road, they've been dropping mines! They're *still* following us!"

Small pings of metal, each sharp and tinny.

"What was that?!"

"I said they dropping mi— WATCH OUT!"

An explosion, so very violent and sudden, rolling off buildings again and again amongst falling debris.

"...urgh... Glimmer, you—"

"I'm... I think, just shrapnel... hrk... Murky... Murky you alright?"

"I... I..."

"Hold on, we'll get out of here, we'll *all* get out of here. Just a little further!"

"Where's Brimstone!?"

"I don't know! He must be up ahead at the bank or got separated or something, we need to keep going! Find something to help you and me... urgh—"

Heavy sounds. Metal hooves, crashing through rubble and cranked tarmac.

"The Rangers are still in the same street, keep going! KEEP GOING!"

"My-my leg—"

"I know, but we need to go now! Get to me! Inside, Murky! We're almost there!"

And from the distance, a shrieking whistle of something approaching rapidly, rocketing into a solid wall with a deafening roar of a warhead's detonation.

"Watch the building! I-it's coming down!"

Finally, the slow creaking of foundations and rebar starting to bend and give way, crashing down like an avalanche of wood and stone.

"Oh, no... Murky! MURKY! No! Get off me! Get off! My friend, he's still in— ARGH!"

Past the chaos of battle and danger, it slowly drifted away, being replaced by a gentle warmth. It was soft and comforting, draped over me...

Before, I might not have known, but the feeling of somepony else holding me closely was unmistakable after that one life changing embrace Glimmerlight had given me. The first I had ever known as a grown pony. I lay amongst the quiet bliss of another, a sense of serenity and simply taking comfort in somepony else's presence calming my nerves. Felt my hooves against their soft, thick mane, and heard another's heartbeat.

A dream, so obviously a dream. I knew who I *wanted* it to be, but was it her? Was it my Saviour? My Lightbringer? Coming back to rescue me from the searing pain left in me from an hour solid of galloping under fire and taking wounds? I'd like that. To hold her close. I felt myself squeeze a little tighter in need. Soothing delight tinting my every sense as I felt them return the favour.

My eyes wouldn't open; wouldn't see. I simply rested, hearing her voice. Five words. Five words that made my spirit stir and my heart steel against all adversary, but only one of which I could identify.

"Together..."

Light stabbed into my eyes. Dizzy, tangled, and weighed down, I wanted to kick and struggle, but an overwhelming tiredness overtook me. My vision was nothing but white, a bright illumination that slowly began to fade just as much as a creeping agony began to settle in on my skull. I was under something heavy and rugged... a coarse blanket? Something was moving above me in a circle, whirling like the threshing machine, softly *wup wup wup* away.

Every limb felt heavy when I tried to lift them, to roll and try to stand. I could hear trotting nearby, somepony whistling and getting closer. Wanting to try to cry out for Glimmerlight, I instead felt my throat dry up and turn raspy. How long had it been since I'd last taken RadAway?

"Well how 'bout that..."

An older stallion, his voice drawling and tinged with an accent I'd only heard every so often. Movement began to fade into my sight, and my centre of balance finally detected that I was looking upwards. The splitting headache only became worse as I shifted uncomfortably to try and see who it was. Blinking, (ow... even that hurt) I saw the silhouette gradually fade into a pony trotting up to sit beside me. I tried to shift, before stifling back a high pitched cry. My head flared and fired a lance of pain from left to right between the ears. Falling back, I panted on the... the couch or something?

"Woah, woah, easy there. Easy, just relax a second; get your bearings."

I felt a hoof rest on my side, ever so gently pressing me back against the couch until I stopped wriggling. Blinking rapidly, finally things were coming into focus. A musty old room, filled with antique furniture and lit by a hazy yellow drifting through closed blinds over the windows. The old stallion was right before me. Setting my vision on him, struggling to keep my eyes open, I saw a rust coloured earth pony sitting upon an old cushion. A calm smile rested on his face, his eyes meeting mine.

"You've been out a couple a' hours now, had to give you something to keep you sleeping

till the worst was over. Take it slow, and let's see what the damage is."

"I... I— argh!"

Moving my head elicited another sharp pain as though somepony had just hit me over the head with a wooden stick. Something about why I knew what that precisely felt like said a lot about a particular old master of mine.

With slow effort, I finally got my hooves beneath me, unsteadily beginning to settle down on all fours. With my size I could sit right across the couch fairly easily to face my... helper? I hoped so.

"Something, I don't quite know..."

"Let's just keep it simple, there. How 'bout your name?"

He sat back again once I had risen from my side, smoothing out the tough leather claddings he wore and adjusting the red neckerchief. I noticed he did that a lot, like it never quite sat comfortably.

"Murky Number Seven."

"Heh, can't say it's anything I'd have picked, but if that's your name, it's your name. I'm Doc Minstrel. Welcome to my quaint little home. Now, I had to do a little bit of work keeping you alive back there. You were pretty beat up when we found ya."

Slowly, moving on seemingly creaky old limbs, Minstrel leant down and retrieved a cracked, dusty mirror between his front hooves. Blowing over it enough to raise a little cloud of stagnant dust, he set it down before me, allowing me to gaze down. The dust remained still in the thick interior air before dispersing and disappearing within the beams of light in through the windows.

"Now I did the best I could, but can't say I could make it perfect again."

Closing my eyes, I felt my hooves touch the mirror. The cool burnished brass around it felt all too similar to the feeling in my gut. My imagination running riot. My head was hurting so much. He said it wasn't perfect again. What had happened to me?

I didn't want to open my eyes

Dreading the moment, the dull aching in my forehead matching the weak beating of my heart, I slid my eyes open and looked down upon myself.

I gasped sharply, turning to a sharp yelp.

First in shock, then in pain as the sudden motion of trying to throw the mirror away set every aching wound alight. My head, shoulder, back legs, and even one I hadn't felt on my front right hoof seared as I collapsed down shivering. Minstrel moved quickly, his strong, firm hooves holding me in place to prevent further injury. Already my eyes were shedding tears. I had seen...

...him.

Above those matching horrific eyes, I now bore the same scar running from behind my left ear to just above my eye. Red and welted against my muddy green coat, it stood out as a swollen line of both pain and unpleasant memory. The knowledge of my head being permanently marked paled in comparison to that I looked like *him*.

"Whoa there, just stay still! You ain't ready to go all thrashin' around like that just yet, young buck, it'll probably fade in time when your coat grows back a little and the skin heals. But that there wasn't just any reaction to a pretty nasty scar now, was it?"

I shook my head, wincing as that baleful line linking me to him throbbed, shaking tears across the couch beneath me.

"Well, you rest here for now, Murky Number Seven. I get the feeling there's issues here

I'm not seen'. But don' worry; you're safe here."

A thousand questions were vying for attention. One after the other, they wanted to explode forth, but through all the pain, through the mental scarring and above all else, there was only one.

"W-where am I? Am-am I free? Did I get out?"

Doc Minstrel raised an eyebrow, letting me go.

"Hmm, I did have a thought you was a slave. You runnin' from Red Eye?"

"Am I free!? Please! It's taken all my life!"

It was a beg to more than just this stallion. It was to everypony. To my life. To the Goddesses on their stars above and to every bit of fate I had ever been through. Doc Minstrel settled forward, resting his hoof on my back once again. For a second, every worry in my mind rose up. What if... what if I had been dragged back inside Filly? What if this was just Protégé's personal physician he mentioned?

The answer felt like it took a thousand years to arrive. My heart in my mouth as I saw him take a breath.

"We're miles from ol' Filly here, little buck. Don't you worry; you made it just far enough."

He paused, a smile slowly coming across his face as he rubbed my back and got up.

"You're free at last, little slave."

Doc Minstrel wasn't gone long, just enough to fetch a small tray bearing a mug of water and a wet flannel. Trotting in, carefully balancing the tray on his back, he set it down in front of me.

I was quite simply too flabbergasted to even notice.

Free? I was free? My mind struggled to comprehend it, just the sheer scale of being told, well, that! Even as I felt him lift the wet flannel onto my head, I barely even registered the sharp pains at first. I just sat and stared without a sound.

Alright, perhaps I squeaked at the cold shock. No more than a yelp. Maybe a wince too. But no squealing. I was getting better.

"Now, I imagine you've got yourself a fine lot to think about. Lifelong slave to this? Big shift to go it into the wasteland, y'know? So tell me, how'd you even get here? Escaping Fillydelphia isn't exactly easy."

I had been dreading this. While he had fetched water and a cloth, I had simply sat feeling stunned. Minstrel had left my saddlebag near the couch, and after a few false starts, I had dragged my journal across. It was safe; it was still with me. Small marks from where shrapnel had dug into the cover littered the front. It might have felt violating, seeing such a treasured belonging marked like that, but it had always been frayed and well worn, and for all I knew it could have just saved my life by stopping them.

Sitting sadly and quietly, flicking through the pages, I struggled to really come to terms.

Free...

Year after year in servitude. Master after Master. One torture to the next. Scars, whips, and broken wings. Tears, blood, and sweat every unceasing day.

Free.

Less than a week ago I had been shown the truth by the Stable Dweller. I had gone

against my masters, launched a failed attempt to escape that almost claimed my life, and been through a multitude of horrors that grew every time into that one last moment.

Could it really be? I scarcely wanted to believe it.

One last rush. Glimmerlight and Brimstone by my side only... only...

"Hey, kid?"

I blinked back to the present, seeing Minstrel's old face looking at me.

"You alright there?"

"I..."

"Take it as slow as you want, that kinda injury isn't gonna leave you too capable for a while. Now just settle back, Tell me what happened. How did you escape? Mighty impressive that you managed it."

Sighing, I rubbed my sore temples and glanced at the window, into the fuzzy light that revealed nothing outside.

"I don't know if I remember too well It's just all one big blur, like time running too fast. Sound... my friends... oh Goddesses! I don't know what happened to my friends!"

Panic was gripping me. I had fallen, but Glimmer and Brim, Where were they? Why hadn't Minstrel mentioned them? Had they...

"Well, when my assistant Sunny found ya, you was the only one in the area. She was out takin' a look around the Fillydelphia ruins to try and get me a new spark generator battery when she saw you poking out of the rubble. Weren't no one else there..."

Shivering, I tried to remember. Any little detail, anything to help! Maybe I could retrace my steps, find them again! Maybe they had just gotten away, thinking I was dead—oh no...

"I don't remember very much at all, sir."

"Now don't you go 'sir' on me, I go by Minstrel. And I hear you using 'Goddess' there? Mighty long time since I heard anypony talking about that stuff, do wonder where you got that from. Now look, I wouldn't say you've quite got amnesia, you remember enough. You remember their names?"

I slowly nodded.

"Good, I think you've just been shaken by the whole experience, takin' time to digest it. We'll get it out of you, bit by bit. That's what the good doc does. What was the last thing you remember, little Murk?"

Drawing breath slowly, I closed my eyes, but it wouldn't appear. Just blurred images and some memories that were much too far back. Eventually, I began flicking through my journal, memory by memory. From Littlepip soaring above me, to Brimstone standing guard over Glimmerlight. One by one, memories formed, solidified and began to return.

Picking up my charcoal stick, I knew how I would remember better. Lowering my head, I began to draw. Allowing my subconscious to take over, lines sweeping back and forth, ignoring the pains it caused my head.

Shapes formed without even meaning to, I felt it flow from me, the emotion that no injury could *ever* take away erupting into my work. A great circular doorway, beaming with light before three ponies.

"We were in a Stable... the Steel Rangers attacked Red Eye's army, so we were going to take the chance..."

The three ponies were galloping, charging into the light, toward the...

...wasteland outside. As one, Brimstone, Glimmerlight, and myself hopped over the metal rung of the door and charged toward freedom.

We should have known they'd be watching the entrance.

Our gallop was brought to an almost immediate halt by the scene ahead of us. The slavers were, for the most part, utterly devastated. The ground was littered with the wreckage of exploded wagons, their steel bars bent and warped around flipped running bases. The stronger winds kicking up were sweeping loose cloth, torn barding, and indeed, even the bloody specks of dust into a small, but foul dust storm across the plains around the hillside. Equipment was strewn around the corpses of any who had resisted or what was left of them. Steel Ranger weaponry left little in its wake.

Worse, there were three Steel Rangers standing directly before us. The dark metal of power armour towered amidst the swirling dust above every one of the prisoners they had taken. I saw a very angry looking Mosin lying against a rock, shrapnel wounds preventing him moving. Each Steel Ranger bore massive weaponry. The first with dual long rifles similar to what I had seen griffons carrying, the next a combination of gatling cannon and seemingly a box of missiles, while the third had what seemed to be a small, portable piece of *artillery* across his or her back. Gender was impossible to tell; all three wore identical types of suits.

"Halt! All looters will remain where they are!"

The voice, male, held authority and force, booming from the external speakers in the helmet. I felt my hooves lock and stop on the spot, falling to the ground beside Glimmerlight. Brimstone started grimly at them, snarling deeply as his hooves scraped the ground. I saw the two lighter armed Rangers brace themselves, their weapons swinging to face him. Behind me I could still hear their comrades inside battling with Barb's raiders, but it seemed out here the Rangers had won, and had the entrance completely in their favour. Nopony could come out of such a thin exit into this firepower.

"We're slaves, Paladins!" Glimmerlight's voice rung true over the wind, albeit tired and shaky. "We mean no harm, and we own no loot! Just let us past and you'll never hear from us!"

Apparently, she did not find this a good time to mention her own past allegiances.

I began to feel my muscles clench in fear as the leader, bearing the huge cannon, looked away from her and curiously turned his head directly to me.

"Tis a lie! The little one will step forward and relieve himself of the PipBuck fragment!"

What? Sundial's PipBuck?! I had just begun to finally feel like it was truly mine now; his life and the meanings he was giving, they weren't for being stored away! He wanted them told and known to somepony who found it!

"It's just a non-functioning fragment, Paladin! It's no use; I checked it myself. Just a piece of old scrap now."

"Not for you to decide, *slave*. We have trained scribes who would restore it to glory and take its place among the records we guard. Now *pass it over immediately!*"

Glimmerlight scowled, muttering quietly out of the side of her mouth, "Fillydelphian Scribes couldn't tell a working PipBuck from the rods shoved up their asses..."

"*What was that!?*"

"Look, it's a hunk of scrap! Argh, I'm gonna regret this. I am of the Bucklynn Cross Steel Rangers! Initiate Glimmerlight, daughter of Paladin Candy Floss! You have my word that

the PipBuck will be returned to our records when we get out of here; I'm repairing it myself. I can quote the regs if you *really* want me to!"

Standing beside her, I never realised how much I was shivering. Brimstone looked ready to charge them, however pointlessly, any second. Meanwhile, the Rangers had every gun trained on us with an intensity I hadn't even seen in the most loyal griffons of Red Eye's army. This could go very bad, very quickly, and we didn't have much time if Barb's raiders won out inside and surged from behind us.

Much to my surprise, however, the leader raised his weapons away and trotted forward, sliding the helmet from his head. A dark orange stallion of rough face and weathered eyes glared at Glimmerlight.

"I know Candy Floss. She is a strong Paladin. But the word of the Rangers matters little these days between brothers and sisters of the chapters. *Traitor* Steelhooves has declared his independence of us and taken many of the Rangers with him. The Orders are in uproar, Bucklynn Cross included. Our own Order has left for Stable Two in Sweet Apple Acres, Initiate Glimmerlight. After we have extradited all remaining technology from here worth taking, we shall join them. I am afraid that I cannot trust such a... rogue element as you to your word. However, as a matter of respect for your mother, I will permit you to leave peacefully *if* you hand over the PipBuck. The mission is above all, Initiate, you know this!"

"Steelhooves went rogue?"

Glimmerlight barely did more than whisper it, a look of odd longing and wishful nature in her eyes, before shaking it free. The Paladin ahead narrowed his eyes, stomping a rock so hard it cracked beneath him.

"That is our *only* offer! Give up the PipBuck!"

The last command was shouted at me. Offended that I even felt my limbs twitch to obey, I just staggered backwards, holding it closely while I trotted on three legs.

"Now, slave! I will *not* ask again!" The weapons lowered, pointed directly at me.

"Please, don't..." My mouth barely staggered the words out, shaking my head and trying to work out how to just run away. I didn't want to give it up.

The two Rangers flanking their leader advanced, thudding their hooves on the ground as their large weight began moving towards me. Swerving, Brimstone leapt before them, growling and scraping the ground with his front hoof. I'd seen that look before when he had murdered an innocent slave. This was too close to kicking off. I'd have to give it over, it meant so much, but what we were after was worth so much more to risk a confrontation over Sundial's—

The lead Paladin's head exploded.

Droplets of blood sprayed in all directions, coating his armour, his comrades' armour, and mixed with the spilt blood of the slavers below.

With that, hell was unleashed. Sniper shots rained down from above, high calibre rounds sparking off armour and cracking off rocks. The Steel Rangers reacted with speed that defied their weight and size, swinging their weaponry to the skies, to where I saw the griffons loyal to Red Eye divebomb from the clouds above. The sky in between quickly became a death zone, as the Rangers unloaded their weapons indiscriminately. Rockets roared, cannons whirled and screamed amidst the thick booms of the huge rifles. A criss cross of heavy firepower that sent griffons whirling through the barrage on their rocketing descent. Screaming, I fell to the side, my ears assaulted and stinging under the overwhelming noise. Bullets pinged off rocks around me, kicking up plumes of the earth or loose gravel mere feet

away as the rounds ricocheted off Ranger armour towards us.

“—urk! Follow—”

I'd only heard a fragment, but that was Brimstone's voice! Scrambling, I scampered from rock to rock, staying as low as possible. I saw the Rangers thundering away as little blue tinged grenades tumbled from the sky above. I hastily shielded my eyes from the magical blast. A dull thump rocked the ground, a rocket whooshed, and an explosion lit the sky among the 'flying V' of griffons. Spotting Brimstone and Glimmerlight running for the flanks of the battle, I saw Glimmer look back and scream for me to get out of the area. She must have thought I was behind her! I put my head down and ran, before skidding to a halt in shock.

With a wet splatter, a shredded griffon corpse collapsed ahead of me. The blood erupted from his chest on impact, spraying across the front of my body and face. Crying out loud, I turned and galloped directly away to the side, into the smoke to avoid the remaining rounds that pulverised the fallen body.

“Murky! This way! Follow my voice! I know you'll hear me!”

The gunfire, downwash from griffon wings and the furious stomping of Steel Rangers were kicking up so much dust that I couldn't see anything. Corpses littered the ground around me. I passed the Paladin that had been shot in the head, realising I'd somehow wandered back toward the middle. Red Eye's slavers the Rangers had taken prisoner crouched behind rocks screaming to the skies. Doubling back, I again headed for where I'd last seen my friends through the dust.

“Yeah! You go get em, Stern!”

“Kill those metal fuckers!”

A huge female griffon swooped low, a large anti-machine rifle in her talons, and landed behind the rifle wielding Ranger. I had seen her before. This was Red Eye's second-in-command, Stern. Possibly the most lethal griffon in Fillydelphia. Whipping that rifle around with almost freakish speed, she planted it right against the Ranger and pulled the trigger.

At that range, the armour stood no chance, even on Steel Rangers. I witnessed a small hole punched in one side, and half of a pony disgustingly blown out of the other. Propelled by the blast, the Ranger's armour collapsed. Before it had hit the ground, Stern was gone again, taking to the skies with a powerful stroke of her wings before the remaining Ranger could bring its weapons to bear. Banking into the wind, she rejoined the head of the griffon formation.

Ponies and griffons died on all sides around me. Caught in the middle, I only now saw the truth of the wasteland.

I had once believed that slaves suffered and slavers prospered. That was how it *worked*.

But here, as I felt a wet crunch, my hoof recoiled as it landed atop the chest cavity of a dead slave, eyes lidless and staring upwards. He lay torn wide open by Steel Ranger weaponry, presumably as he had tried to run from the Stable.

Slaves killed by Rangers, slavers around me falling from the skies as they were torn from the skies by even one remaining Paladin. Nearby lay one of the proud warriors, Stern's work. Behind me, I knew there would be more coming after either the raiders or Rangers survived. Then it would all begin again with *whoever* won out here.

No pony on any pony's side, just one huge circle of violence and distrust.

Barb hadn't been wrong.

Staggering over the sharp rocks to the side of the road leading up to the Stable door, I fell against one of the large boulders dotted around. I'd made it out of the melee itself, but I was still only metres away from it, crawling through clouds and keeping below rounds punching through the air. I could only hear snaps, gunshots, and screams, and more Rangers charge from the Stable, followed by the howl of raiders chasing them. This had just escalated. I had no sense of setting, no concept of clear lines of battle or which side was winning. Just one huge mess of confused sensory overload.

I galloped for all I was worth, passing slavers trying to grab weapons around me, only to be torn apart while fighting back desperately. I saw raiders leaping on them, biting throats and feverishly bucking. Rudimentary knives and gifted weaponry for the job was used on their masters. One raider with blood pouring down one side of his face saw me, screamed and gave chase.

"Come 'ere little buck! Gonna get ya!"

Screaming, I ran, hearing his hooves clatter on the rocks behind as he grabbed a discarded dagger and gave chase. I couldn't see anything! Where was I going?

"Murky! MURKY!"

Wait... left. Or was that right? I couldn't tell! I hadn't known battles would be this confusing! What if something just hit me? What if—

"Got ya!"

Screaming in terror, I felt the raider leap on me from behind. His long strides had caught me far faster than I'd imagined without seeing anything in the dust. I bucked with my right hoof, catching nothing. Briefly, I felt us struggle as I tried to get away, his mangy hide rubbing hideously against me while we fell, rolling one over the other down the shallow slope. With a wing aching thud, he landed atop me. Looking behind me, I screamed again and I saw the knife in his mouth descend and land clean.

I had been shot before. The sheer shock had immobilised me. But this... I cried out, throwing my head backwards and howling into the air in agony when I felt the four inches of cold metal penetrate my left shoulder...

...and *twist*.

My ears picked up the sucking wet sound as the wound opened.

My scream didn't stop. I howled, begged, and cried out as the weapon yanked out, leaving me to bleed. Thrashing on the floor, I tried to hold a hoof over the wound, crying in pain as I registered the feeling of a new, wet hole in my shoulder. The raider reared up, ducked as a griffon whipped overhead and licked the knife clean with a delightful giggle, watching me squirm and scream. Suddenly, he glanced around.

"Ah, shit. You bleed out! Blood flows in the wasteland, little pony. Blood flows. I'll be back for you!"

Without warning, he left. The reasoning only became clear as I felt the passing minor earthquake (to me) of a Steel Ranger galloping past into better cover. I simply lay there, flailing among the rocks, bleeding amidst it all, screaming for anyone, from Glimmerlight to Littlepip, even my mother. I wasn't alone. A griffon was trying to clutch her lower body nearby, after shrapnel had sliced across her belly. My throat was becoming hoarse from shouting, rough and sore. Already I was feeling light headed...

"Rangers! Gallop to the city! We shall bring them low in urban warfare!"

"Griffons! They're trying to retreat! Hound them!"

It occurred to me that my hypersensitive hearing was picking up *both sides'* commands.

The fears of being left alone to bleed out amongst the dead and dying began to filter in. I don't want it to be slow, by all the Goddesses I didn't want to be left here for that! It hurt so much...

Then I was being pulled, roughly and without care. Whimpering and clutching my shoulder, I saw the trail of blood behind me on the rocks. The sight made me want to throw up, it wasn't a small amount either. Ahead of me, I saw a Steel Ranger firing in indiscriminate circles at a shadow that seemed to bounce around him. With sudden jerks, I saw the Ranger flinch as the shadow passed by him again and again...

Barb.

Feeling myself being dumped, I saw shapes around me. Whimpering pathetically, I tried to fight them off with my good hoof, to get up. The raiders had pulled me behind the rocks to gut me with that knife or execute me with that pistol or—

“Murky! It's me! Stop it! What are you—”

Glimmer's voice stopped as I felt more than saw her pay attention to my shoulder. Blood was flowing freely. I tried to reach for her...

“Oh... oh fuck. BRIM! He's hurt! They got him!”

“It won't kill him immediately, get him in the wagon now!”

Finally, my vision focused as I saw Glimmerlight bent over me, shielding me with herself, lifting me towards something... wait, Mosin's armoury wagon! The thick metal plated wagon lay on its side. I could see the huge figure of Brimstone, unmistakable by silhouette even through thick vision obscuring conditions, heaving and lifting the massive wagon by his own strength. Creaking, the old FunFarm circus trailer finally lurched back onto its wheels.

Behind Brimstone, a figure began running directly for him, a bayoneted rifle held in mouth.

“Ngh, Brim! Behind you!”

My scream, pitching to the point my voice broke, caught even Glimmerlight off guard, twisting off me as she too saw the furious charging figure of a slaver trying to prevent our escape, his gas mask fallen to dangle from his neck. Slipping his assault rifle from his back, Brim flipped it into the air, caught the barrel in his mouth and swung it *hard*. The butt connected solidly with the slaver's own gun, knocking it clean from his filthy mouth, along with a few yellowed teeth. The return stroke snapped his head around far too quickly to be healthy, landing the slaver face down at an awkward angle, quite dead.

Brimstone looked at the rifle in his mouth, now snapped in two from the impact, before spitting it away.

“‘Unbreakable’... aye right, ye vodka heaving old bastard...”

Crying out in pain as Glimmerlight pulled me into the wagon, I flopped onto the floor. I could feel her jump in behind me while Brimstone hooked himself to the front. I saw puncture marks kick through the metal sides of the wagon. Some penetrated, missing us by scant inches. Glimmerlight yanked me backwards away from it and toward the back. I tried to do it myself, but my hooves were like lead, barely able to function from the exertion. Brimstone bellowed back from the front.

“Hold on! They're going to gun for us as much as any Ranger. So we'll use the scraps as armed cover!”

“Brim, the Rangers will—”

“They have bigger problems than some escaping slaves! But if we're near them, then they

are a bigger threat! **Hold on!**"

Stuck in the back, I screamed again as I tried and failed to hold the blood in. Why couldn't I stop it? I didn't want to lose my blood! How would I get it back? I felt dizzy, thinking stupid thoughts.

"Glimmer... Glimmer..."

"Hush, Murky, lemme have a look around here."

With a jerk, the entire wagon began moving at a rate far faster than it was ever designed for. Items fell from shelves as Brimstone dragged it over the rough terrain. Doing her best, Glimmerlight pulled the shutters with her magic and dragged over a box bearing the same symbols as my saddlebag.

"Drink up... oh Murky, I'm so sorry..."

As I felt the purple liquid held to my mouth, the entire battle seemed to drain away into the background. Replaced only with occasional snap shots of griffons on the retreating of the Rangers. Evidently their armour let them keep pace as I felt them gallop all around us. But I couldn't concentrate on much for long. It hurt so much... please stop it hurting...

Glimmerlight simply held me as we put our trust in Brimstone Blitz's determination. Even as I felt the healing potion aid the pain and begin to stem the bleeding, I just still cried at the memory of the raider attack.

I hadn't even properly realised how afraid I was. The things that happened out here in the wasteland...

In many ways, although I felt ashamed at how I looked like this, I kept thinking how much safer I was with them. Sniffling, I pushed my head towards Glimmerlight's shoulder, crying it out...

...into her shoulder. I finished the last sketchy lines of her own front legs curled around me. Sniffling, I sat back from my sketch, seeing Doc Minstrel cast a glance down. The couch now held a few drawings that had helped me remember. Minstrel had been a good listener.

"Well, that'd explain the wound you had on your shoulder there, Murk." His voice was slow, watching me glance at the bandages on my shoulder. There were still red marks of blood seeping through them.

Remembering the feeling of the weapon puncturing my flesh, I shivered.

"That Glim-girl probably saved your life with that healing potion to stem the bleeding. Kill off infection too. Them raiders have filthy weapons, as good as any poison, really, if untreated. Still, brave move you folks did to make your escape. Stealing their wagon? Hehe, reminds me of my younger days in the wastes."

I listened to him only slightly, sighing as I glanced back at Glimmerlight and myself in my sketch. Where were my friends? I hadn't properly felt like I *missed* anypony since my mother. But now they were out there somewhere without me. Did they escape? Were they taken back? Brimstone had... had he disappeared and—urgh!

Winching, my hoof gently went to my head. With a groan I settled back down, apparently furrowing my brow in concern was enough to hurt that... *that* scar. Doc Minstrel patted my shoulder, getting up.

"You've had a rough time, but don't try and force it. A little memory fuzziness isn't entirely uncommon with traumatic head injuries. Really, aside from a little scarring, give

yourself a bit longer for the healing potions to work and stay safe for a while and you should be right as rain.”

If only I shared that. The mirror sat across the couch now, but every glance, every half hearted look only reminded me of the horrible shared features...

I wasn't going to be his... no. No matter what he said or what happened.

“Now look, that's only one of your problems. You're badly malnourished. How much have you had to eat in the last week?”

“Half a can of beans, a small apple stew and some bits of oatmeal...”

Minstrel seemed to stop, his mouth hanging open as if expecting me to go on. Eventually, I saw his eyes glance down to my stomach, before tutting and shaking his head.

“We better get somethin' in ya. Healing process works better on a stomach that isn't eating itself out of hunger. No wonder you're so small if you didn't get those nutrients while growing up. Let's get you up and over to the table.”

He moved alongside me, wrapping hooves across my torso and nodding ready. Taking a few breaths, I edged off the side, dropping my two left hooves to the ground and—

“Ooohhh...”

The light seemed to blur in the air, my vision becoming blurry and indistinct. The scar *ached*, feeling like my skull was shifting as my body took responsibility for my balance once again. Falling against Doc Minstrel, I let him support my weight until the moment passed. I saw him pick up my journal for me.

“That's it. Won't be easy for a few minutes. Just trot it off, gently does it...”

Step after hesitant, limping step, I moved across the room. Little sound emerged from outside, just the wind and the banging of shutters on his home. Every window was covered for warmth. The ten foot journey to a cushion on the floor felt like I had run for the Wall all over again, and I gratefully sat back on my haunches to lean on the table to breathe.

“I... I don't feel well...”

“Cause you got nuthin' in you to sustain activity, lil' Murk! Your stomach's tryin' to digest stuff that ain't there. Just sit there a second.”

He left towards a musty old kitchen down the corridor of the house. Left alone, I pondered, looking around. Doc Minstrel was fairly well off; the home was cosy, seemingly secure, and somewhat comfortable. Probably why I hadn't yet properly grasped my freedom was the lack of a view outside. My thoughts drifted to Glimmer and Brim again, but no answers could come of it. Maybe when I began to remember more of what happened...

I heard Minstrel approaching again. A plate of dry looking biscuits beside stale fruit was laid before me. I hadn't expected much; the wasteland was never going to be easy for food. But at least it was better than the vomit inducing slimy oatmeal Whiplash had fed me. Sitting opposite me, Minstrel smiled gently. I sat and stared back, glancing back at the food every so often.

“Is something wrong, Murk?”

“I...” My voice faltered, I realised I'd been waiting for him to permit me to eat. Treating him as a master. It took me some effort to bite down the wave of upsetting feelings that caused and get to the food before me. “No, nothing's wrong...”

“Hm.” Minstrel didn't sound convinced, nodding after a few seconds. Clearly, he was rather perceptive of mental states. “You have to learn to be your own buck, Murk. Out here, nopony's gonna tell you what you need to do to survive all the time.”

“It's hard. I don't know how! Even with my friends, I just followed, usually. All my life,

master and slave. Command and follow. But now I don't know what I should do. I thought it'd all come to me."

"Don't worry for now, we'll come back to that. Just eat."

Without much hesitation, I dug in. I felt my shrunken stomach bulge a little with the amount (still less than a normal pony would feel sated with, I imagined) while listening to Minstrel telling me of himself. Apparently he made a living by selling things he found in the ruins of Fillydelphia, using battles between Red Eye and the Rangers as cover to sneak in and out. These days, his assistant Sunny did the job far more often. Between the two of them, they could fix things up to sell for a higher price. The goal, however, was to eventually sell enough to relocate off towards the central wastes where it was much safer. Apparently, that wouldn't be too long from now, he seemed hopeful.

To tell the truth, though, I only barely listened. My eyes were focused either on the food or on the windows that I kept trying to imagine the expansive wasteland behind. What would be the first thing I would see? The great valleys that led towards Manehattan? An old town safe to wander around in?

But really, it was fear that drove me to think and worry to distraction. The Master could be spreading out to hunt for me, those shackles and collars of his clinking at his side ready to—

I needed to get going.

"I can't wait around here too long. Red Eye might come to look for me, or my Master."

Minstrel sighed, reaching across to my good shoulder again.

"You don't *have* a master now, Murk. I think you're going to have to take time to get used to that. Where do you think you'll go?"

My mouth opened, but no words came out. I didn't know. Where was I supposed to go? Which direction? What was my goal? Sickeningly, I felt part of my mind wish somepony would tell me what to do. Fighting the revulsion, I just screwed my eyes shut, lowering my head.

"Well, gather your thoughts. Whether it's to hunt for your friends or whatever, but you're safe here. Red Eye's cronies never come here, too off the beaten track if you get me. Let's just take our time, get you ready to move and help you remember just what happened before good ol' Sunny found you, alright? Best wait till Sunny is back anyways. She might know something about your friends."

Briefly, my mind rebelled that I was only nodding because he had told me what to do. Sniffing, I pulled across my journal from where he had left it.

"I—hmk—I don't want to be a slave. But I can't stop thinking it..."

"Just take your time and draw, Murk. There's no rush now. I'm not going to whip you for not doing something immediately."

His voice was calming, allowing me to sniff sharply and open a new page.

"We... we were escaping in the wagon."

Thick black lines appeared, the outline of the wagon hurtling under Brimstone's power. The steely look of determination tinged with fury on his face. Moving aside, I began drawing other shapes around us... in the air, Rangers and griffons...

"The Rangers ignored us but the griffons started dropping bombs and mines."

With strong sudden draws of charcoal, the explosion filled the ground in front of the wagon, casting...

...dirt up into the air that pelted the top of Mosin's mobile armoury. Ducking at the painful sound, I peeked through my hooves to see Glimmerlight opening fire with every rifle and pistol she could find within the wagon. Either through one of the slit windows or by leaning out the door, she tried to force off the griffons before they could line up their throws. She was trained, aimed properly, and seemed pretty cool under fire, but the wagon was being hurled every which way under Brimstone's steam that ruined her aim. We hit a bump so large I felt all four of my hooves leave the floor before clattering down. My shoulder ached, but the wound had clotted over for now after two healing potions and a thick wad of bandage.

"Hey, Brim! Can you get off the main road? They might leave us alone if we disappear now!"

There was no reply, the cacophony of sound was beginning to give me a headache. Rangers thundering down the road around us were stopping every few seconds to dissuade the griffons with their heavy weaponry. The run from the Stable had cost them one more armoured warrior, but now that we were within the ruins of Fillydelphia, the urban environment was beginning to give them a chance. Already, the crowd of them around us had gradually passed away to take up positions inside ruined homes or warehouses.

Glimmerlight fell back suddenly with a cry of shock. Gasping, I threw myself to her, searching for the wound. What was I meant to do for gunshots? She gently pushed me away, struggling to keep her balance in the madly bucking trailer.

"It's alright! Murky, I'm fine! Just had a round next to me—bit of a surprise. Got any alcohol?"

"Ah... huh?"

"None of Mosin's vodka around? Ah shit, I usually aim better with a shot or two in me. Brim! I said, could we—WOAH!"

Echoing her sentiment, I clung to the workbench as the wagon turned sharp to the right, reeled up on two wheels and struck a wall with a metallic crash that stripped some plates of armour entirely off. We were flung around, the world twisting up before it all landed again with a bone shaking slam. Various empty firearms scattered out of the open door behind us to tumble on the road. The little thief inside me couldn't help but feel a wince of pain at such a waste of potential items to acquire once we got away.

Through the windows, I saw nothing but brickwork and shadows. We were in an alleyway. Slipping my goggles over my eyes (I felt safer from bullets and wasn't about to argue the harsher rules of reality) I dared to poke my head up to a slit window, seeing no griffons above us. Just the two thin walls of the alleyway between a pair of huge buildings.

"I-I think they're gone."

Popping her head out of the front window, I saw Glimmer lean down to Brimstone's torn ear.

"Next time, you gonna warn me before you decide to throw us around like that?"

Brimstone's voice seemed all the more deadpan amidst his clear concentration and focus.

"Figured you were used to being bucked about hard."

"I... *what!*? Why... you... ARGH!"

She slammed the slit window shut and turned back to me, fuming for a few seconds with crossed legs, before shaking her head and uttering a small laugh.

"I swear, someday if I ever grow up, I'll look back and cringe. You promise to remind me to never become an old cynical bastard like him, Murky?"

At the moment, I was still shivering and holding on to the workbench leg as though it would protect me from every horrible thing in Equestria. Chuckling, she gently eased me from it. Well, perhaps she had a little difficulty. That table leg felt *safe*.

"I... I promise? I think..." Stammering, I found myself fighting all the emotions in my head. Why couldn't I handle emotions like anypony else? Fear of being caught or dying mixed with an elation at our escape attempt and that we were outside the Wall! My eyes felt like they had run dry minutes ago while I had been lying wounded. My shoulder still gave me a sickening feeling every time I moved it. I had seen ponies receive so much worse, but one stab had broken my determination into a blubbing wreck. I didn't feel brave like those who could take an injury and keep going, like Brimstone.

How would I ever manage out here?

My thoughts were pushed away when I felt a rusty old revolver and what looked like a cut down combat rifle thrust at me by Glimmer.

"Here, keep yourself occupied. We'll need these before this is out. Get them loaded up for me, I'll see if we can find something for you too."

Her voice was calmer, more stoic than before. Looking at her pulling the same bolt action she had in the Stable apart to check something, I saw every inch the grim training that Ranger Initiates must have had to go through. Every motion mechanical, like their suits, even when not in them or not intended to ever wear them. Still fighting for balance, and occasionally feeling the wagon grind against a wall, I began to pick up the guns to load. (And in the process, discovering precisely why I had only ever seen unicorns carry revolvers.)

We had a straight run. This alleyway was almost fully protected from aerial strikes, and once we were past the exit into the next road, we'd be gone! It was the only way out of the alley, so no ambushes!

"Here, Murky, try this out."

Her magic floated across a small pistol (I had long since checked for battle saddles) that I bit into. The grip felt small enough for my mouth, the trigger thick and easy to find. The, uh, thing that held bullets seemed to be full already.

"You've got seven rounds in there, Murky, tongue back for safety, forward to fire. Recoil should be low, I think."

"You think?" I muttered around the weapon. Only a small chance of knocking one of my teeth out then? I spat it out to hang around my neck on its cord before going back to my work on her guns.

"Personally I think I'd just prefer—"

"A battle saddle. We *know*."

Nonplussed, I continued. "No no! I mean, like, mines. I like to... um... run away, you see. I could drop them behind me or-or put them places where I knew somepony was going to come out of!"

Glimmerlight stopped where she was, staring at me as though I had just shot her by accident.

"Somewhere you knew somepony was going to come out... *shit!*"

Dropping, the long barrelled pistol at her hooves, she leapt to the slit window at the front.

"Brim! The alleyway is mi—"

She was seconds too late. Brimstone must have leapt over it by sheer chance. But we had not.

Never had my world accelerated so fast. I lost all hearing, blasted into a ringing oblivion, as I felt the armoured floor of the wagon catapult up underneath me amidst a roaring explosion that flared through every window. Briefly, I became weightless within a wagon that had been blown vertically up and over, rolling end over end. I felt my mouth open, screaming as I impacted from wall to wall, unknowing of which way was up or down. The workbench collided with my ribs before a final crunch hurled me away, I impacted on something, tumbling over or through it... Everything turned red. Pain flooded every joint and every muscle when I landed in a heap, rolling multiple times to a halt on... dirt?

Groaning, I opened my eyes onto a scene of devastation. The red was not my vision being lost, it was Fillydelphia in general. The wagon had been thrown so hard I had been sent flying out of the door. The armoured transport's underside was bent and shattered around an odd V-shape of design welded on. I tried to move, before finding just why that was such a mistake. Nothing seemed badly hurt, but I felt bruised all over and shivery. My shoulder bandage was turning red again. I could feel the blood trickling under it.

Gradually, sound returned like the roaring of hard rain, and I tried to crawl back towards the wagon. I could see Brimstone, thrown with the wagon, bucking the harness off himself. His hide bore several red spots below the dirt, and I saw him pull a small shard of metal from his torso with a grunt. Glimmerlight was flopped over the door, holding her head. Her nose was bleeding, but she seemed unharmed.

"Murky! Get into cover! Quickly!"

Doing the best I could, I dragged myself towards the burning wagon. Brimstone pulled Glimmerlight down behind it while she tried to regain her senses. Around me I saw little plumes of dirt kick up.

A flutter... many flutters...

Griffons! There were half a dozen above us, circling and leaping roof to roof into firing positions. Finding strength born of lethal danger, I limped and staggered to fall into cover beside Brimstone and Glimmerlight. The big raider had grabbed a combat rifle and was letting rattling shots off from his mouth to dissuade the griffons from coming any closer. They didn't know he likely couldn't hit them even at ten feet.

I cowered behind the wagon, feeling the heat of the flames on the side of my face. What was I meant to do? I didn't know and—

"Get this in your mouth and keep their heads down!"

Brimstone shoved the small pistol from around my neck almost directly into my mouth. Shivering, I tried, I really did, but every impact on our hiding spot from the griffon snipers made me want to cry and curl up under the nearest object. I couldn't do this!

Closing my eyes, I heard Brimstone curse as he saw me fall down and cover my ears, simply crying away instead of helping like I should. I tried to blank my mind, imagine everything as nice again. Around me, I saw this warehouse estate as bustling. There were ponies laughing as they worked, knowing they were safe! Yes, safe! I'd go and find the ponies I liked and be safe! Like... like that ice cream cart over there that *totally* wasn't a ruined shell now! Or that café that didn't have a pegasus sky chariot crashed through the front door!

I just wanted things to be better, not stuck in the middle of a failing escape attempt about to be shot! I didn't want to be shot again! Every part of my mind was focused on trying to fool myself into thinking I wasn't really where I was, that I was back on the rock farm! Or

back in even Old Equestria to just get away from it! The slave in my mind was screaming, cursing, and slapping my face to get back in line. If I ran out and gave up, they'd take me back! They only shot at Brim and Glimmer because they were fighting back!

Gunfights were too much. I just wanted—

“...to be better!”

The voice louder than any sound of my messed up subconscious. The great DJ. I checked my PipBuck, but I couldn't be sure. Was I hearing his voice at the wonderful right time, or just remembering?

“The obstacles in our path can be overcome if we just work together. So don't abandon those you care about y'hear?”

Beside me, I saw Glimmer reel back as a ricochet skiffed her neck, replacing the cuts she had healed from the fight in the Stable. I saw the blood running from Brimstone's shrapnel wound. I was abandoning them to fight on my behalf.

“Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better... no matter what horrors we all must share along the way.”

That we must *share*.

Protégé had told me that I didn't have the mindset or determination to escape Fillydelphia. I'd found others to help me replace it with their own strength. But now I was taking that for granted, hiding while they risked danger. How many times had I drawn myself succeeding at escaping now?

Time to make it a reality.

I picked up the pistol again... clambering up and throwing my goggles onto my head after they had steamed up from my tears. I was still crying, but I didn't care. That wouldn't ever stop. Pulling my weight up on my good hoof, I cast a glance around at the buildings that were opening fire on us. Celestia, give me the great strength to do this!

Aiming at the first one I saw, my tongue pulled the trigger.

In the space of that single shot, past the concussive pain in my ears, I felt the fear fade. A strand of concrete exploded into pieces three feet to the right of the griffon, but I saw her duck because of it. I could do this! Turning my head, I aimed for where I heard the sizzle of an energy weapon and followed the contrail of red to the source. Two squeezes, two loud *bangs* that hurt my head. They both missed, but I saw Glimmerlight given a chance to think, aim, and fire the long bolt action rifle accurately enough to snap the griffon back from her perch. Whether by injury or just armour impact was unknown.

Together, I fought with them. I fought to defend them. To help them. I fought for our freedom, with friends, and I felt stronger than I ever had for aiding in that moment.

“Cover me!” The voice wasn't Brimstone or Glimmerlight, it was a griffon! I screamed for them to get down before the griffons unleashed everything they had at us. My ears, through the noise, picked up a flutter of wings... they were on the move to outflank us and—

“Yargh!”

A bullet pinged in from the side of the wagon, rebounding just in front of my eyes. Brimstone shoved me below the wreckage, firing a burst at the griffon who had snuck around under their cover. Behind us, I could hear three more flying for the alleyway to get behind us. Soon, my help or not, we'd be overwhelmed.

“Fucking chickens not wanting to come down and tussle hooves with me... I *hate* griffons.” Brimstone complained as he dumped his last rounds at them and dropped the rifle with a snarl.

"To be fair, they don't have hooves, Brim." Glimmerlight's humour was forced through clenched teeth, the last round sprung from her rifle. There were others on the ground somewhere. But in the wreckage, it was all too dirt covered and scattered to identify what rounds were for which gun in time. I had a few shots left, but my participation was hardly stellar, as spirited as I felt.

"We're going to die, aren't we?" I felt myself asking through my wet eyes to Glimmer, surprising myself with how steady my voice was.

She sighed, looking around the rooftops, before grinning and pulling an apple shaped grenade from the armoury wagon. Brimstone shook his head disapprovingly.

"Grenades aren't known for taking care of flying enemies too well, Glim."

Glimmerlight's grin only widened and turned almost crazed as she raised the Want-It-Need-It spell orb up alongside the grenade.

Brimstone's eyebrows raised.

"Well now, that's just playing dirty."

The spell orb flickered...

...toward her horn, drawn in shades by rubbing my hoof over it, creating the look of magic as best I could. She had saved us, my sketch showing her originality in putting two elements together. My charcoal curved around her almost gleeful eyes as the nearly wicked plan entered her mind. Minstrel watched from beside me, carefully listening as I recounted what I could. How we had averted our eyes and galloped onward into the buildings to seek cover from above. Stopping, I just looked down at her face. Already, I was missing that casually crazed mindset of hers.

"She mean a lot to you, kid?"

Sniffing, I sat back and nodded. "I only met her less than a day ago. Glimmerlight was the first pony to ever hug me that wasn't my mother. She just cares so much. Even if she is quite... um..."

Blushing, I looked away, prompting Minstrel to chuckle and pick up my empty plate between his hooves and settle it on an old tray.

"Yes, I quite got the impression she isn't a mare who intends to think 'long term' very much from how you spoke. In all senses of the words. Me? I think I'm happier to settle. Or at least, I hope to soon."

My head was lowered, as it often naturally fell to, while turning to watch him place the tray on a nearby table out of the way.

"You're settling with Sunny?"

Minstrel laughed. "Sunny? Hah! Oh no, my friend. She's my number one assistant, protector, and friend. But she's also a good twenty years younger. No, I refer to my blessed wife, Chorale Sonata."

He smiled wistfully towards a dresser as he spoke, sighing happily. I found myself grinning slightly. Her name was beautiful. Following his gaze, I saw a picture frame atop the polish wood. Fighting tired limbs, determined to prove that I had *some* ability to push myself, I staggered and limped over to it alongside him.

It was an old and sepia toned picture showing an older mare, standing at this very same window-side dresser and nervously trying to hide her face, to little avail. The photo had

caught that loving smirk perfectly. Something about her reminded me about the mysterious mare, if she had been a lot older, that same rounded face and oddly fragile expression remained. Her cutie mark was hidden under the plain white dress, which even in sepia seemed to light up the room around her, reflecting the sun over the farming fields behind and—

Wait...

“Minstrel?”

“Yeah, Murk?”

“This, um, this is a pre-war picture.”

Minstrel picked up the frame between his front hooves. Looking deep into the image, he lightly chuckled, setting it back down.

“Show me a camera that works and I’ll find one of her, Murk. I miss her... I’d do anything to get Sunny and myself enough caps to relocate back to her. But this mare’s eyes reminded me of mah dearest. In this world? Sometimes that’s all you get when you don’t know if you’ll see them again.”

His eyes followed mine when I looked back at it, turning the picture to again look at her.

“It’s partly why I envy you, Murk. You can create your own memories. That’s a rare talent, y’know? Many might draw but you seem to do it from the heart. Keep up with that. Memories *matter*. They have great power to affect us, y’know?”

Images of the mare and I, etched in charcoal came to mind. I flicked the journal back to her, allowing Minstrel to see. I remembered Glimmerlight’s special talent to show her own past, those happy times that kept her going. Even the remnants of memory left in the dark Stable.

“Yeah, I do know.”

Gently placing my hoof upon my first ever image of the mare, I silently promised myself that the moment I was properly safe and free, my promise to her would be fulfilled. One picture to remember her. Even if it wasn’t perfect, it would be enough.

Gradually, my shock from waking outside of Fillydelphia was beginning to lessen. True, the element of ‘freedom’ in my mind wouldn’t hit proper until I could look back and not see the baleful slave city in my field of view. (Using binoculars, just to be *sure*. Possibly a telescope.)

Doc Minstrel had instructed me to stay put and just rest until I felt better. In the meantime, I had taken to checking over all of my belongings his assistant had brought back with her. My PipBuck, to my great pleasure, was with me still, as was my fleece and saddlebag, along with, obviously, my journal. Within my saddlebag, I found my goggles and various items taken from the Stable. My newly acquired pistol was gone. A reasonable precaution, I guessed. Unfolding it, I intended to put my fleece back on, but shuddered to a stop when I noticed the thick bloodstains coating the wool right through around the shoulder. The pain still lingered. If I let my thoughts wander, I could see fleeting images of a frothing, raged, and bloodthirsty raider holding me down to sink the knife into me. During the escape, I’d had too much on my mind to think about it, even while running injured or fighting for my life. But now in the downtime, it all just came back.

It wasn’t my only injury, apparently. I had been half buried in the rubble of a house, after all. I could feel another wad of bandage around my torso, and my front right leg held a

dressing where my PipBuck was normally tied around. With a glance, I saw the PipBuck bore new scars, making it even more like a hunk of scrap metal than it had already been. Yet with a tap to one of the chunky buttons to turn on the radio, I was surprised to find it still worked. Stable-Tec knew how to build them, that was for sure. Nervous of offending Minstrel with noise, I immediately turned it off, cutting the DJ's broadcast short.

"...who's to say the Stable Dweller won't help all them slaves when she gets back—"

Apologising internally, I set it down, even if the words did lift my spirits. Littlepip was coming back? Perhaps I could meet her on the road and we could go find my friends together! Yes! Already my mind was trawling what I should draw in advance as a gift to her. If I could make her like me...

I had to fight the urge to bat my head to purge those distracting thoughts. (Telling myself, 'Crush later, Murky, recovery now!') Sitting back on my haunches and holding my hoof up, I tried to shift the bandages a little. Before any travel on my newly decided objective, I needed to know what had happened to my leg.

"Wouldn't say that there's too advisable. Shrapnel, usually the kind you'd find from mines, got embedded there. Pretty sure I got rid of it, but it's an open wound. Removing the dressing before it's healed would just hurt a hell of a lot and expose it to every bit of infection in the air."

Snapping my other hoof away like a foal caught near the cookie jar, I glanced over at Minstrel entering the room.

"I took a little look from up top of the house. Looks like Sunny will be back within the hour if my eyes work right these days."

"Could I see?"

"No, no. Too many particles in the air, fallout and dirt on the wind, for someone injured like you are. Just you stay down here. Now, I thought I might get to know you a little. That slave mindset is awfully worrying to somepony about to go out into the wastes to find his friends. You picked up a gun once, yeah, but as much as I hate to admit it, such a thing is all too common a requirement out here. There comes a time when even myself, a physician, had to fight to protect the ones he loved. Never woulda thought I'd have to do that back in the Stable."

Briefly, my mind stopped and focused entirely on him.

"You came from a Stable?"

Minstrel beckoned me to follow. Unsteadily, I trotted after him into the corridor of the house. Ahead of me, I could see the front door, thick and wooden. I was led through beige carpets and exquisite woodwork furniture to a back room. There was a mirror on my left side, and with one glance, I whimpered and moved on with my eyes firmly shut.

Within there was an odd mixture of belongings, ranging from scrap items in disrepair to fully functional tools that I had seen in the Stable. In the corner sat an old instrument I'd once heard called a 'lute.' Hanging across a mannequin I saw a bright blue and yellow jumpsuit, a number I couldn't identify written on the lapels. Armoured plates were sewn into it or strapped on the torso and shoulders. Hung around the neck on a small chain lay a PipBuck that chimed in a pale orange.

"I'm an old stallion now, Murk. Stables ain't as common as they used to be. I came out mine when I was just sixteen. Only just got this little beauty."

He tapped the PipBuck with a hoof, setting it swinging on a chain.

"I don't need this stuff too much anymore, always figured I'd give it to somepony who

needed it. But I see you've already got yer own. Perhaps I'll sell it to the next trader, help pay for the supplies to take me home. Hell, I'd sell *anythin'* to get back to her again."

"How long will that take?"

Wandering amongst the inventory of his house, Minstrel glanced back at me, that fading mane shifting in the thick air of the home. An eyebrow raised as he leaned on the mannequin.

"Hopefully, not long at all. Why'd ya ask?"

"We could travel together! More is better than one, right? And we could... oh..."

Minstrel had held up his hoof, shaking his head before just staring at me. "Don't think so, we're gonna be taking a lightweight run. Besides, you'll have other things to do."

He was right. My friends, Littlepip, my mother even! I had so much of my own to do.

My thoughts were broken as a tickling started in my throat. Panicking, I tried to reach for the nearest piece of furniture, a chair! I almost made it. The tickling became a burning as the great retching cough burst from my mouth, followed by an anguished cry as my head seared with pain, dizzying me and knocking me over. The chair toppled, collapsing on the ground beside me as I clutched my chest, quaking and trying to hold more in. Minstrel was beside me quickly, a hoof on my breast as he lowered his ear to my neck.

"You're wheezing bad, internally. I'm pretty good at patching up folks, but I'm no proper physician. Asthma?"

Weeping from the pain, feeling ragged and thin breathing from hot lungs, I lay my head on a hoof and whispered instead. "Rads in my lungs. Please, I need RadAway soon..."

"Hmm, 'fraid I don't have any of that. Pretty valuable stuff that most folks need. But I could mix a hot drink for that throat and—"

"Please! I need RadAway, I—"

Another cough interrupted me just as I tried to rise, making me retch and stay hunched over, fighting the urge to scream as the patched would in my skull pounded and seemed to grind the pain into me.

"Sorry, Murk. Don't have any. Best bet is to get you on your hooves and out there soon enough. Once Sunny's back, I'll see if she can't take a quick trip to the traders and round some up."

Helping me back up, my breathing became heavy as the episode died down. Breathing became a little easier inside, with apparently less rads in the air.

"I... I'm sorry, Minstrel. I haven't even thanked you for what you *have* done with me yet. I'm not sure what I can offer in return to match... well, all this."

Hoisting my hoof over his neck, he held on to me to lead me back through, shaking his head as he went.

"Think nought of it. Sometimes, a good act can return itself much better in the long term. Now, come on. Time we continued helping you, keep your mind off this illness. Feeling up to it?"

Nodding, I made my way back through with his help. Yet as we passed by the door to his storage room, I cast a glance back at the mannequin. So that's what Stable Dwellers wore to protect themselves...

Battle barding... she had a scoped revolver too, according to Glimmerlight. What had she called it again? My memory failed me, but remembering her form from the pit (contrary to what Glimmer might claim, I *did* remember more than just certain bits of said form) I mentally dressed her up. Finally, a little image of what my beloved legend looked like.

I'd have to draw it later. But for now, taking a new page in the main room, I sat and struggled to remember.

"We... we..."

"Don't strain yourself there, just let it flow. That's how you draw, ain't it?"

"Like it all just comes from my soul itself."

"How very poetic. You're a little more intelligent than you look."

Ceasing my thoughts, I glanced sideways with narrowed eyes to catch him chuckling.

"No offence meant, of course. What I mean is, you can't read or write, you've not been taught any real math or a lot of standard life skills, but you aren't stupid. You just... weren't ever told how. Free from slavery, you could be somepony better than you are, y'know?"

Somehow, some way... that reassured a large part of my ever-worrying mind to finally settle and smoothly think back.

"We were on the run, on hooves. That I remember, but they spotted us a lot of times, chasing us."

Shaking, I lowered the charcoal, letting it almost control itself. Bold lines crushing everything into a thin... thin... alleyway! It was an alleyway! Spurred by my subconscious drawing, I began to fill in the details. A side on shot of all three of us, galloping forwards. Brimstone at the lead, grim and determined with a huge muscular stride to his gallop. Behind him, Glimmerlight with her short mane blowing in the wind...

...that tore down the thin corridor, directly into our faces. I was lagging, my shoulder flaring in pain with every step and my short gait failing to keep up with my larger friends. Above us, I heard another *pop* in the air as another shining star burst into a red glare that lit the streets amongst the fading light of day. More than ever, Fillydelphia was a crimson hell, even outside the walls in the remainder of the city. Around us, I could hear teams of slavers moving in groups, trying to locate or head us off along with hunt down the remaining Steel Rangers that had gone to ground. Occasionally, a burst of intense violence broke the evening air as one was found and, more often than not, slaughtered their hunters in return.

With Brimstone, I felt safe. He could take on any small group of slavers no problem, so long as his wounds didn't get too bad. In the past half hour, he'd been stabbed, shot, and bucked more times than I could count, all while defending us from the groups of slavers that infested the city on their escape prevention patrols. I'd been forced to loot through their corpses with Glimmer to try and find healing potions to keep Brimstone Blitz at his height.

My mind felt ready to snap. The tension was unbearable. Intense lengths of fear and hiding punctuated with brief moments of heart-pounding terror when those klaxon calls sounded our detection. Already, I could hear griffons in the air: reinforcements from Stern to watch the rooftops and wider open streets. The efficiency of Red Eye's army was downright scary in its ability to work as one, bound by his charismatic will. Was this the Unity he often spoke of?

I was not doing well. Already I was having to round corners only to see Brimstone turning the next one, Glimmerlight attempting to do her best to keep sight of both of us. I knew Brimstone wouldn't *leave* me, but my condition was worrying me. My throat was feeling raspy again, the more time we spent in these thin, contaminated urban areas that had been exposed to the balefire, the more my disease was starting to make itself known.

Running was causing my breathing to spasm on burning coughs. It wasn't lethal yet, only bad due to the exertion, but I'd need RadAway within a day or so...

"Come on, Murky! Just keep—phew—going. We're all tired..." Glimmerlight was clearly digging deeply herself, but my own body just felt unable to push much further. The last time I'd actually rested that wasn't recovering from some injury or illness was long out of my memory. Many times I'd worked for days at a time, pushing or lifting heavy cargo. But out here all that obedient endurance just seemed to fade.

Could I even operate properly as a free pony?

Rounding the next corner, I found Brimstone halted at the end. (Oh thank you!) Dropping my pace, I fell on the ground beside them, trying my best to get any air possible into my clogged lungs.

"Murk?" Brimstone glanced back from the corner. "Get those lugs of yours working and listen. Where are they?"

Even nodding felt like an effort. Closing my eyes, I tried to shut out everything else and just concentrate on listening. Around us I could hear crumbling, sizzling, hissing of broken industry, and half faulty spark batteries. Fillydelphia, even outside the Wall, was nothing short of an industrial powerhouse of a city, ruined or not. In the distance, shouts and orders—some from down low—I could hear the echoes off charred walls and metal containers. Others didn't echo. They were louder sounds, probably griffons above us. We couldn't risk the main roads still. The smoke deadened sound, and the concrete maze that was the industrial park in this location made it incredibly difficult to pinpoint the sounds by distance, but...

"They're that way, and that way." I pointed with my hoof, behind us and off to the right.

Glimmerlight peered around. "Well, we can't go left, the gates out of this park is still locked shut. Guess we just stay the course. You sure there aren't any others?"

"I... I don't know—"

"Come on, *listen!*" Brimstone was not in one of his friendlier moods. I imagined being wounded and healed so often in a short space of time would do that to a raider's attitude.

"I'm trying!" Concentrating, I blocked out everything but sounds. I tried to tune out the ambience. The wind was irregular, but easy to ignore. A beeping from some old control room in the factories was persistent, but clearly not to do with slavers. I tuned it out. What else?

A thick stomping underground not far away, a Ranger in a cellar? Flutters in the air ahead of us, oh dear...

"There are griffons up ahead, and I think there's a small trio of slavers about to move into this area and—"

A sound entered my ears that I knew all too well. It wasn't a living being. It was the sound of metal scraping and grinding along scrap-constructed gears and pivots. Fillydelphia was opening its gates. Even this far out, I could hear the *clunk-clunk-clunk* of the massive gears sliding from tooth to tooth. Moments after, the trundle of wagons and the clatter of many hooves on the ground followed. Even Glimmer seemed to pick up the far off sounds, nodding.

"Guess Stern wasn't kidding about reinforcements. They'll be reaching us in five or ten minutes if they stick to the main road. Remember, they *know* what section we're in."

"Why are they trying so hard to get us? We're only three slaves! Why can't they just let us go?"

My protests sounded like whines. They somewhat were, but it was born of nothing but frustration at this endless run.

Glimmerlight sighed, rubbing my mane lightly. "Red Eye doesn't like losing workers, hun. Especially not when it includes two of his biggest prizes, a Raider Warlord and one of the few—"

"Steel Rangers, right?"

Her face narrowed, almost looking as though she wanted to disagree like I'd been wrong, before stroking my mane again and even quickly hugging me. Tightly.

"Yes... yes, Brim and I, Murky. We're the ones he wants back."

What had that hesitation been? No matter, we needed to get moving, any longer and they'd—

I heard a flutter.

I *knew* that sound.

"Get down!" I screamed, throwing myself behind the nearest large bin in the alleyway.

Glimmerlight and Brimstone dived to the side as rapid fire streaks of magical energy tore up the length of the alley from above. Dirt was fused to a goopy green that pulsed and stunk of fried air in little chunks, as was portions of my cover.

"MOVE!" Brimstone roared, grabbing and swinging me onto his back before galloping off. Gripping his mane as tightly as I could, I found that the wagon had been *nothing* in comparison to the rough ride here. We took off, galloping out of the alleyway into a storage yard, long stripped bare by Red Eye's slaves, leaving things too heavy to carry. Empty pallet trucks and deserted train carriages made it a metallic maze surrounding the central cargo-rail building. Above it, I could see a cartoonesque pony riding a tiny train filled with smiling workers. If only...

More griffons dove from the clouds, their scout having spotted us by sheer luck. Brimstone turned down between two lengths of train to avoid most of the incoming fire, sticking to the right as rounds pinged and ricocheted between the carriages. I felt my mane whip, whether from the wind or a passing bullet I didn't know. Glimmerlight followed us, breathing heavily but determination lending her the strength to keep pushing. At the end of the two trains lay a third mounted on the same rail we were galloping down, its back carriage open to a passenger compartment. Hearing the platform creak under the weight, I held on as Brimstone launched himself into it. With windows exploding and melting on either side in a cascade of bright colours, Brimstone hurtled down between two lines of seats. The train had to have been partially armoured against zebra ambushes, for few holes were made but for the small windows, and their weapons didn't penetrate the main chassis.

I heard the *thunk* of taloned feet landing above us, on the roof. Brimstone stopped short, knowing that to burst out between the carriages would be little more than running right into their line of fire. I could see him thinking, glancing to and fro.

Stern's griffons weren't going to give us that time to think. With the sharp sound of impacts on glass, I saw small metal apples held down and tossed through the broken windows. Rolling to a halt before us, thin bands pinged off them... grenades!

Glimmerlight was the first to act. Almost screaming, she pushed the boundaries of her stamina into her magic, and hurled the lethal orbs as far down the carriage as she could. Unable to lift them, they just skittered along the floor while we ducked behind the seats. Shielded by Brimstone, I covered my ears.

There was little point. The noise was so intense that I felt my ears pop and replace all

sound with a keening whine. I didn't even hear the sound they made, just a dull *whump*. The shockwave made my stomach churn and my head ache. Again and again, grenade after grenade, painful shots in my ears and spikes of pain through the middle of my skull. The entire train lurched and shook again and again as each explosive set itself off or detonated others early. Dizzied, I opened my eyes to find Glimmerlight almost collapsed on the floor. Worry overrode my own pains, and I pulled myself over to her, trying to help her to stand. Her hoof was tapping me, her mouth moving with no sound emerging. Holding my face up, she nodded through hazed eyes.

Sound gradually returned.

"—m okay! Just tired. I... I think I've burned out. Too much in the Stable, and now all this."

The sounds of falling train parts and popping flame surrounded us. My thoughts turned to the griffons. They had to have retreated to let their detonation go off, but did they think us dead? Brimstone made the decision for us, bellowing for us to move before they decided to come and check amidst the smoke that now shielded us. Yet as we lagged, he shook his head.

"You two won't last in a run with flyers. Move through the smoke, get inside the station, and lay low!"

Glimmer shook her head, staggering to her hooves. "We need to keep moving and—"

"No arguments, Glim! Get in the fucking station!"

Both Glimmer and I stood in virtual shock. Brimstone had been firm, but he had *never* spoken to her in that tone. Ever. I felt Glimmer begin pulling me with a hoof. Staring into Brimstone's eyes, I saw the authority that has destroyed entire settlements for that second, reflected in the fire and smoke of battle. Even as Glimmerlight tugged me down the train, that glare bored into my eyes. Not for the first time, but certainly more than ever, I was beginning to see the beast inside that began emerging in the middle of such chaos and violence. In some manner, I felt like I was running away from him.

Hearing his thick stride behind us, I followed Glimmer through the train. Three carriages later, we heard the griffons landing behind us, obscured still in the smoke of their own grenades. Screeching and shouting when they found no corpses, I heard their talons making a rampaging charge across the tin floors.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh *shit*..." Glimmerlight was muttering to herself as we limped and pulled one another as fast as two tired ponies could. I ceased to hear Brimstone behind me; had he stopped? My legs felt like dead weight, exhausted beyond compare. Stumbling over all the wreckage, we were only moving one carriage for every three the griffons were bounding through to catch up. I didn't want to look back! All I might see would be those razor sharp claws waiting to rip me apart! Memories of outrunning the thresher machine began to re-emerge, prompting mewling whinnying. We couldn't leave the train! If we did, we'd be gunned down. It was a simple race to—

"Contacts spotted ahead! Two slaves!"

"Engage and eliminate!"

Against all my fear, my head turned. Two griffons, a male and female, black and white, were launching between chairs and leaping over wreckage through the carriage behind us. Equipped for close quarters, both had knives drawn, one with a pistol in his off hand. Where was—

Brimstone Blitz exploded from behind the door. Having purposefully stopped to wait on

them, his full titanic weight bore down on the two griffons from the side. Frenzied, I saw him actually *bite* the arm carrying the pistol, snapping and snarling enough to draw blood and make the griffon drop his firearm. Screeching at a pitch that dizzied me, the griffon spun, raking the knife at Brimstone. Normally, griffons were considered bigger and stronger than a pony, but even they seemed small compared to Brimstone in such tight quarters. Tearing a chunk of flesh away with his teeth, he roared with bloodlust, one mighty hoof slapping away the knife as his forehead collided with the griffon's own. A sharp *thok* barely registered before he stamped down hard with a front hoof on his stunned opponent's hind leg.

Legs were not supposed to bend that way. The griffon squealed, falling to the ground.

Caught unaware, the female griffon whirled to face the unexpected foe, only to find her companion hurled into her hard enough to drop them both into a seat. Brimstone reared up, dropping both hooves down on the pair hard enough to snap ribs on the male and wind the female beneath him. Using the time, I saw him go for the knife with his mouth, a mad glint in his eye, and—

I felt Glimmerlight pull my head away as he lunged. The screaming started.

Even holding my ears covered, I could still hear it, like ripping cloth apart, accompanied by long wailing cries that finally stopped after far too long a time. Hidden by the chairs that obscured the corpses, I could still see the draining blood and dirtied feathers dropping onto the floor and slowly spreading. With a sudden jolt, his smeared face turned to us.

"Why... are you still here?"

We didn't need any encouragement, turning, we galloped as fast as we could, little more than a determined canter. Both our heads were drooping, and I could see Glimmer's legs beginning to wobble under her. I could feel my lungs having to work almost as hard as my limbs to get air. Hopping off the train, we found ourselves in the warehouse shop floor. Chains and hooks surrounded us, all of them hanging from giant ceiling-borne cranes. Already, I could hear griffons on the roof trying to shout to their comrades. Single shots whipped into the hard ground as skylights smashed and dropped razor edges either side of us. Glimmer galloped into a group of offices nearby to the edge of the yard, spurring herself to dive into and through the open doors even as the ground chewed up behind her. I was still twenty feet out, way too far to—

A griffon landed atop a train beside me, the short barrelled weapon pointed directly at me.

Acting before thinking, I ducked and rolled under the train, only realising why this was a horrible idea as I felt my bandages yank and tear. I clutched at my shoulder and screamed at both the sucking wound's pain and the clatter of fully automatic fire mere feet above me. Clawing, pulling, and struggling, I pushed myself to keep crawling under the train towards the offices Glimmer had moved into. The train only moved parallel to the doorway though; I'd have to leave and make a run for it sometime, but I *couldn't* run!

I had to try.

Three legs only. It'd look silly, but I had to keep going. Drawing my head out from under the train, I saw the griffon stalking along on top of it, head lowered. She hadn't spotted me yet and—

Yes she had! Her head jerked around, the barrel following even as I begged her not to shoot.

"Please! I'll come back! I'll go back to my Master!"

“Too late, pipsqueak. Stern says you die, you die.”

Her talon clenched on the trigger, until the entire train lurched, shaking the griffon's balance until it threw her off and sent a shot wildly into the air. Swearing colourfully, she twisted in the air and landed on her hind legs directly atop me, one hind leg snapping down on my neck and pushing me into the concrete. My squeal of agony from my shoulder being under my body drowned out into a rasping sound as her weight pressed down on my weak lungs. Her weapon was pointed around, before spraying through the train itself. Why? What was she—

A two foot wide train wheel hurtled in from over the carriage like a child's throwing disc, slamming directly into her chest and pinning the mercenary to the ground. A crisp *snap* told of broken ribs. Following it, Brimstone Blitz launched himself through the middle of the carriage's cargo doors and bounded over to the fallen griffon. Stamping on the gun, bending the barrel, he barely even hesitated before another ferocious stamp cracked her skull off the ground. If she had remained that way, she may have lived. But groaning in pain only attracted the grim raider's attention, leading him to stamp again and again... over and over until her groaning stopped.

Pulling myself up, I felt him bend over and pull out one of the last small healing potions we had liberated from slaver corpses, before carefully dragging me towards where Glimmer hid. Already, I could hear other griffons taking to the air to close in on the screams. The moment Brimstone got us behind the doorway he closed it, throwing cabinets and desks against it like playthings until he had bought us at least a little time with the makeshift blockade.

My shoulder was stinging as the healing potion took effect, the bleeding coagulating again into a thick hardened mass. The potion wouldn't get rid of it, but it would stop me bleeding out a while longer and let me walk. Skittering on the slick concrete floor, I cast a glance around. We needed a hiding spot, this was *my* area of things. Rooms... too obvious and natural. Vents... Glimmer and Brim wouldn't fit. Storage cupboards... only one way out. Damn! The entire building was big enough to survive a nearby balefire detonation, but held no safe rooms? I pathetically bucked a small sign on the wall in frustration before tripping over my own hooves. What idiot designed this place to not have any safe rooms in a major industrial city?

“Uh, Murky, what's wrong?” Glimmer glanced sideways at me.

“I'm trying to find an underground bomb shelter!” I ranted, staggering in a small circle. “It'd be the best place to hide in, I used to get crammed in one back in Manehattan, so I know big wartime buildings have them and they always have an exit in case the building came down. We can hide in it and escape to the outside. But nopony left any stupid directions!”

“Um, that way?” Glimmerlight pointed a hoof toward some side offices.

Wait... how... but... *what!* Ah wait, I knew why!

“I see... you're a Steel Ranger, you know all about pre-war buildings!”

“Actually, I just read the sign you kicked.” Despite her exhaustion, she managed a thin smile. Turning, I saw the green and white sign filled with indecipherable words, still legible amongst the seared interior. Not for the first time in my life, I sighed and lowered my head. Illiteracy really wasn't fun. Without Glimmer, I'd likely be running around in circles trying to find it.

“Hey, hey, Murky! Positive thoughts now! Big nasty griffons about to drop in! Let's go!”

I heard Brimstone batter down the door into the offices, revealing the easy access safe-room slope at the far end, where a huge steel door lay open. My stomach clenched when I saw multiple charred skeletons nearby to it, where they had just pulled it open before the fires had surged through the blackened building. My hooves crunched in the ash of light furniture and papers, all that seemed left was the bare structure and what bones survived. They had been so close...

Behind us, I heard the surging of wings and wisps of air as griffons leapt in from the skylights. They were accompanied by a thumping, as other slavers tried to batter down the door Brimstone had blocked. They had us surrounded.

"Get in!" Brimstone arrived, grabbed my jerkin, and virtually hurled me down the stairs. Painfully bouncing and rolling, I barely managed to get back to my feet and glance back up to see Glimmer jump over the ledge and onto the dark stairwell. Brimstone glanced back, before snorting and pushing the door closed... from the outside. Her own hooves moving quickly, Glimmerlight tried to stop him, pushing futile against his strength.

"Wait, what are you *doing*? Get in here, Brim!"

The old raider didn't even stop scraping his hooves through ash as the great door began to slide shut. Tangentially, it occurred to me that if those ponies two-hundred years ago hadn't gotten it open for us, we'd have been caught with how long it took even him to move it.

"Those feather brained bampots are going to surround the place! They'll be happy to wait, they *know* slaves are in here. They need a lure. Something to get them off your tails while you rest."

Almost all sound seemed to deaden as the ramifications of his plan started to weigh upon my mind, I found myself galloping back up the stairs to beside Glimmerlight. Words just wouldn't come to me. Her mouth was just open, shaking her head.

"Look, we'll find a way; you don't need to do this!"

Brimstone Blitz looked back at us, gore dripping still from his muzzle and bloodshot eyes quivering with the adrenaline of battle. Then he smiled.

"Won't happen; griffons are patient. More than I am. Besides, I put slaves into this trade all my life, killed ponies, and... just so much else."

I felt my eyes well up, this was too rushed. I didn't have time to prepare anything to say, or how to react! My tears were not alone, Glimmerlight pressed her hoof against his chest.

"Now you want to save at least some..."

"Aye..."

"Well..." She narrowed her eyes. "You come back. I am not accepting that the Great Warlord you've rumbled on in my ear about so much is going to be beaten by a bunch of flying chickens. On my way here, I saw an old bank outside Fillydelphia's main centres. You know it?"

Brimstone merely nodded.

"Then we'll meet there." She stepped back. I saw Brimstone's gaze turn to me. Not expecting it, I wracked my brain for what to say, but hearing hooves and talons clattering closer, I just shook my head. Theirs was a story I shared, the raider and the runaway, but this was his moment to shine. Only two words really came from my mouth as I trotted forwards to hop up and lay my head against the side of his shoulder.

"Thank you..."

I knew I was crying. For once, the pony locking me away was doing it to *save* me.

"Goddesses be with ye both." Brimstone rumbled the words, his hoof briefly arcing

around to hold me, before gently pressing me back towards Glimmerlight. "Gallop safely. We'll meet again."

With that, the light died as Brimstone slammed the great door shut. His great stride sounded immediately, galloping away into the building. He had told me that he was always a raider, that there was no way to appear as anything else, but right now I could not help but feel inspired by his determination to protect the ponies who he felt deserved it. He may not agree, but in that moment he was as far from the raider as I could ever believe.

Glimmerlight and I stayed on the staircase for some time, listening to the gunfire, screams and blood curdling warcries mixed with dull impacts and tearing metal. Gradually they moved further and further away, before eventually ceasing completely. By then, I felt Glimmerlight holding me tightly against her with one hoof.

"He got away. They didn't get him."

"How do you know?"

"Not anywhere near enough gunfire to bring that big lout down. Besides, he still owes me ten caps and a beer."

Her smile in my PipBuck's pale light seemed small as she turned and led me down into the emergency lights of the safe room. Remaining for just a second with one hoof pressed against the door, I could not begin to fully grasp the emotion. What was it? Sadness? Loss? Somepony had just thrown themselves into the grinder for me... and amidst my torn mindset, I just didn't know what to feel.

The safe room had lived up to its name. Lit by amber lamps, we found multiple stale and hard beds surrounded by infuriatingly locked doors that, by Glimmer's reading, led to an armoury and a food locker. After the canteen in the Stable, I was considering it unlikely that such food would still be edible anyways.

Trotting ahead of me, Glimmerlight flopped herself down atop one of the bunks, sending a small shockwave of stored dust flapping in all directions. Finally off her hooves, I heard her sigh deeply, looking for all the world that she might fall asleep on the spot. Nervously, I trotted onward, checking the far side of the room for... yes... the exit tunnel that would lead us to the outside once things quieted down. Not to mention give us a moment to catch our breath.

"Here, Murky, lie down, rest a minute." Glimmerlight tapped the bunk beside her, which I obediently hopped up onto and settled upon. Feeling my back muscles and whip marks ache and sting, I slid off my saddlebag and pulled the goggles from my face. Brimstone had been a topic avoided. Glimmerlight was insistent about his safety while I simply didn't know what to even say. This was all so alien to me. Ponies caring for me, fighting for me... being so far outside the Wall and hunted during an escape attempt? When I had run for the Wall, I never imagined this sort of reality. In my mind, it was me running and running forever and outstripping the chains that bound me. But the reality was... harsh, unromantic, and full of twisting turns that bounced me from encounter to encounter without any downtime or chance to properly *think*. No long planning, no idea that survived the actual execution. It was just instinct and reaction mixed with cold unrelenting luck and chance. The idea that I had once sat in Whiplash's storage room planning my eventual grand escape felt childlike and far away. This was real.

Real was more tiring than I'd ever dreamt.

Glimmerlight seemed to doze for a few minutes at a time, her breathing finally steady. She had thrown her robes off in the heat of exhaustion once arriving, leaving them crumbled in a heap below her. I lay upon my side, gently easing my sore wing under me and just watched her. The pony who ruffled my mane, who hugged and smiled at me. Who reassured me and cared... who had *fought* to save my life. Others had done some of those, but more and more I was feeling a connection to Glimmerlight like... like a friend.

But not all my mind accepted it. Slaves didn't have friends. My very presence here was a slight against my place in life if I listened to the deeper, darker areas of my own thoughts. The Wall and my orders were my boundaries, but now I was across them. Upon my flank, I felt my cutie mark almost *tingle* in an effort to remind me. Instructing me to wander off and leave her that I might return to the safekeeping of those who would guide me and tell me what to do, rather than face the uncompromising wastes. If I apologised enough to Protégé, maybe he... maybe...

Shaking my head violently, almost butting my forehead against the pillows, I fought them down. That was just fear talking. The fear of being caught and killed before I could do anything I wanted with life. *My life*. The one I'd been denied for... for how long? Oh Goddesses, I wished I knew how old I actually was. I didn't even know my birthday. I'd once been ordered to clear out of the barn and sleep with the brahmin on the rock farm because they'd wanted to use it for a party in my master's honour. His birthday. I'd snuck out and crept up to one of the windows, glancing in at him and his family that owned me getting drunk and laughing a lot. Maybe when I got out and found my mother, she could tell me when mine was.

I did kinda really want to have a birthday someday...

Just once, I wished I could feel the same urge for freedom that Littlepip no doubt had felt. Something to boost me along to finish this and finally—*finally*—escape the bonds that were imprinted upon my very side. My eyes turned back to Glimmerlight. She wore a small smile as she settled, not sleeping, but eyes closed all the same. What kept her so free and willing? What drove her?

Perhaps Protégé had answered for me long ago. She *knew* freedom. That wasn't all though: slaves in Fillydelphia bullied me, stomped on me, stole my food and called me things like 'runt.' Mocking noises of them screaming how I would die in the Pit still disturbed my slumbers. But she had remained nice and caring. Even the best ponies had been broken by Fillydelphia. Flippy Bit had his prejudices made all the more intense by the ignorance of slavery under Red Eye. Even I had almost stooped to stealing from a sick mare. But not Glimmer. Staring at her cutie mark of the three memory orbs; each of them glinting even through the muck and old wounds any slave carried after time in Fillydelphia, I began to see why. They were her key, being able to revisit your free days, the good times... that must certainly help.

"Uh, Murky. Not to knock you down, but I *think* I'm a little old for you."

Blinking, I snapped back to reality. Blushing, I drew my eyes away from her flank (No, cutie mark! Her cutie mark!) and bit my lip while seeing her snorting with laughter. Was she just winding me up?

"Oh, I... uh, your cutie mark, it-it just makes me wish I could, y'know..."

Reaching between the two bunks, she (again) ruffled my mane with a hoof and giggled.

"I know, I know. And there are *so* many ways I could twist that sentence, but I don't think

you have it in you. Well, until you get some charcoal in your mouth anyways.”

She winked. I blushed.

“Which reminds me, I’ve not had a chance to really get a glance at that book of yours. Mind if I take a look with you? It’ll give us something to take our minds off, y’know...”

Well, she hadn’t ever done anything but support me before. Groaning as stiff and painful joints cracked and ached, I pulled over my saddlebag and yanked out my treasured journal. Glimmerlight rolled off her bunk to sit beside mine as I placed it beside me and opened to some of my pictures from a few days ago. I saw her frown as she saw me lying dead in the Pit, the last image I ever drew before the mare gave me the idea to set my mind free. Flicking from page to page, Glimmerlight reminded me of that mare with the way she just accepted everything. Even down to the little snicker and sideways glance at, um, some of my pictures...

“Careful what you draw, Murky. You’re making me want to grab a mare the moment we get out of here.”

Chuckling, she winked and continued. I didn’t know if she was just being nice or genuinely did like them, but I felt settled enough to leave her to read through it. Shifting off my bed, I began to trot around the little saferoom. It was cramped; nothing was there without an express purpose. In an appreciative nod, I rather enjoyed the concept of a bin that doubled as a chair when its lid was down. Only Glimmerlight’s confused glance was enough to make me stop flipping it up and down by pressing my hoof on the pedal. (What? It was good!)

Seeing her settle down and stare more longingly at the drawing I’d done of her being watched over by Brimstone, I gave her some space by moving into the bathroom.

Barely four feet by four feet, it was tiny. I didn’t need to use it, really, but it was the only separate room. Nosing around, I cracked open the butterfly case within, finding little but bandages that fell apart in my hooves and a small needle. Memory flickered, I’d seen this before! What was it called... Med-Yes? I pulled it carefully into a leg pocket and turned to...

...a mirror.

Throughout my life, mirrors had been nothing but a reminder and crushing visual sight of myself. But it had always been tempered. I knew I was a dirty, weak, and sick little slave. Now, when I could think clearer...

...oh Goddesses... what had my life done to me?

Before me, just above the low sink, I saw a scrawny, scarred little buck, his coat so coated in rubbish, mud, blood, and rotten juices from the Stable orchard that it barely resembled any singular colour anymore. My mane and tail had *bits* in them. Stained in a dozen different ways just like the, by now ripped and bloodstained, fleece and filthy dark red bandages around my shoulder. But it was the health of my body... drawn, almost skeletal and covered in rad-sores on my muzzle and hind legs.

The eyes that stared back were not the eyes of the free pony I felt I should be. They looked terrified, out of place, and showed the image of a pony about to crack and run for the nearest thing that would tell him what to do or how to live. Sunken into dark sockets and red with tiredness, I could see my own pupils shaking, see the edges tearing up as he saw his own cutie mark in the mirror that...

I had to look away. Quivering and sobbing, I tried the sink and got a paltry trickle of brown water. Splashing it into my face, I scrubbed as best I could. Maybe if I scrubbed hard enough I could wipe away the slave, show the real pony I was supposed to be.

The water was tepid, stinging my rad-sores and small cuts I hadn't even realised I had. Time lost all meaning as I just sat and kept trying. Every time I looked up at my soaked and dripping face, I only saw myself looking more desperate and more pathetic than before. I knew I'd have to try *really* hard now to get it all off. Get rid of all the blood. Get rid of all the dirt of the place that hurt me. Get rid of all of it. I wanted rid of it *all*. Coughing, spluttering, I finally leaned over the bowl of the sink, not sure which was the water and which was my own tears. That's all I could do. Cry. I couldn't help anypony. I wasn't a hero like Littlepip, strong like Brimstone, smart like Protégé, or as resourceful as Glimmerlight. Somehow, every time I did anything good, it all twisted in on itself within minutes.

"I just want to do something right..."

"You have."

Glancing back up, I saw Glimmerlight in the mirror behind me at the door.

"You got out here. You saved my life, and Brimstone's life many times. Heh, more than he'd admit. You *are* a pony that matters, Murky. Now c'mere."

Her horn sparked, flared, and immediately failed. Straining, it popped back into life just enough to pull a small towel from the top shelf into her hoof before spluttering and imploding the spell with a brief shot of light. Dampening the towel, she sat and wiped my tears.

"You ever have any siblings, Murky?"

"I don't know. Six of them, maybe, if my name says anything, but I don't remember any of them. My mom never mentioned any, so I assumed they'd been sold... or maybe there wasn't any. I don't know."

The towel was coming off filthy on each rub. I felt her firmly wipe it around my eyes, avoiding all my sores. Her voice was quiet and comforting.

"I never had any, but there was one little initiate back at Bucklynn Cross. He used to hang out with me because the others kept picking on him. They called him Safety Catch because he had a habit of leaving his on while in the range. Eventually, it got so bad he started forgetting who he was, started using the name himself. Forgot all the good things he could do, like strip an energy weapon faster than I could strip somepony's robes if we got some alone time."

I couldn't help it, I lightly chuckled. She was just so carefree, overriding my sadness with sheer audacity. Yet her voice turned poignant.

"Thought he was useless, you see? He used to get so worked up, saying he didn't matter. Didn't even remember that he'd scored top marks in the tests my pops set for us. But the day he actually became a scribe and got the badge? Well, he remembered, saw what he was as soon as he looked in the mirror. That he was a smart pony."

The towel dabbed under the water again, before it seemed to die entirely and spluttered out. Pulling tightly on my cheeks, she kept cleaning before almost too firmly rubbing my forehead with it, biting her own lip as she did so. I winced as I felt her pull on my mane with it, as through wringing it out.

"So I guess what I'm saying is. We can forget ourselves as it all piles up. But if somepony can just show us what still lies beneath it, perhaps it'll help a little."

Dropping the towel, she held her hooves on either side of my face.

"He was like a little brother for a while, really. Probably the only reason I wasn't known as simply 'that mare who drinks far too much at ceremonies.' My sense of humour does exaggerate myself a little sometimes."

Almost hypnotized, my head was turned as I looked back in the mirror again.

Green and blonde.

My coat's colour. A gentle green, lighter than I'd ever expected it to be. My mane... I'd come to think of it as a light brown, but it actually was blonde under it all... all light and fluffy. The line between the dirt and what she had cleaned was as sudden as a fence. In reality, it looked a little silly, the front of my face clean for once with some strands of my mane free of debris and dirt, but it gradually spread in my imagination. The artistic side of my mind filled in the blanks, and let those borders expand. To look at—

—a colt, standing with innocent little wide eyes filled with tears, my two stubby little wings flapping...

Gasping, I could see nothing but what the mirror in the FunFarm had shown me. I had almost forgotten the Mirror House and the strange sight. The little slave, yet to acquire a life's worth of dirt and grime that would mar his appearance as much as it would mar his dreams...

Not seconds later, I was wrenched out by merely blinking, breaking my daydream. Tears dripped from my face, but landed upon a small smile as I turned back to Glimmerlight.

"...Glim?"

"Yeah, Murky?"

"You keep helping me. Making me see the right things. I don't think I'd have made it this far without you."

"We all help each other."

I shook my head.

"No, no. I mean, with me being... *me*. Trying to work out what I am. Who I am. What kind of pony I am beneath the years of being nothing but a slave. You keep guiding me, always being there for me. I... I know it's only been a little while we've known each other but..."

Leaning down, she wiped away my wet mane from my face.

"But what?"

"Well, a mare once told me we shouldn't forget or ignore the good when it comes, no matter how short a time it takes. You said you saw that buck like a little brother, right? I, um, wanted to ask..."

Biting my lip, I looked away, feeling unfathomably embarrassed.

"...could-could you ever see me like that? Because I think I, uh, sort of see you like the big sister I wished I always had around..."

A brief period of silence reigned as Glimmerlight just looked down at me, before, gently, she pulled me close. Her impetuous embrace stopped only by concern for my wound, but her head leaned against mine.

And in that moment, I felt relief beyond words.

"Tell the truth? I was kind of hoping you'd say that, because that's how I was beginning to think of you too. We can't take time for granted, days could be years to slaves, Murky. We take who and what we can get. So yes."

Within the underground room, amidst an escape attempt that could or could not succeed still, there was at least one life defining moment to remember. Family need not be by blood.

"Yes. Yes I will be. Your big sister best friend forever."

"I'd like that."

There was a brief moment, just allowing me to smile and hold onto the best pony I'd ever

met. For about a minute, we simply sat within the saferoom, between the bathroom and main room, just permitting the moment. Eventually, she snickered, leaning back, her eyebrows narrowed and lowered.

“But... you do know what little brothers get, don't you?”

She grinned. I just raised an eyebrow. I hadn't even had a sibling nearby to know. What did little brothers ge—

“Noogies!”

“Noo—what, what are—wait, no! Haha!” Before I could react, she had me in a virtual headlock, rubbing her hoof on my mane vigorously. I squirmed as best I could while injured, laughing and squealing in equal amounts to try and get her to stop. Waving my front legs to try...

...and make her let go. The smile I drew across my face seeming almost alien as I softly added more width with the end of the charcoal stick. Then a little more... and a little more. Before I knew it, I'd drawn one of the most wide smiles I ever had. Almost as much as when I'd drawn myself on my own on that page so long ago. Now where was that one?

Flicking back, I hunted it out. The one I had drawn just after gaining the ability to think for myself... even a little. Back in the FunFarm. Eventually, I found it, the one that had me on my own, grinning widely with my wings flared to either side beautifully. It still made me chuckle to think I could ever actually make a smile like that without being around Littlepip's escape. But there it was, just in the middle left of the page on my own and—

I wasn't alone anymore. There had been something else drawn on it.

At some point during the rest period, I had added somepony else. Now, Glimmerlight stood just to the right of me, about one pony's width away. Clean, as though she wasn't a slave, her initiate robes well kept and draped tidily about her. But she still had that playful energy about her posture. And on her face, wow. That look, the sparkling cheeky grin and alluringly casual eyebrows. One expression that comforted her friends and caught the attention of stallions all in one fell swoop. Feeling my hooves shake, I fought to urge to try and hug the journal itself. I knew finally why I had drawn myself to one side like that.

I had been waiting for the friends I could add in later all along.

“So that's the mare herself, huh?” Minstrel smiled thinly as he watched over my shoulder. “Although I have to question. Regarding yourselves siblings within forty eight hours of meeting? That seems a little... preemptive, don't you think?”

“I thought so too. But back inside Filly, time didn't feel right. Shifts could come anytime, you could be underground in the pits working away and not knowing how long for. You lived day to day, anything that survived was a blessing. Death was so easy. I saw ponies burned alive, shot, or simply dying of sickness. Just so random and unforgiving. I only barely survived...”

Part of me wished I'd drawn her closer on the piece of paper, nearer to me.

“But it works the other way too. If somepony feels trustworthy and close to you, then I discovered just how amazing you could feel in a few scant hours. I'm a pegasus, Doc, ponies *hate* me...”

“I don't.”

“But almost all of *them* did! Slaves are... are ignorant! They don't know how to think

about situations like ponies outside do. Even I didn't realise that until they opened my eyes."

"They?"

"All of them: Littlepip, the mare, the DJ, Brimstone, Glimmerlight, even Protégé in some weird way. I don't understand! Some of them I only saw for less than a few seconds, but it *matters* when you're a slave like me. It's all I have! All I had..."

I sniffed, wiping my eyes with a hoof, still flinching from my forehead throbbing at the motion.

"That's why I think we... we were able to just, *know*, that we would be so close no matter what. We'd saved each other's lives already. Slaves like we are—I mean, were? That counts for everything."

A period of silence began as Minstrel carefully mulled this over, leaning on his front hooves and staring almost unflinching at me. The only noise was the occasional snuffle from me and a wind banging upon the window shutters every few seconds. Eventually, Minstrel got to his hooves.

"Well, I suppose you need to get her back. That much is obvious, 'fraid I can't help too much, but well, wait and have a chat with Sunny. She knows the area and the ponies you can trust. Might even give you a few tips on how to fire that pistol she carried in with you. I'll see what I can cook up to maybe give you a hand when you head out the door. Just take it easy. I can see in your eyes how much you wanna just gun it and find Glimmerlight. But you're badly wounded and recovering still, not to mention your memory ain't quite there yet."

He shrugged, wandering toward the corridor and tapping the sofa on the way.

"Lie down, and get some rest. Goodness knows you need it. I'll wake ya up when Sunny's back. Who knows, maybe you'll remember somethin' yourself."

Nodding silently, I wandered up the sofa and rolled onto it. The soft cushions allowed me to lie on my side without the worry of wing-ache (oh I had a *name* for it now?) and just flick through my journal. Perhaps if I went far enough back I could find something to—

No. I couldn't do that. Not now, definitely not. If I wouldn't dare look at my slave past before, doing it now would just... it would be too much to handle. No, the years of my life would remain indistinct and behind me. I had no wish to see imagery of me being abused.

Time passed, just lying and thinking, not thinking, and being confused. Freedom didn't feel quite so monumental as I thought it would at this stage. My heart didn't feel like jumping for joy. The shackles on my flank still stung every time I looked at them. I felt out of place. Searching through my saddlebag to distract myself didn't help, I came across the elements of loot I'd taken from Stable Ninety Three. Mostly just odds and ends I'd carried for Brimstone and Glimmerlight. A spanner, small hammer, screwdriver, nuts, bolts, and some little bobby pins. But striving, I pulled the largest item, a thick book, one I had liberated from the Memorial Room. Or... was it? I couldn't precisely remember, the haunting passage through the bowels of the Stable had left my memory indistinct and blurry... or maybe that was the blow to the head. Time would only tell if everything would reassemble like it should.

Weighing the book in my hooves, feeling the heavy weight, it dawned on me how long I'd been pushed by adrenaline and fear. How I'd been able to keep going even with a sick body and the injuries every slave carries. Typical. When I wanted to be heroic, I was weak, but when terrified I could push myself. If only it were the other way around like proper heroes...

But this book. I'd picked it up to give to Protégé. But I was free of that conniving and 'caring' master forever. Helping and saying he wanted to be kind to me one minute then sending me into Stables the next. Holding the coverless book in my hooves, my eyes fell hopelessly on the words I could never read. I would be glad to never have to wrack my brains just talking to him ever again.

So why did I feel like I was going to miss handing him the book?

Gritting my teeth, I dropped it back into my saddlebag. With some degree of revulsion, I set about pulling my fleece back on. As much as Minstrel seemed fine with my wings, I didn't like feeling naked and exposed like this. Whimpering as I squeezed my head through, even wool pulling across my skull feeling like industrial sandpaper, I finally flopped down, breathing hard and switched on my PipBuck's radio.

"—ck and rooooooll!"

The music ceased. Celestia damn it! I'd missed one of Velvet's songs!

Immediately, my mind realised what it had thought and sent approximately eight prayers towards the sky in forgiveness. One for each letter of Her name. Just to be sure.

"Y'know, I really don't think I'll ever tire of that stuff, year after year of the same sounds wear on any good DJ's ears. We've got the main daily news comin' up in a few hours, but for now I got a little tidbit that just can't wait. From over across the plains I've been getting reports of a large scale confrontation between Red Ass and the Steel Rangers. Seems even with all the problems out in the main wasteland, those two groups still want to clobber one another. But that's not the best part, through the network it seems that the slaves of Fillydelphia took the Stable Dweller's actions to heart. There's a colossal search going on and it's clearly not just for Rangers. You don't go hunting for ponies in power armour with whips and shackles, do you?"

My heart leapt. This... this was—

"Oh my!"

"So I say to those of you out there. Good work! Now get out safe, they don't let anypony go easy. Indeed, the Walls are only the first obstacle in their network to catch runaways. Be. Careful. 'Cause ain't nuthin' gonna hurt more than being dragged back through those gates in chains. I thought of saying what roads might be less crowded, but I'd be one pretty big idiot to think they aren't listening in too. Now we've not had any reports of actual escapees yet, but by all the great goodness left in the wastelands I sure hope there is. Anypony out there gets a whiff of a slave that escapes? Let ol' Pon-Three know, will ya?"

Find my friends.

Find Littlepip.

Find my mother.

Now I had another one to add to the list.

Proudly trot into the DJ's very studio as 'the one who got away' and say 'I did it!'.

Giggling so happily to myself at the thought that my throat threatened to spasm and cough, I squirmed and curled up on the sofa, clutching the half destroyed PipBuck tightly enough I feared it might bend. The DJ clearly knew Littlepip, maybe he could put in a good word too?

I might be weak, deathly sick, and, for now, without allies nearby, but at least I knew there were others out there rooting for me. Wishing my dreams to succeed as much as I did.

Hours of the day faded by... at least I thought they were day. Inside, behind shut windows, and with the cloud cover outside there was little way to tell. I dozed while tired and ate when provided for. Minstrel checked over my wounds a few times, replacing the dressing on my shoulder as well as giving my fleece a scrub down with some old cleaning fluid. The one he didn't touch was the bandages around my lower right leg, citing that it would be far too painful to change them for at least a few days until the anti-infection fluid soaking into it killed off the infection in the wound.

"Sunny should be back soon, Murk, don't you worry..."

"You've said that a few times, don't you know?"

Looking up from where he was testing the joints on my legs for any concussive damage, Minstrel just faintly smiled.

"She's got some zipline up on one of the nearby old buildings that lets her get down the hill quick to go scavenging. Problem is, getting back up is still a trot and a half. Depending on how much she fished out, it could be anything from half a day to a couple hours. Apparently you weren't much of a weight, so I see..."

My own eyes followed his to my stomach, shrivelled and still showing ribs if I were to pull up my fleece. Indeed, just ahead of my hind legs, I was fairly sure a griffon could fit their hands together around my waist.

Wasn't that a wonderful thought.

"Just calm down, lil' Murk. It's big an' scary comin' out into the wastes. I used to be in a Stable, I know how it feels. You got the problem that you don't right know how to be free, either. It'll come, just wait for Sunny. She'll see ya right."

Perking up, I heard something. Hooves. Immediately I wanted to gallop, to flee. What if it were Red Eye's slavers? Spotting my tentativeness, Minstrel listened carefully before smiling as his own older ears caught up with my finer hearing.

"Well... I reckon that's her right there."

Scrunching gravel gave way to the front door opening and shutting quickly.

"Hey, Doc? You around?"

"Front room, my dear. Just checking on our little newcomer, he's up and about."

Sharp clip-clopping in the front hall came from a confident and springy step, until I saw the sandy coloured Sunny wander in. An earth pony, a little shorter than most, wearing leather fittings similar to Minstrel's (I assumed one of them stitched for both), and carrying a small bolt action in a side holster. Her mane was a deep brown streaked with bright red, surrounding a focused but rather bright face. Across her back were at least four saddlebags packed full of, well, junk.

I had to admit, though. I *kind of* wanted that big wide-brimmed hat she had on her head. Even if I knew it would just fall down over my eyes.

Something wasn't right, though. Before she even spoke or properly saw me, my ears twitched. Somepony was sneaking behind her. I could hear padded stepping very clearly. Somepony light and soft on their feet... and... panting?

While Sunny trotted farther into the room, the second presence wandered in. Dirty and dark haired, I saw something much smaller than I had been expecting. It wasn't a pony. It was a dog.

Barking loudly enough to make me wince and sweat in fear, it immediately bounded

across the room, heedless of Sunny's shouted command. Shrieking, I fell backwards off the couch, painfully scrambling backwards away from it. The table overturned, knocking my journal onto the floor and making Minstrel stagger backwards. Memories flared in my head, horrible and twisted. Guard dogs growling and barking in my face or just waiting for me to try and escape to find *food* so they could bite me... again.

"Cayenne!"

Whimpering, I closed my eyes, trying to ward off the attacker with my front hooves. I felt the furry head push right past them, going right for my neck and—

...licking me?

"Cayenne, heel girl! Leave the poor buck be! Come on!"

Slowly, shivering, I opened my eyes and had to wince immediately. I felt rough, warm and wet slobbering licks over my left cheek. The dog seemed to grin at me while panting. 'Gotcha'. I could see it written all over 'Cayenne's' face. Behind the sofa, Sunny dumped her things before wandering toward the dog and I. Relieved of her cargo, I could see a bright smiley face shaped like the sun on her flanks. Despite the apparently friendly nature of this... this *mutt*, I could still feel the fear and tension ripple through me. I didn't like dogs.

"Come on, heel!" Sunny snapped the last word with a little more sternness, leading Cayenne to bark and run back over to Sunny, padding around her hooves and under her belly before sitting obediently beside her and looking up, awaiting the next command.

"You alright, buck? Sorry, she gets a little excited around new ponies she meets. She won't bite... usually not even when I tell her to." Sunny winked at me, before giving Cayenne a disgruntled, but loving look. She held nowhere even close to the sheer casual grace of Glimmerlight, but her expression was friendly and warm... if clearly weathered.

"I... I just..."

Mistral coughed lightly.

"I imagine Murk here has encountered a few dogs before of less spicy comedic mindset than Cayenne," spoke Minstrel, trotting back over after righting the table and setting my open journal upon it, "Murk, this is Sunny. Cayenne was the one who sniffed you out in the rubble for Sunny to rescue."

Shakily getting to my hooves, favouring my shoulder, I nodded, trying to find the words.

"Um... I... uh... thanks, I guess?"

Somehow, I had a feeling I'd never make it as a Tenpony Tower ambassador in my new life. Shaking my head, I tried again.

"I mean, sorry. Just still a bit confused. Thank you."

I leaned down, lowering my head as I would to any master. Really, it was the only way I knew to show respect and loyalty as thanks or apology. After a brief, awkward, and silent moment, I heard Doc Minstrel cough into a hoof.

"So... Sunny, aside from enough junk to start our very own scrapyard, any news? Particularly, anypony else get out from that big mess earlier? Our friend here has lost his companions, his protector, and his sister."

I saw his sly wink at me. My heart warmed to him... remembering that little point so well. Sunny settled on the sofa, lying on her side and ruffling Cayenne's rapidly panting and moving head.

"Yeah, met a few ponies, actually. Even got stopped by a few of Red Eye's lot. They're certainly comin' farther out than normal. Somepony with big authority drivin' em onward to reclaim somethin'."

My entire body began shivering. I felt the scar on my skull twitch and stab pain. I direly wished for him to, just let me go and think I was gone.

"Never got a look at *him*, but the cronies seemed content to leave anypony not an escaped slave or a Ranger be for now. The rest seem to still understand the agreement. They don't come out and bother us, we leave some good alcohol for them near the old school once in a while. Good to know that no amount of discipline and fear from Red Eye can beat a little beverage persuasion." She grinned at me, no doubt having explained for my benefit. "Honestly? Red Eye's not so bad a neighbour if you know how to stay on their side. We leave a little loot for them here and there, and he's content to have the griffons not come after us. Not like we'll be around here soon enough. Soon as we got enough caps to make the journey, we're out of here, right Doc?"

Minstrel nodded, smiling thinly. I could swear I saw him glance at the picture nearby.

"But I saw one pony, down near the old bank on the outskirts. Almost shot 'em on sight. Big... one heck of a nasty old brute. Coulda sworn I knew him from somewhere a while back. Looked way too dangerous to approach, a raider for sure. Never any sense in tangling with those types, I tell ya. All pumped up on drugs till they don't care if you put one in their body. Not often you see them out this close to Fillydelphia."

Straightening up fast enough to make Cayenne leap to her feet, I gasped and stammered incoherent words, trying to figure out how to put it. Eventually, I found my tongue.

"That's my friend!"

The look on Sunny's face could have been a painting for the ages. Her glance flickered from me to Minstrel and back a great many times.

"...the big red stallion?"

"Yes!"

"...huge muscles, scars, war tattoos?"

"Yes, yes!"

"...covered in gore and bucking every lamppost in sight out of apparent sheer anger and uncontrollable rage?"

"That's him!"

Sunny resumed that slightly open-mouthed look of bewilderment between myself and the lightly nodding Minstrel. A good ten seconds of sheer silence passed with little movement other than Sunny's face attempting to smile as it looked back and forth between us.

"...I am *very* confused right now."

This could take some explaining.

"Woof!" agreed Cayenne.

Eventually, along with a lot of coercing from Minstrel, Sunny began to actually believe that a Grand Raider Warlord whom she had known to devastate entire areas of the wastes was actually protecting a scared little pegasus and an ex-initiate of the Steel Rangers. Not until I had explained all this did I realise how simply mad my life had been over the past... week? No, it had to have been shorter... few days?

"Right, so your friend is down there. Well, let's get moving!" Sunny seemed insistent to make tracks. Seeing her master pick up the rifle, Cayenne began bounding around the sofa and waiting impatiently near the door. Minstrel held his hooves up, shaking his head.

"No... no. Murk is still far too injured to make such a journey. Didn't you see the balloons go down near that place a few days ago? It's dangerous still. No place for walking wounded. Remain here, Sunny, help him, teach him. If this raider is as insistent as he sounds, he'll wait. Now, I gotta go fetch some stuff from the stash, give em a hand. You stay with 'em, Sunny."

Speaking even as he drew on a leather longcoat, Minstrel trotted toward the front door, shouting his goodbyes as he left. Sighing at my seemingly eternal time to "wait and see" when my entire will wanted to surge through the door, I trotted over and sat in front of my journal instead. Minstrel had explained how I was using it to help remember the events of the escape, so at least I could distract myself using it. Now just to—

It felt like my mind had stopped moving. When I had knocked my journal off the table in my rush to get away from Cayenne, it had fallen open at an earlier page.

A *much* earlier page.

Sunny, hearing my audible gasp, shifted over to peer across my shoulder.

"Huh... now why'd ya go and draw one of them things, now?"

Before me, upon the page, lay a charcoal sketch of a foal's toy. A stupid little frayed and oft-repaired stuffed pony with mismatching eye shapes. In my younger days, the scaling was all messed up, but I felt myself shiver.

"Nothing... nothing big." The memory was beginning to filter back in. I'd never *forgotten* it per se, just it had passed out of my mind down the years of being *told* to ignore everything else. Of a strange little emotion I'd briefly felt once long ago.

Struggling, putting the bits and pieces back together, I tried to remember all the details. It was *nothing*. Other than that it was from my foalhood, a time when usually, I had felt nothing but loneliness.

"I... I didn't think much of it, just once, as a foal in slavery? We were being taken down to the riverbed to scavenge, all of us in chains. But there was this wagon passing by and I saw this stuffed toy fall off. I ran out of line to grab it, probably just me being a stupid foal. I wasn't too intelligent."

Sunny leaned closer, looking more curious than caring.

"So, this toy used to belong to you?"

"No! That's the thing, I *could* have done what I normally do, just take what I can. But when I picked it up in my mouth I saw this little filly on the back of the wagon crying and trying to get her parents to stop. I... I think they didn't want to stop near slavers, so they kept going. I galloped up and threw it back to her."

Sunny drew out her words slowly. "How... generous. You could have just taken it."

Gently, I shook my head. "I guess I just couldn't while I saw her looking. It was hers. She caught it when I threw it. I got lashed with a cane a dozen times for stepping out of line and... and that was it r-really..."

It was a real fight to not burst into tears as the memory of being forced across a nearby rock, held down by my hooves, and caned flooded back. How he hadn't let up even as my shrill young voice had shrieked and echoed in the dusty valley. *This* was why I didn't look back in my journal, exactly the reason everything before I was made free in my mind was off-limits to me.

Nope. There wasn't any helping it. I could already see the drips on the paper. Sunny remained quiet, before reaching across and flicking through my journal until it was on a blank page. She didn't seem to have much soft emotion, but had just enough social

perception to spot the memory was a little unsettling.

"Well... uh, I'm sure she'd be pretty thankful for what you did. I'm sure? Come on, try something new, get your head out of the clouds and into escaping, eh?"

Beside me, I felt Cayenne pad across and lay her head across my hind legs, whining slightly and rubbing her soft hair against me. Even my fears couldn't stop me feeling a little comforted by the animal's empathy.

Taking a deep breath, I wiped my eyes and took up the charcoal. Yes... yes, just ignoring things, that'd work. It always had. Forget it and get on with the work.

"We spent a lot of time in that safe room till things quietened down and we'd gotten our breath back. However we didn't have any medical supplies left bar one syringe. I... I think my shoulder was getting worse. But we had to move soon."

Leaning down, a dark, metal flapping door was drawn with Glimmer's head...

...pressed against it, listening to the dull sounds outside as she sighed at the distant gunshots. I sat nearby, nursing the growing agony in my shoulder and trying not to whimper. The bleeding had stopped, but the horrid motion of galloping so much on it had generated a burning pain that was affecting my ability to even trot.

"I... don't think I can move quickly. Should we wait until night?"

"No. Not enough time. Eventually they'll get word of how many slaves are still out here and start searching every door they can find. You still got that Med-X?"

Nodding, I dug it out of my saddlebag, only briefly wondering why I was still carrying that book alongside my journal. All that weight in one saddlebag was unbalancing me. Glimmer closed her eyes, concentrated hard, and sparked her horn to lift the syringe from my mouth. She had spent the last half-hour nursing her magic back into being. Apparently, she had been lucky, it was just a lack of stamina, not a 'true' burnout as she'd called them. Those could knock a unicorn out for days, allegedly.

"Have you used any of these recently?" Her voice was stern, serious as she pulled the cap off and tested the plunger lightly.

"One, I think. Maybe a few days ago? I don't know how long it's been, really."

Glimmerlight's face became deadly serious for a minute, as though trying to decide on the risks herself rather than telling me. Eventually, with a light sigh, she motioned me to hold out the hoof with my shoulder on that side. The intent was obvious, we had to take the risk if I was going to go anywhere.

Wincing as I felt the needle poke in, the cool rush of liquid entering my bloodstream made me shiver and nipped at the injection point terribly. Sitting back, I let out a raspy breath. The last one had taken a little while to kick in, so we wandered back down the stairs into the saferoom for a minute until it— wooooah boy!

Staggering, my hooves went dead under me and every line of definition in the room whirled and danced. I keeled to one side and fell face first into the spare rugs piled in one corner. I ended up lying on my chest with my hind legs and rump in the air. Attempting to move only led to me falling to the side, not even feeling my own body drop to the ground. Oooh, these things were comfy when I didn't feel pain, maybe sleep would be nice right about-

"Hey! Hey, Murky!"

My eyes were closed, smiling, I felt all the pain and weariness flush out of me. The feeling was slow to come back after the initial surge of painless numbing. I just wanted to hug that pile of rugs and snuggle up under it.

"Murky! Come on, there, stop sleeping. No time to rest!"

Dully, I felt her hooves lifting me up onto mine. I swayed from side to side and fell back on my rump instead. Looking up, I grinned widely at her. See how happy I am, Glimmerlight? All because of you! She just had a half-grin on her face as I flopped around in her hooves. Eventually, remembering to not try shaking my head this time, I looked at her more directly.

"You alright there?"

"...your eyes are really sparkly..." My speech felt slurred around a mouth that was trying to grin wider than my face. Why couldn't I *always* feel like this?

Glimmerlight blinked, rolled her eyes and chuckled.

"You're a regular Casanova, Murky. I *think* the Med-X dosage was a little high for somepony of your size and weight. You're only getting half doses in future, mister."

"Aww..." I giggled and tested my hooves on the ground. Gradually, after at least a few more embarrassing comments ("It's a bin *and* a seat, Glimmer! Look!"), it began to wind down and settled into a slight dulling of my sense of touch all over. Satisfied I wasn't about to start referring to gunfire as 'pretty fireworks,' we began moving back to the door.

"Right, chances are that we will be spotted at least once, but if we can get to the old bank, I'm fairly sure we stand a good chance if Brimstone carries you the rest of the way. We can make good tracks ahead of pursuers, then. You ready for round two?"

Would I *ever* be? All the same, I nodded gently, before we both shoved the door at the same time to enter the home stretch.

Home. I was *going home*. To wherever that ended up being, it would be mine!

Dry Fillydelphian air washed across us after we emerged into the outside world once again. Not willing to stay near to the large open doors, we both hopped out and cantered into the cover of a chainlink fence, its wire shielded with flakboard, and hunkered beside a gate. Glancing through it, I saw open ground, one of the huge roads that led into the centre of Fillydelphia. I knew this one led straight back to the gates themselves. At Glimmer's prompting, I listened as best I could.

Slavers were laughing as they boasted about a Ranger they'd killed. They were up ahead, a short distance from the trainyard, and as such there was no going back there. The road might be our only—

No! I heard a wagon approaching. We hid back behind the fence as it tore past us, pulled by muscular earth ponies and chewing up the broken ground under its metal wheels. No doubt carting supplies to a unit in the wastes. Listening again, there were other, farther off sounds and even a few shrieks of griffons in the sky above, camouflaged against the red haze.

"I... I think we have to make a break over the road. There's loads of slavers inside the trainyard. Some griffons above it, too... I think. Sorry..."

"No, no... you're doing fine. I certainly couldn't hear any of that. Come on, while it's quiet and before any more supply wagons rip past."

Breaking cover, we cantered as fast as we dared on the hard tarmac. I felt vulnerable, if I

looked... to the left I could see the expanse of the wastes... to the right I could see all the way down the road to the gates of Fillydelphia in the distance. No doubt why Red Eye had chosen such a location as to have access to a trade route that ran directly to his fortress. The sight of that open, gaping maw into hell almost made me trip from fear.

"Down!"

Surprised, I felt Glimmer force me to the ground, her eyes skyward. Above us, a single griffon was swooping silently in arcs, about three hundred metres or so away and fifty metres up.

"Let's get to the other side, into cover!" I made to move forward, before feeling Glimmer hold me tightly down.

"Don't move! From the sky, motion shows more than shape. Mother taught me that. Stay still. It'll leave... hopefully."

Whimpering, I remained still. We were dead in the middle of the road, ten metres from the other side. Feeling horribly exposed, I tried to think of why she was right. I was dark and dirty, wearing a black (and blood red...) fleece while Glimmer's dark crimson robes seemed to gel into the very atmosphere and smog of Fillydelphia, even this far out.

My discomfort only grew when I heard the last sound I wanted to. Wagon wheels. Trundling, bobbing, and sparking on the ground, my ears heard them breaking into a fast speed upon the tarmac. Slowly tilting my head, praying with all my might the griffon wouldn't see me, I looked toward the gate and had to fight the urge to scream.

Over a dozen wagons, packed full of Red Eye's army, were barrelling down upon us.

"Glimmer..." I whispered back toward her ear, her eyes concrete and held skyward. The griffon was, oh Goddesses, it was even closer! We were... we were trapped. I had to run—

"Don't... move... Murky..."

A squeak escaped my mouth. Every muscle was willing me to run. This sort of hiding went against every instinct I had.

"There's smog and dust clouds around us. The griffon can't see us."

"The wagons—"

"Stay... still..."

The griffon stopped, head craned toward the wagons. Hovering, I could swear his (or her... too far to tell) eyes looked directly at us, before their gaze swept away down behind the buildings.

Immediately, we moved. I went first, crawling and staying low. Inch by painfully slow inch, we raced the speeding wagons. They were a few hundred metres away, and only billowing dust had to be hiding us. I dared not cry for leaving a trail of tears, however silly it seemed. Only when we reached the edge and rolled down into the lower level behind a ruined safety barrier did we get to our hooves and gallop madly into the nearest building. No sooner had I ducked into the doorway did the clattering sound of a military convoy hurtle past. Wagon after wagon... headed out to ruin somepony's day in the wastes. Silently, I prayed the Stable Dweller would be evading them.

We waited for an extra minute, breathing hard on either side of the double doors... or rather the doorway. The glass doors themselves had long shattered across the floor. Stepping aside, I flinched as I felt a stab of pain. In my haste, I hadn't even noticed my back left fetlock had been cut on the glass.

"Promise me, Murky. We are *never* doing that again..."

"Cross my heart, hope to fly..."

She looked at me weirdly. I just raised one hoof and shrugged.

"Pinkie Pie said it all the time over the speakers back at the FunFarm."

"The Ministry Mare? Of course... well," she chuckled and continued, stroking my side briefly where my wings were, "very appropriate for you."

I wasn't so sure. Anything from that weird pony freaked me out enough without being reminded of my inabilities. But that said, it *was* right. Brimstone had told me not to deny who I was. Did that mean I should have that hope? I'd never even considered it.

Following Glimmerlight farther in, we found ourselves inside a normal train station for ponies, not the industrial one across the road. The ditch outside had been the area for wagons to pull into, apparently. Open plan interiors with empty cash desks lay barren and trashed across one wall, the booths set below a giant board filled with letters and numbers. Benches and small tug-carts littered the main areas over the smooth marble floor. Massive archways made up the support of the building. Had it not been ruined by balefire, it would have been beautiful. This had to be pre-war, the architecture was very different to the blocky factories.

Movement caught my eye. From behind a stairwell trundled a rusty old machine shaped like a pony. Each leg moved so slow that it made me impatient just to watch the bulbous and creaking robot stumble toward us. A card slot on the front flashed a red light, while its speaker

bleeped and blooped lightly, breaking into a grinding, but polite sounding, electronic tone.

"Tickets... please..."

"Uh... maybe later?" Glimmer shrugged to me and resumed looking at the odd remaining robot.

"Tickets... please..."

Without speaking further, we ignored it and cantered through it toward the main stairway. There was no sense in aggravating the machine or causing noise by taking it out. We needed to get our bearings, possibly from the top floor rather than the roof. Old luggage sat unattended around us, strewn open where it had been left and thrown by the blast. Where were the remains? As much as I *hated* it... it seemed off. Even without bones, the seared clothing and warped utensils and tools seemed utterly bizarre. Nothing was just 'normal.'

Glimmerlight wandered to the platform doors, glancing her head through where I could see a train still sitting, bucked off the rails by the force of the bomb. Even as I watched, I saw her shudder and step back. Confused, I went to poke my head around and—

"No." Her hoof stopped me. Looking up at her face, even on her dirtied white coat... she seemed pale and drawn as she slowly shook her head. "You don't want to."

I needed no further convincing. Stepping back, shaking at the mere *thought* of what might be found farther in that way, I reflected on the obvious path anypony hearing an evacuation would take... where they might *all* be. Passing backward, we trotted up the stairs, passing the machine once again. It had completed its excruciatingly slow turn and had been winding forward to meet us again.

"Tickets... please..."

Surprisingly even myself, I scouted ahead to each corner as we ascended floor after floor. There was little to see that anypony who had lived in the wastes hadn't encountered, but it was always a constant fight to keep my imagination in check. Listening for griffons was my

only real distraction as I passed blocked doorways that no doubt held my greatest fears and worst images. We trotted through an old passenger VIP lounge, the plush couches and chairs ruined and charred into blackened piles. A huge panoramic window, ran from the floor to the ceiling, over fifteen feet wide and curved around the corner of the building. Its astonishing view overlooked Fillydelphia, blown in the side facing the crater and outward on the other side. Lowering myself to the ground, I led Glimmer around the drinks bar, avoiding shards of glass before we settled behind the cabinets to remain hidden.

I saw our freedom.

Out ahead of us, stretching as far as I could see... the wastes. Dull and barren, broken by wrecked highways and curious towers, it was at once a grand vista of wonder and scale, and a sight telling the shattering tragedy of a lost world. Fillydelphia lay wrecked below us while the highways, wagon trails, and outer bodies of buildings formed the skeletal structure of the greater plains beyond. A thousand places one could visit... each no doubt with its own story. An endless source of discovery...

Very quickly, I began to realise just how small I really was.

"Every pair of wings..." I muttered.

"...in the wasteland." Glimmerlight finished, before winking at me. "Yeah, I've heard that one too. Good saying, but really, everypony has their own little tale. We're just one more on top of dozens... maybe hundreds, that are out there. The grand history of the wasteland goes on."

She pointed with a hoof.

"There. The bank, down on the skirts. If we head down this row of houses, it shouldn't be too far. It's all side roads. I don't wanna say we're home free, but the chances look good. All the griffons in the sky are off to the east."

We should have left then, but really... faced with this sight, facing the expanse we were about to head to, who could simply move without a moment to think? I gulped, looking at the world now, and remembered the art in the Stable.

"Glimmer? Do you think this will ever, y'know, be good again?"

"The city?"

"No... Equestria. We never got to see it for real. Do you think we can save it? Ponies, I mean..."

Glimmerlight watched the shifting clouds that blocked the sun for a few seconds, before hooking a leg around me and pulling me in.

"I honestly don't know, Murky. I think everypony out there has taken at least one moment to look to the skies above and just ask... 'Why us? Why in our time?' What I would give to live in a world where we were truly safe again, Murky... but the truth is, history always goes on. Maybe ponies descended from us will finally see the light of day."

Out there, I saw little rays of brighter sunlight breaking through the muddy sky, casting small portions of the wasteland into brighter relief. Glimmer pointed at it, making sure I saw it and smiling broadly at the accidental timing. We saw a little shred of beauty out there, one that expanded, and let others through as a thinner portion of cloud passed over, lighting the colours of homes, bush and field briefly. It wasn't much, but even that dash of colour, that one little effort, made me feel closer to what this land once was, and maybe someday could be.

Glimmerlight's watched it, before looking down at me.

"There's still good to be had in Equestria; the good fight, to trust and love in one another.

We've been given a bad draw from the hand of fate, I know. But if there's one thing ponies have learned over the years, Murky, it's that there's one thing that always stays the same, no matter what hardships come to pass. One thing that *never* changes."

Gazing into the distant and faded plains, and watching those bright spots shift and move with the clouds, I couldn't even turn to speak directly to her.

"What's that?"

She squeezed me close, talking with a bright, hopeful smile.

"Friendship. And someday I know, it'll be friendship that sees us through all this in the end. All it takes is us all to do what we each can."

Hearing the way she said that, I felt very warm inside.

"I think I'd like to believe that too."

Leaning my head on her shoulder, I felt her ruffle my mane as we rested with that view, watching every little ray of sunlight as they danced across the wastela-

No.

Across Equestria.

Beep!

I almost screamed with shock, looking for the nearest door to escape through before it closed on me. Only the light pouring in through the windows kept my mind intact to remain still by reminding me I that was still above ground. I should have known, coming upstairs like this would set off the PipBuck's height detection mechanism. (I could do fancy terms too!)

Beep!

"Huh, seems that thing's elevation and geographical positioning sensor is going off again."

Oh come on. Couldn't I be the fanciest speaker for once? Glimmer smiled, stopping us by the doorway leading back downstairs. Better to let Sundial say his piece when we were still relatively safe.

Beep!

Click.

"Hey, this is Sundial!"

"And this is Skydanceeeeer!"

My eyebrows shot up. A young mare's voice breaking through the speakers was not what I had come to expect. Wasn't this just meant to be me and Sundial's thing? All the same, she sounded nice, light spoken, and joyful.

"Heh, yeah, Skydancer's staying over tonight and... well... you just wouldn't let me be to do this on my own, would you?"

"Not a chance. Have you told that thing about us then?"

"About what?"

"That we're a thing, silly! What kind of buck doesn't tell his diary that he got a marefriend a few days ago?"

"Oh... oh I did! On the last one, honest!"

"Suuuuuure."

"I did! I'll replay it afterwards and prove it to you."

"Fine, fine... I'll believe you this time. Well, you go chat to your Pippy-thingy, I'll be

back once I've changed."

"Thanks."

There was a brief pause. I felt a little warm in the face. Their interactions and simple *fun* was heartwarming to hear after such a series of harsh events and the darker memories of the Stable.

"Well, what can I say that she doesn't portray herself? I still can't believe my luck. Who woulda thought that one little chance meeting would lead to this after just a few weeks? My pops says to be careful, not to get too ahead of myself, but he was always a bit of a cranky old stallion. Skydancer is amazing. Honestly, it almost makes it bearable, all the problems these days, knowing she's there to meet up with every few days when her job brings her back to Fillydelphia. Cos honestly, things are getting a bit darker. We had a drill the other day, to get to the Stable in time. Everypony thought it was the real thing. Three ponies... well... the crowds were running mad and... and they'll get better but..."

I understood panic and terror better than many ponies. My heart went out to how they must have felt then.

"That aside, they've got us in some pretty secret stuff down at the Wartime Ministry. Some new armour we're designing in tandem with the Arcane lot. Only reason I tell you here is... well... not like this thing comes off very often. But it's amazing technology, really incredible to work with. It worries me though, escalation keeps happening. There are reports the Zebras are using dragons now. How long before somepony sets the bigger things in motion?"

Another silence. I could hear him shuffling about, and a door clicking shut.

"I can't let her hear this, but I'm setting aside most of my income to try and get her a ticket into the Stable, too. Just in case, y'know? But at this rate it'll take me a year... if the prices don't go up again. Since my Dad got one for me they've doubled. I need more income. I don't know how, but I know I want to manage. For her. If anything so I feel safe with her. That drill took me away from her. I can't have that happen for real. How would it feel to have to leave somepony behind? To escape into safety and know they're still out there? I've started looking out what I can sell, and even enlisted in the Fillydelphia Night Watch, but it's still not enough to catch up now. I'm just a normal buck! How can I get the funds to—"

He stopped. I heard trotting in the background.

"Still talking?"

"Heh... yeah, sorry, I tend to ramble in this thing."

"Well, don't take too long. If I wanted to hear you talking about yourself, I'd listen to you in bed."

Glimmer exploded in laughter, covering her mouth with her hooves, falling backwards. I held the PipBuck with an open mouth and my cheeks red.

"Ah... wha... I..."

"Oh, I'm joking you silly thing. C'mere."

There was a soft sound, like a quick, short suck. Was that a kiss? Then there was another... and... well... another...

"I... um... Sky, I need to turn off the—"

He got cut off after a short giggle. Some fumbling sounds mixed with muffled chuckles later and the sound ceased. Glimmerlight was still snorting on the floor, almost spasming.

Clearly, that type of joke was right up her street. I just felt embarrassed for Sundial.

"Oooh, that's so cute." Glimmerlight finally regained the power of speech, lying on her back. For a second, I could almost forget we were in the middle of a death defying escape from the harshest slave pit in the wastes. "We better get going, snrk! Let... hehe... let's go."

She stood, fighting giggles while we trotted toward the stairs. I kept glancing at my PipBuck all the way, that single piece of scrap metal containing such memories. My mind kept flicking through the happy banter, through the relaxed and casual ease with which they enjoyed each other. The caring; such a level that I'd never heard before. A different sort to the friends I knew.

In fact, it seemed closest to the mare but still, different. To have a... a special somepony? I wish I knew what that felt like...

Our route took us through the staff offices to a fire escape at the back. We'd spotted a fallen chimney that had bridged between the station and the building directly next to it, and quickly decided it would be best to cross it, avoiding the street level entirely. Inside the offices, I carefully listened... nothing. Silent enough to risk talking.

"Glimmer, can I ask you... um... something?"

"Sure, Murky." Her head was scanning around each corner and office in the grey corridor. Musky dust fell from the cracked ceilings while we trotted through, slowly drifting in air currents that almost unnoticeably weaved their way through the ruined station.

"How... how do you make somepony like you?" My voice felt squeaky and pathetic, but I forced the line out. "Like, I mean... like that?"

"Got somepony in mind?" She grinned down at me, clearly knowing the answer. "Perhaps you know where she 'dwells?'"

My cheeks flushed, looking away quickly. Was I *that* obvious? Well, she *had* seen my journal. Oh dear... embarrassment time.

"Don't worry about it, Murky. When it happens, it happens. Just be your charming usual self. I think you'd be surprised how many mares want a buck who isn't in their face all the time talking their ears off."

I bit my lip.

"What if I had... well... somepony in mind that I didn't really know too well?"

Glimmerlight paused, I knew how ridiculous what I was thinking was. But she just reached out and ruffled my mane again.

"Don't think too hard on it. Nothing wrong with a sweet little crush to dream about in lonely times. I'm sure there's a mare waiting out there for you. That is, if you still don't consider bucks a likely route."

My flustered response of incomprehensible jabbering was met only with a sly grin from her, before I shut up entirely; and not because of embarrassment.

My ears twitched, a stomping, metallic noise had entered the train station ground floor, unmistakable. Seconds later, voices, audible only to me, drifted up.

"E.F.S. spotted two signatures inside this building, up high. Likely Red Eye observers, Star Paladin."

"Engage and negate. If we clear them, we clear a route out toward the bank. Hopefully. It's still a ways out."

The stomping began moving forward again, faster. They were trying to be quiet. Perhaps to others they may have been. But to me it was like someone sticking my head inside a bell. Motioning to Glimmer, we quickly cantered downstairs, aiming to reach the room with the

fallen chimney before they caught up. Heavy power armour likely couldn't follow us over such a rickety makeshift bridge.

Glimmerlight whispered to me, "Rangers?"

I nodded, and she just shook her head.

"Then don't worry about sound, Murky, just go for it. They know where we are with those suits."

I still tried to set us a pace that made it look like we were just 'moving fast' and not 'galloping away.' Just because they knew where we were didn't mean they knew I'd heard them. On our way, much to my amazement, the ticket robot had followed us, as though aiming to get up to the VIP lounge to ask us again.

"Tickets... please..."

We galloped around it, hearing the machine methodically and patiently begin turning once again to follow us once more. Potentially the most determined ticket collector in history. One floor above the Rangers' heads, we quickly knocked aside the fractured wooden door and moved inside the office where the chimney's broken top was located.

A blast of wind whipped at my mane, flowing in through a colossal hole in the brickwork wall. The brickwork chimney had collided through it, scattering tiny red shards of brick everywhere and smashing the room asunder. Jammed horizontally, it acted as a small gap to the old housing next door. Being only ten feet wide, it didn't seem so bad.

Yet the moment my hoof touched it, the chimney lurched and a few bricks dropped from it. Alright, pretty bad...

"Didn't think you had a problem with heights." Glimmer stepped up onto it, carefully shifting her way out. I followed, trying to take comfort in the thought that if the balefire hadn't brought it completely down, my own tiny weight wouldn't.

"I don't mind heights. I *do* mind feeling like I'll fall..."

Concentrating while we shifted across, carefully judging every balance, I listened behind us.

"Targets are due east, moving slowly."

"Moving between buildings... damn, must be that chimney we spotted outside. Circle around, back downstairs."

Breathing a sigh of relief that we had bought ourselves some time, I hopped the last few feet, taking Glimmer's hoof. In one horrifying moment, my hoof skiffed off the edge of the wall, prompting an ever increasing crumbling sound. Glimmer gasped, yanking me forward.

"Get off of it!"

We dove further into the strangely identical office within the opposite building (had they copied one another through the windows?) and ducked behind a desk. Behind us, the crumbling turned to a cracking, grinding sound and...

...stopped.

Ten seconds or so later, popping our heads back up above the desk to look back, the chimney was still in place, albeit a few inches lower on this side. Very hesitantly, we chuckled out of sheer relief.

"Tickets... please..."

My chuckled slowly died and quietened. Twisting to look, I saw the four legged ticket robot begin trundling out onto the chimney in its endless quest to acquire non-existent tickets from the first passengers in centuries.

Then the chimney collapsed.

It grew from a smattering of grinding stone, the entire support curving to the side, and then giving way to an avalanche, the roar of a thousand bricks slamming into the ground at different times echoing across the block. So much weight dropping tore the creaky walls from both buildings completely apart. In a moment of horror, I felt the floor beneath us dropping out, tilting with cracks forming like forked lightning toward us. We turned, but there was no chance. The entire floor gave way, dropping us to slide down it toward the gap where the makeshift bridge had fallen. Screaming, sliding toward the hole, I found myself flung out into the air.

The wreck of the chimney below shortened the drop, but not by much. The impact on my four hooves felt like I'd fallen a mile. Even dropping and rolling the moment I hit a thankfully flat section of fallen wall, I yelped in pain and rolled down the rest of the pile, end over end, before crumbling into a heap amongst the rubble in the alleyway with a bone jarring impact. Bricks rained down around me, pinging and sending small fragments everywhere like shrapnel. Glimmerlight had somehow kept her feet beneath her, landing and rolling in a more controlled manner before being pitched to the side by a brick striking her on the back like a hammer. I heard her yell out. The dust cloud kicked up blew out of both sides of the train station's back alley.

"Murky... urgh, you there?"

"Tickets... please..."

"Not you! Murky!"

"I... yes..."

The robot was half buried beside me, damaged and sparking as it futilely strove to move. I felt Glimmer pulling me up, dragging me desperately away. The train station's wall collapsed where we had lain. A boxy machine with a screen fell from the station's room, exploding as it hit the ground and blasting an entire stockpile of old tickets across the entire area like confetti.

Screeching filled the skies, Steel Rangers pounded on the ground toward the noise, and all a manner of shouting went up from nearby.

"Murky, run!"

Clearly, my ears had been somewhat wrong. I'd only heard the *noisy* hunters, but we were more surrounded than I'd ever thought. The griffons must have lain silent on clouds or rooftops just waiting for us... using their patrols to trick us into thinking it was clear. Galloping as best we could, we ran out into the street, taking the quickest route toward the cover of more housing while the skies slowly *filled* with griffons.

Behind us, ten thousand tickets fluttered slowly to the ground, resting all over the wreckage, and burying everything in a sea of white paper.

"Thank... you..."

A high velocity round whipped past us, tearing a six inch hole in a home's wooden pillars. Yelping, I fell back and felt Glimmer trying to yank me behind the low wall surrounding the rotten garden.

"Shit! Down! Get down! Where did they come from?!"

"Griffons! They're hiding on the rooftops. Oh Goddesses!"

We had to move, half crawling, half galloping we fled along the gardens as best we could.

The griffons were moving all over the place, not just after us. It was for the Rangers behind us. They had run out of the train station, shouting to stop us before we 'alerted Red Eye' to their presence. Reaching the end of the gardens, Glimmer glanced and saw the griffons either moving to cover the Rangers' approach, or reloading. Spurred on, we took the chance and ran into the open to reach what looked like a subway entrance.

"Murky, just watch the road. They've been dropping mines! They're *still* following us!"

Indeed they were. Even while reloading, they flapped between chimneys and over rooftop gardens.

Then I heard a soft ping of metal hitting the ground.

"What was that?"

"I said they're dropping mi— WATCH OUT!"

It leapt up from the asphalt, a curious stick of metal and plastic. Glimmer dragged me to the ground, flattening us down as much as she could, her body laying over me. The small stick bounced again, before detonating right above us.

My ears were searing with pain, my entire body felt like I had just belly flopped into a river and my vision was hazy. Crying with a headache, sound returned only gradually. My front right hoof was bleeding badly. I could see a small shard of metal stuck in it. I clutched it close, whimpering and crying out.

Behind me, the battle started proper as the Rangers engaged. Clenching my teeth to try and bite down the pain, I rolled up. Only now I noticed that Glimmer was struggling to even stand up about ten feet away.

Her flank and torso bore multiple small wounds, her blood was oddly hard to see along her red robes. Limping, I tried to move over to her.

"Urgh... Glimmer, you—"

"I'm... I think, just shrapnel... hrk. Murky... Murky you alright?"

"I... I..."

"Hold on, we'll get out of here. We'll *all* get out of here. Just a little further..."

We tried to move, but avoiding other mines and our injuries reduced our speed to a crawl. The subway entrance was only perhaps twenty metres ahead; the bank not more than half a mile. We were *so close*, but at this rate, it might as well be in Appleloosa.

"Where's Brimstone!?"

"I don't know! He must be up ahead at the bank... or got separated or something, we need to keep going. Find something to help you... and me... urgh..."

Behind us, the battle moved closer, the priority of the Rangers being the only thing keeping us from being sniped off by griffons. Bullets not meant for us still whipped through the air above our heads while we crawled down the pavement. Missiles streaked in the air after missing griffons, exploding roofs and towers that crashed down to either side. Looking behind us, Glimmer seethed and gritted her teeth. Shuffle... after shuffle...

We stayed apart, so we became less of a target, one of us roughly on either side of the street. Only as we reached an area blocked by fallen sky wagons did I realise I was on the *wrong* side. Ducking back, I retreated into the veranda of stone walled and wooden roofed home, cowering just behind the inner fence of the suburban building next to a table still bearing abandoned plates. Between her and I lay mines and a *lot* of gunfire.

"The Rangers are still in the same street, keep going! KEEP GOING!"

"My... my leg..."

"I know, but we need to go now! Get to me! Inside, Murky! We're almost there!"

Please, Celestia give me the courage to cross that road to get into the metro station with her. Feeling woozy, probably from blood loss, I tried to push myself to-

Without warning, a stray missile from the raging battle down the street rocketed past a very lucky griffon. Exploding above me, I screamed as wood and chunks of stone fell on all sides. Glancing upward, I saw almost every supporting beam on the veranda and the upper floor had been knocked out.

It began to creak ominously

"Watch the building!" Glimmerlight screamed from across the street. "It's... it's coming down!"

I wanted to move. But my limbs had locked up in fear. Just staring upwards, I felt unwilling to run into a mined area behind me, but staying here meant...

What... what was I meant to do?

The last thought through my head as the building began to crumble was a quick thought that any of the others. Glimmer, Brimstone, Littlepip... they would have known what to do when caught between all of this. But I didn't... I didn't...

The most I brought myself to do was to dive under the strong looking table sitting on the veranda.

There wasn't even any pain. Just a crushing envelopment and a dulling of all my senses. The table bend out, before dropping down on one side and banging my forehead from above. And with that, I felt my consciousness mercifully give out amongst the crashing tide of wood falling atop me.

What must have been only seconds later, I groggily opened my eyes again, feeling like I'd been woken far too soon. Hearing as though I was beneath water, and seeing through misted eyes, I realised the wreckage had almost entire buried me. Everything felt hazy, and a splitting pain pierced through my skull. Like a pink and white blur, I saw Glimmerlight trying to crawl over the street under fire.

"Oh... no... Murky! MURKY!"

Griffons swept in, huge brown shapes as I began to drift off again.

"No! Get off me! Get off! My friend, he's still in... ARGH!"

Finally, the darkness won out. The pain in my skull flared and built, leaving me alone...

...covered by rubble. Just my head and one hoof sticking out from under the wood. I had been lucky... if it had been anything heavier than the table sheltering me that had struck my head, well... that would have been it. Sitting back from the frankly haunting image of my own crushed body, I simply tried to prevent myself from breathing too quickly again.

Sunny glanced from behind me on the sofa, where she had watched me draw the numerous pictures and listened to my scattered thoughts and memories. Over the course of the exercise, I had slowly began to feel a little less nervous about Cayenne sitting softly against me. The canine didn't *seem* to be dangerous, even if I did still shiver each time she moved. Wiping my eyes, I felt her dig into me and curl up around my back hooves.

"She's glad you're up. Really, Cayenne's the one who saved your life. You may not like dogs, but I can tell ya... she don't do that for just anypony. Most folks are too filled with harsh thoughts and anger. Dogs can sense that."

"Whereas I'm just a weak, sick, and hated pegasus..." I muttered quietly.

Sunny tutted. "Alright. Can that rubbish. Not *everypony* hates pegasi. Sure, the vast majority of slaves might after Red Eye used 'em for a scapegoat to keep common ground in there, but look at how many ponies don't judge you for it that you've met. Besides, if a dog thinks you're great, don't ask for a second opinion. Now come on."

"Huh?" I twisted, seeing Sunny get up and grab her rifle. Donning her hat, she shook herself out after being hunched up so long.

"Well, we gotta get you ready to go find that gal, don't we? Can't have you wandering back around Filly's outskirts, raider friend or no, without you being able to shoot back. They are still out searching, so they've likely got her in a wagon or something still. That stallion leading them hasn't let anypony go back to Filly yet, so your friend must still be out there. We'll go get, what was it... Brimstone? We'll get him, then the four of us will go hunting. I'm tired of sitting around on the sidelines if there's ponies out there..."

Cayenne was with her master immediately, bounding around her hooves rapidly, impatiently even.

Rather to my own surprise, I felt a little hope begin to filter in. The escape was still on... we could still *all* get out! Gathering my things into my saddlebag, I adjusted my fleece and began limping after her. PipBuck and goggles went in the saddlebag, my hoof and forehead still being far too painful right now to wear them. We headed towards the door and—

Doc Minstrel arrived home. The moment we had left to go to the door, I heard it open. So much for that moment of dramatic striding onward, I hadn't even got to see the door itself.

"Sunny?"

"Just heading out to get our new friend taught, Doc."

Minstrel wandered into the room, looking at me standing ready.

"We're not going out. Sunny, put your rifle down and lock Cayenne in the kitchen."

Her face just seemed puzzled, but Minstrel's voice was quieter, slightly pleading with her to just do as he said.

"Doc?"

"Now, Sunny! Just head into the kitchen. I've already made arrangements. We're going home soon, back to the others we know."

"Doc, what are you *talking* about?" Sunny looked about ready to burst of indignation. Cayenne stood by her side, eyes fixed before barking suddenly toward the corridor as I heard multiple heavy treads enter.

"What the good doctor means..."

My forehead *seared* in pain, making me squeal suddenly until the throbbing subsided, pleading internally. 'No... please no... don't let me open my eyes and this be true... no... no no no...'

He was here. Impossible as it seemed, he was standing right before me. Two slavers flanked him with weapons drawn.

"...is that he understands when property should be returned to its *rightful*... heh... Master."

Striding into the room, his filthy hooves from hours of trekking around Fillydelphia left a trail behind them, and his rotten teeth showed through his grin when he saw me backing into a corner. A stubby shotgun hung by his side, his hard leather whip at the other. Segmented plate armour creaked as he rounded past the sofa.

Sunny hopped to the side, between me and him, rifle drawn. Immediately, The Master's

two attendants pulled their own pistols and aimed for her. Cayenne pawed at the floor, growling incessantly at The Master, baring her teeth. He just cackled, reaching a hoof to pet her and pulling it with a laugh when she snapped at it.

“Doc... what *is* this? What have you *done*!?”

Minstrel stood at the back, near the corridor, with sad eyes.

“I’ve always said it. I need to get back to my love. I even told him, I’d sell *anything* to finally achieve that. Well, pegasi are a valued asset to Red Eye; I sought them out and made a deal. Seven hundred caps, he’s willing to pay, along with a guarantee of safe passage out of Red Eye’s territory.”

Sunny growled, hunching down as she bit back at him.

“You healed him! Saved his life! How could you betray every dream of his like this? You always took *care* of ponies!”

“He’s not worth anything dead! Come on, Sunny, you know he’d be dead in a day out there! The stupid buck doesn’t even know how to think for himself! Not to mention he was travelling with the Warlord that killed my *hometown* back in Ponyville years ago! He’s *safer* with Red Eye, where he at least gets fed and directed.”

He sounded only partially convinced, but Sunny broke the back of a chair with her enraged hoof slamming down on it.

“I spent years with you, just for this!?”

The Master stared into the barrel of her gun without fear, just grinning at their exchange. Yet his eyes never left mine. Boring silently into my mind as Minstrel and Sunny argued, I could feel the sensation of those chains that held me in slavery tightening again.

“Come on home, Number Seven. You know it’s where you belong. Now let’s just have you trot outside, we’ll even give you a lift in the wagon, won’t that be nice, heh heh...”

No...

“Step forward, Number Seven.”

No...

He narrowed his eyes, stomping the floor hard enough to make Cayenne bark in offence and every ornament on every shelf clatter and shake. One hoof pulled the whip toward his mouth.

“Step forward, Number Seven!”

I *tried*. I honestly tried to force my mind so far in I might wake up from some nightmare or... or forget everything again. The lash struck me right on my face, on top of my newly healed skull. Pain greater than any single blow before ripped through my head, drawing me right back to *his* world. Collapsing on the floor before him, staggering forward on instinct, I whimpered and lowered my head. A huge hoof of his flipped me over, letting him glare directly down at me. Spittle from his foaming rage dripped and landed around my neck, but the furious expression calmed, laughing instead. I saw his cronies back Sunny into the corner.

“Heh... you and I, Number Seven. We’re *meant* to be together. Here’s more proof than ever...”

The cracked and filthy hoof traced the scar. I could see his almost identical one, running from left ear to above his left eye. Leaning down, he brought his face close enough that I could feel his very breath upon me.

“But don’t think for one second you’re not going to be punished for this, you despicable little *worm*. Trying to escape me, eh? Thought you could escape me, eh? You won’t ever get

away, little runt... you're *mine*. No matter how far you scamper, the chains will always pull you back. I'd hunt you to the ends of the world if I had to."

"P-please... I... I'm..."

"I didn't say you could speak, slave!"

The hoof rose, aiming to slam down upon my chest. I curled up and screamed, yet instead, a dark brown blur hurled itself at his neck, growling and biting deeply.

Roaring in anger, The Master backed off, shaking and tossing Cayenne as she sunk her teeth hard into his front leg. Distracted, his slavers found their guns knocked aside. Sunny's small rifle made a disproportionately loud bang, sending one slaver reeling and screaming, holding his bleeding neck. Bucking the other aside, Sunny grabbed me, pulling me to my hooves.

"Get downstairs, Murky! Go!"

Shoving me, I staggered and almost fell as The Master slammed into me. His bulk knocked me clean across the room into the kitchen while he fought with the grimly thrashing dog that had locked onto him. Cayenne was rotating her bite, trying to find purchase under his armour, staying away from his hooves.

Turning, I saw a fallen kitchen knife and grabbed it in my mouth. He was distracted... I could just—

I couldn't... he was My Master. *You didn't attack your Master*. What might he do if I didn't get away and I'd stabbed him?

I ran instead. Sunny ushered me along, her rifle booming a second time in the enclosed space, missing the second slaver when he ducked behind the sofa I'd woken up on. Half pulled, half galloping, I found myself directed to a small door that opened up to the cellar.

"Get down, they'll have somepony at the door, I'd bet. Cayenne! Heel, girl!"

Taking aim with her rifle, she made sure the other slaver kept his head down. I could see Minstrel lying on the floor, looking shocked and bewildered beyond words. Glancing across, he tried to mouth something, but just looked away.

Cayenne ripped once more, sending a spurt of blood across the table and making The Master bellow in pain. His hooves lashed out, slapping the dog away from him. Falling on her side, Cayenne furiously thrashed her legs to get up.

One of Sunny's shots smacked into The Master's side, I saw the round ricochet off of one of the heavy metal plates. He didn't even look staggered, instead snarling and drawing the small shotgun.

"Back!"

Sunny pushed us both into the cellar staircase as the deafening brutal *boom* sent a dozen pieces of buckshot tearing into the wrinkled wallpaper beside the door, blowing it back open again.

"You can't run, slave! You can't escape *me*!"

Sunny fired blind around the corner, before swearing and trying to dig out more ammunition. I realised her saddlebag was still in the sitting room.

"Cayenne, *heel*!"

I heard the dog launch herself at The Master again, attacking in a frenzy. I couldn't see into the room from the staircase, but I heard snapping and a skittering of paws.

"Pathetic animal, *down*!"

I didn't see the shotgun's blast, but I just heard it roar; punctuated by the one short, sharp whine that died out as a small weight hit the ground. Freezing solid, I glanced back upward.

Sunny's eyes were wet, before a blinding rage overtook her. Screaming in incoherent fury, she slammed the door shut and slid a heavy metal bar across it.

"That... I... I am going to kill him, Murk."

The Master was still stomping around, before the door bent inward with a dull thud.

"Go, downstairs! He isn't getting you. *He isn't.*"

We galloped down, finding a small living area with a single bed and a dog basket. Presumably this was Sunny's own space. It was spartan, but cosy below ground, occupied by old books, magazines and maps; with a cleaning kit spread on the desk. An old spark lantern swung on each brutal impact from behind us on the door.

"You hear me, Number Seven!?"

His harsh blow on the door sounded like it snapped a piece of wood on the frame. Dust fell from the roof in trickles, shaken loose by the savage impacts.

"You belong to me!"

Every time I heard that, my body wanted to rush to obey. Without Sunny, I might have simply stood waiting. She swept possessions into her saddlebag, slung a waterskin around her from where it lay on the post of her bed, before opening a drawer and grabbing more ammunition. Already I could see a storm door that opened upwards into the backyard of the house.

"I keep that thing covered from the outside, they shouldn't have it guarded. There's a zipline on the nearest tall building to the south I use to move into the suburbs near the bank quicker, should support both of us. We're getting out. Now or later, I don't care, but he will die."

Testing the door, I found it easy to open, before resting against it to wait for Sunny to grab her things. My heart was beating and my head throbbed on every crunch of the door upstairs.

"I'm sorry. I've ruined everything for you..."

"Shut up. The Doc ruined it for himself, the stupid bastard! Argh!"

She bucked the desk's chair in sheer frustration, splintering it against the wall. Throwing her saddlebag over her back, she picked up her rifle and began reloading.

"Sunny, why are you helping me?"

It was a stupid question. A stupid *time* to ask it. But I needed conversation. *Anything* to keep my mind off of-

"I am your Master, slave! Come out!"

—that. If I listened too much, I might believe it.

"Few reasons, really. One, nopony deserves to be a slave, way I see it."

Two rounds fed into her rifle.

"Two, Doc betrayed me as much as you in doing this."

Two more rounds slotted in, each with a satisfying click.

"Three..."

She hesitated, before opening a nearby drawer and lifting something else out. I couldn't quite see, but she opened her saddlebags, stopping with it in sight just before adding it in. Half gasping, I just pointed my hoof disbelievingly. She didn't smile, but spoke with resolution.

"...let's just say there's a little filly who still owes you one for this."

In her hoof, she held a foal's stuffed toy, weathered all the more with age, before gently setting it in her travel bag.

"Y-you..."

"I heard your screaming when they punished you, Murk. Tried to tell my folks to turn back, buy ya or somethin' so you could live with us. But nuthin'. Look, I don't believe a lot in the magic of friendship stuff they talk about, but life's thrown me a bone here. I guess I see this as a chance to finally do somethin' about it."

Part of me felt offended, how could I not have more time to talk about this? To get to know her properly before we galloped out together? Why couldn't I ever have time to properly meet anypony? This was too fast, too sudden!

"...thank you, Sunny."

"Well, we'll talk later, on the road. But now?"

As though dropping the subject, she slid the final two rounds into her rifle.

"Gonna give that big bastard something to sting before I go, at least."

Trotting over, she took aim at the door from the bottom of the stairs. The Master was bucking it hard enough to make the entire room vibrate. Wood splintered, her lantern fell from the ceiling, giving everything a strange look of being lit from below when it smashed open and revealed the glowing element within.

"This is for Cayenne you son of a... heh, bitch."

Even before she could depress the trigger, the shotgun's buckshot tore through the wood from above. It flew downstairs in a swarm of hot metal, taking Sunny clean off her feet. My mouth dropped, screaming her name as I saw the blood fly from her side, and heard the painfully slow sound of her rifle dropping to the ground.

Creaking, straining, the stairs barely supported The Master's weight as he descended, step by slow step. Even with Sunny lying groaning at the bottom, his eyes were fixed on me the entire way. My muscles felt frozen. The way out was right behind me. I could just go.

"Stand still, slave..."

And I did.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, his gaze averted for just enough to glance at Sunny and press a huge hoof down on her leg stretching to her rifle. Exerting his huge bulk and weight, I heard her groan in pain as her leg was held down by the joint.

"You shot at me. You defied me. Yet you lived within my reach, you weren't free. You weren't ever free. Minstrel has been on our payroll to hand over any escaping slaves for *years*. You were just his little toy, even if he was a soft one; just as I've come to reclaim mine. Isn't that right, Number Seven?"

I just squeaked, trying to find the willpower to shake my head. Even ten feet away across a room he held an air of authority. That everlasting and unbroken chain on his flanks, the chainlinks identical to my own, it felt tighter than ever around some unreal part of my mind. It felt like his ownership by right of fate.

He looked down at Sunny again, relishing as she gasped in pain under his massive hoof pressing down upon one of the buckshot wounds.

"F-fuck... you..."

"Cute. You're going to die, mare. Unless of course, the *slave* can save your life. Tell me, Number Seven," he turned back to me, "what is one good reason to spare her?"

My mind was racing, not thinking straight. I wanted to run or cower, or beg and plead... or just... I *didn't know and*—

"Too slow!"

The shotgun arced out, planting it in her mouth and holding it upright with a hoof.

"Try again!"

"I... I'll..."

"Too slow, slave! Again! You know how this works. Now, *do as you're instructed.*"

His game was simple. He wanted to force me to obey. The threat of that shotgun pressing painfully into Sunny's mouth was too much. I had no choice.

"I'll come back!" I screamed it, pain welling in my heart as I felt everything I had worked toward and fought for come crashing down ever since we ran from that Stable. "I'll come with you back... back h-h-home. You don't want our deaths. Y-you want our lives."

The Master grinned. Oh, *that* grin. Those cracked and rotting teeth smiling right at me as the barrel lifted from her mouth. With a bellow, he called the slaver watching Minstrel down behind him and threw the subordinate a set of shackles.

"Put them on her, she's my stock now, not the upstart's. I'm sure she'll fit in well"

His eyes focused on me. A sick lick of his lips accompanied a leering small glance to the side at the shaking, but stern mare below him.

He opened a pouch and dumped a second set of shackles and collar upon the floor, the latter linked to the leather harness on his armour by a thick chain. The slaver was already fitting the shackles to Sunny. I could see her struggling to move, to resist, but blood loss and shock was setting in fast. Her eyes were glazed over.

She couldn't do anything. Cayenne was dead. I was alone.

Under My Master's watchful gaze, I dutifully trotted forward. Of course he had come for me, I had no say in anything. I was just his slave. His ever loyal—

My eyes fell upon Sunny once more. Her blood was leaking from a dozen holes. I didn't think it anything fatal, but it was utterly crippling from pain and injury. It was just like The Master to use such a weapon. She had tried to help me; to save me! Yet, I couldn't help her now as she was dragged toward the stairs to be The Master's slave. Condemned from her free life into a world of poisoned air, scorching industry and backbreaking abuse.

I was no hero to stop them. I couldn't rescue her. I was just one little pony.

"Rules of Fillydelphia, Number Seven. You bring a slave in or recover an escaped one, you keep 'em for your stock. The upstart got you that way. But both you are mine now. Put them on."

Against all willpower, I trotted forward. Reaching for the shackles, I lifted the collar and held it ready to slip around my head. My Master commanded. I had to obey.

Lying on the floor. My eyes spotted the stuffed toy lying from Sunny's spilled bag. The slaver had carted her away, but this was still lying here.

She wouldn't want me to give up. She'd risked herself just to stay true to her belief of freedom being the rightful virtue of all ponies.

I felt my hooves begin to back off.

"Stay where you are!"

Now! I had to go *now* before the terror clenched my heart. He had killed or enslaved those who tried to save me, what would he do to *me*? I felt so sorry for Sunny in my heart. As though she could hear my thoughts, I promised her that if I could find Brimstone, we would try to save both her and Glimmer before they got into that city!

"Stay still, SLAVE!"

I heard him canter toward me, thumping across the floor and drawing the whip. No time to think, no time to grieve or worry or plan or falter and worry.

I just had to dare.

Spinning, I galloped toward the door, hurling myself up and through it even as I heard The Master gallop after me. Hopping up, I tried to pull myself from the vertical doorway and out into the wastes. The whip lashed out, striking across my rump. Screaming, I rolled out, fighting to push myself onwards. Behind me, the doors exploded open as The Master began pulling his more considerable weight through the small space. I had time. I had time to run to-

No, oh no.

I was not 'many miles from Fillydelphia' as Minstrel had claimed. He had lied about that too.

The red haze in the clouds, surrounded by the housing areas wrecked by the balefire and crumbling around me, Minstrel's house was little more a couple miles from Fillydelphia's walls. I could still see them, even if we were far outside of Red Eye's domain. The window covers had hid it! Suddenly I understood the insistence that I stay inside; he had me played from the very start.

Without thinking, I simply galloped forward. Around me I could hear slavers trotting to and fro. The Master behind me, after struggling with the small opening, had retreated back inside, I could hear him screaming to his subordinates to get hunting to catch me. Hidden in swathes of smoke and smog, I could see wagons full of slavers spreading out. Shouts as some saw me grew into a mad dash of a dozen slavers from the front of the house.

I was surrounded.

No, wait, what had Sunny said? She had a zipline on the highest building that led to near the bank! That was where Brimstone was waiting, he could *destroy* these ponies and then we'd get Glimmer and Sunny back! I glanced around, panicking, pacing from hoof to hoof on the spot and whining as I looked for the tallest nearby building.

"Get him! That little slave's life is *mine*, you hear? He's south, go!"

Storming out the front of the house, I saw The Master turn and see me. A dozen slavers looked around or piled out behind him. Shrieking, I fled across Minstrel's garden, winding around random junk before hopping on to and over an old bench to have enough height to jump the fence. Scampering, I headed into the thin lanes between houses as I made for what looked like an old mill that towered above every other nearby building. That *had* to be it! No zipline was visible in the hazy air of Fillydelphia, but there was no other choice. Behind me, slavers thrashing and ripping at the fences to tear them apart lit a panic in my heart. Others were pulling up in towed wagons a street over... or two streets? *I couldn't think, just run!*

"There he is! Come on! Shackles will have our flanks if we don't get him! Stop there, you little runt!"

Shrieking, I saw more slavers, clad in ragged cloth, come galloping down a side alley. How many were there? Why did he want me so much? I kept going, hearing them skittering around the corner behind me. Kicking dustbins and trying to weave around obstacles, I dared not even look as I heard their hooves become irregular amidst a barrage of swearing whenever they tried to catch up. They weren't even armed with guns... they didn't need to be for me. Oh, Brimstone... please be waiting. Don't go wrong... please don't go wrong...

Ducking around a corner, I stopped just long enough to get my bearings. The mill was a hundred metres away, down the street. I could see a tiny hole in the perimeter wall that I might be able to fit through... but slavers lined the roadside, searching houses and galloping to and fro.

It would all come down to how fast I could gallop with a tiny head start.

Steeling myself, I went for it. One second free... two seconds... three, four... five, I could do this if I just got a couple more without them—

“Right there! Go, go!”

“Grab that runt!”

No! I wasn't even half way and already I heard the dozens of hooves clattering behind me. They screamed and hollering, threatening me with unspoken consequences if I didn't stop. Fixing my view on the small hole, I concentrated only on that. The hole. Freedom. Escape. If I could get through that, I'd be home free in a big complex and cramped place I could sneak about, get to the roof and fly—

...a zipline. I'd *fly* away.

Spurred on, ignoring my front right hoof and my shoulder screaming in pain, I dove for the hole faster than I ever thought I could run. It was tight fit, I got my head through, hind legs kicking hard as my front hooves popped through too. Scrambling, squeezing and turning, I began to panic, *why couldn't I fit?*

“He's stuck! Grab his legs!”

They galloped up, I felt hooves grasp my legs and pull. Wailing, I held myself through the hole with my front hooves, trying to push forward. I bucked madly, kicking, thrashing and scraping. With a grinding pull, I felt my saddlebag scrape all of its decoration off, stripping the butterflies away.

“PULL!”

Squealing, I felt myself pulled back into the hole by my hind legs. Whips lashed them, hooves stomped and tugged. Again and again, stuck in the hole I screamed and begged, desperately trying to avoid being yanked through into the rowdy gang of slavers just *waiting* to punish me. I wanted to go! To escape! To... to *fly*—

-without wings.

Gritting my teeth, my thoughts firmly on *her* waiting for me, she had shown me the virtue of freedom. The determination you *had* to have! I tugged my hind legs back in and bucked for all I was worth. The sickening crunch of teeth shattering mixed with a high pitched shriek as I felt my hind legs come free. Pushing through, I felt my heart sink as I saw them covered in lash marks that bled and welted. Adrenaline was all I had left. Adrenaline and faith.

I ran into the mill. Around me, I heard the gates being thrown or broken open. This was a one way ticket now. I either escaped or fell to them. I could already hear some inside the facility, but there was no way for them to know I was headed up there. Bucking in a back door, I made for the emergency stairs. They'd go to the top, right? Clattering on the stone steps, I climbed flight after flight...

Three floors... five...

My stamina began to flag; below me I heard some of them rush into the staircase. Whimpering, I forced my body to keep plodding through step after step, thoughts of freedom racing in my mind. If I could just get on that zipline... I'd feel it, I *knew* it. So even as my legs turned wobbly, even as my lungs were crying out to stop, I kept pushing.

They were on every level now, I could hear a voice of authority ordering them to head back down. I didn't pay it attention to listen too closely... it was just good for me if they thought I was lower.

Then, finally, the roof access door. It was unlocked, oh thank Goddesses. Throwing it

open, I almost fell through it onto the vent ridden roof of the mill. Ahead of me, I could see the pole with the zipline on it, it was just a race to get myself tied onto it now before they got up here! Such thoughts immediately got thrown from my mind. If I had to, I'd throw myself out and just hold on for dear life rather than delay.

Cantering, unable to even gallop, I staggered and meandered toward it. Thirty feet... twenty feet. I could see the line heading off so far into the outskirts of the city. Past barriers and fallen buildings. There was no way anyone could follow in time!

Hooves clattering on stairs echoed up... from somewhere... closer. Push on, push on!

A door flew open. My heart sunk as I saw it ahead of me, from the other end of the building. Wanting to scream in frustration, I was about to throw myself into a gallop until finally, my teary eyes focused on the figure.

"Stop right there, Murk!"

With his glinting eyepiece, floating revolver held solid and true before him, and clad in his red and black battle barding, Protégé galloped out onto the roof, blocking my path to the zipline. He skidded to a halt, catching his breath before shouting desperately.

"You've got half the slavers in the southern quadrant after you, Murk. Come with me, I'll get you back safely!"

My breath was rasping, and my lungs wheezing. I coughed hard as I staggered onward. I couldn't stop. I was *too close*. Blood fell to the ground; from my cough or wounds, I didn't know.

"NO!" I shrieked, expelling a life of frustration and hatred. "I... I can't! Please, don't do this to me again... *just let me go!*"

Protégé trotted to the side, blocking my approach, but his head never turned away from me.

"You know I can't do that, Murk... Master Red Eye demands—"

"I want to be free!"

He matched every movement I made, the revolver pointed directly at me.

"I can *make* you free, Murk! If you do this, you'll be nothing but dead meat to the wastes. Look at what's happened! You aren't even out of Fillydelphia and already you're almost running dead! If you take this into the wastes, I promise you, you *will* die!"

"I don't care! She made me see it! She made me!" I was crying harder than I ever had, no pride in my voice but a horrid rasping beg. "Just step to the side, let me go, Protégé, *please!* You... you're kind! You've helped me... but just let me go!"

Around us, the wind picked up, swirling a red cloud of soot filled smoke out of the way, revealing to one side of us the red hazed slave city in all its terrible glory... and on the other the dusty expanse of the wastes. Atop the building, at the border of my dreams, I felt my entire future hang in the balance. But he just shook his head sadly.

"Freedom isn't just not being in Fillydelphia, Murk. I have been trying to explain that to you. There's more to it than that! Let me help you *earn* it!"

"Slaving away isn't any way to be free! Not to me! Just to have *one day*, even an *hour*, where no-one is controlling me... I... I could die happily..."

He lost his composure, raising his voice.

"I don't want you to die, Murk! Master Red Eye and I can help you! Like he helped *me!* Murk, I know how you feel! I understand what it's like to—"

I cut him off, tears streaming down my cheeks. "No! You're just another master like any other! I... I was *born* a slave, you have hundreds of others in there, I'm just one! Please, can't

you let me go? Just one? Why can't you understand that!?"

Protégé did not yield his position blocking me from the zipline. It waved in the wind behind him, taunting with its proximity. Below us, I could hear The Master bellowing for slavers to head back upstairs. I had to go now!

"Mas... Protégé! Just... just please... I-"

A gust of wind swept smog across the roof, choking me. Both our manes and clothes were whipping in the wind toward the wastes, away from Fillydelphia.

Protégé tried to keep his voice measured, but the wind was forcing him to shout.

"Stand down, Murk! I know you feel you have to, but I refuse to let you kill yourself on the wastes! Stick with me, I can make you free and a better pony, Master Red Eye is trying to *help* the wastes and those in it! Work *with* me!"

"Are you insane!?" My voice shrieked. "Look at what he's made!"

I swept my injured hoof towards Fillydelphia, indicating the giant factories where hundreds... perhaps thousands, of slaves were now toiling and dying slowly within.

"Red Eye is a monster! I'm sick, Protégé! I'm *dying* because of his city! I've been tortured, shot, beaten... The Master's hurt and *killed* those trying to help me! I got put in a Pit to die! I know you're intelligent, why can't you see this is wrong!?"

"Because it *is*! Do you think Master Red Eye likes all this!? No! But how else can the wastes be saved? You think Littlepip is going to shoot every monster there is? What about Brimstone? Would she shoot him? She is not your path in life, Murk!"

Shutting my eyes, I shook my head frantically.

"*STOP IT!* She made me free! Opened my eyes! *SHE'S EVERYTHING TO ME!*"

His voice broke into a desperate cry. "Damn it, Murk, I'm trying to protect you! You're hurt! Not just physically, but inside! Bear it a while longer, I will show you what freedom means!"

"You're just lying! I can be free NOW! I... I'll manage, I have friends!"

"You know I'm right, Murk! I plead of you, stand down and come with me, I can still get you back inside safely, but we must move *now!*"

I could hear heavy tread on the staircase behind me. The Master's shouts. I turned to look back, knowing he and the slavers would be here any minute.

"Murk, please!"

Turning back, sniffing, I looked beyond Protégé, seeing the land of possibility. All the freedom and dreams I had wished for my entire life... even if I hadn't realised it. One daring rush away...

"I can't let you go, Murk! I *cannot* disobey Master Red Eye! If you run... I... I will have to stop you. Don't make me do it, don't make me, Murk, please!"

The world seemed to quiet down, every flap of the fabric over the building or our clothing became lethargic and dulled. Only the shining sunset through the distant clouds seemed clear.

"You don't understand at all, Protégé. Somepony like you never could..."

Finally, my tears dried. But he just shook his head.

"I do, Murk. I do. Don't force it, I can help you. Put the work in, I will make you a better pony by the end of it. You can help save Equestria, but more importantly save yourself more than going with her ever will! Let me try."

He was wrong. He had to be. A slaver could never feel what I felt.

I began to gallop.

"Murk! Stop! Don't force me! Let me be the pony who helps you, not the slaver who stops you! I can't disobey him and let you go! I can't!"

Gritting my teeth, I gunned for the zipline, arcing to go around him. I could see his revolver wavering as he screamed again for me to stop. Ten feet... seven...

"Murk! Don't!!"

Five...

"MURK!"

Four...

A single gunshot rung out across the rooftop.

I felt nothing, just a rocking impact that stopped me dead in my tracks a few feet from Protégé. He was sweating hard, looking as shocked as I felt behind the fading flare of his revolver. Slowly, hesitantly and shaking, I looked down and saw the trickle of blood from the hole in my chest. It grew, spreading and staining my fleece, dripping to the floor in thick clods. No pain... but a fast numbness.

I looked back up to Protégé and felt tears drip from my eyes.

"P-please..."

The revolver clattered to the ground. I felt him move forward, catching me as I fell to the side. Once again, the darkness began to overtake me, creeping in at the side of my vision. Ahead of me, behind Protégé, I could still see the wastes beckoning to me. The open world...

"Please... I..."

His hooves held me tightly against him, one pressed over my chest as he screamed over the edge for somepony to bring potions immediately. I could feel him shaking terribly.

"I'm sorry, Murk... I want you to be free..."

I felt my head limply fall into his hooves. Unconsciousness finally claiming me.

"But it can't be today... I'm so sorry..."

Light... a thin ray of orange light...

Pain, wounds barely healing... my mouth tasted of the potions, how many had... urgh... the ground was moving, why was...

My eyes creaked open. Too tired to even move my head, I realised I was on a small flatbed wagon. I could see the sunset at the end of the long highway out of Fillydelphia. My chest moved so little that I could barely believe I was breathing. Yet even so, I stretched a hoof out. I had to... to crawl, get to the sunset... see where it escaped to so easily... every night...

"Stay still, Murk. You'll be alright, I promise." Protégé's voice sounded from beside me, strained and weak, a far cry from his usual self. I could hear other ponies around me, trotting quietly.

"Hehe... homeward bound, little Number Seven..."

"Be silent, Shackles. I'm not in the mood."

Straining my head, I turned and felt my heart clench ever tighter. The gates of Fillydelphia were open and waiting as I was carted up to them. The pits... the sounds... smells and heat... no... no not again... I'd been outside! Turning back to the sunset, I felt a strained whimper arise from my throat, trying to claw my way back. I

could... could still make... it...

The wagon stopped, I groaned as I felt somepony touch me, checking me. Magic flared, a raspy, ghoulish deep voice speaking.

"Pretty fucking good aim if you wanted to keep the poor bastard alive, kid."

Doctor Weathervane... yet for all the compliment, I could hear the distaste in his voice.

Protégé did not rise to it, speaking quietly. "Will he survive?"

"Yeah... shit, not without a lot of rest, but yeah, he will."

Behind me, ponies finished coming back into Fillydelphia. I saw The Master stomp in, eyes locked on me, looking ferociously annoyed when he saw Protégé standing almost like a guard beside me. Finally... I saw one little figure standing in the doorway.

"I believe that will be seven hundred caps, then?"

Protégé turned, glancing back at Minstrel. Slowly, he trotted toward him.

"You were the one who healed him?"

"Yes, not to mention the one who watched your ruffians take my assistant!"

Protégé's head tilted down, eyeing Minstrel very carefully. His voice turned stern and cold, a tone I had never heard from him before. He didn't *need* to shout.

"*You* did this to Sunny Days, Doctor Minstrel. You abused her trust to land her here, and to have her dog shot down. You did. You and your selfish mentality."

"Then I guess that's where we differ, I'll take my caps and go if it's all the same to you. I've lost enough."

Protégé hesitated for a second, before reaching toward his side and igniting his magic. He did not throw caps, he drew his revolver.

"There are few things that will drive me to anger, Doctor."

Minstrel was already backing up, looking around for help which was never going to come.

"But I hold myself to a certain set of values, highest among them is that of *loyalty*. That if you aim to help ponies... you *do*. Not fix them up, only to dissuade them and lead them astray with their trust in you! You have corrupted the idea of loyalty at the very highest!"

He wasn't shouting, but Protégé's voice did rise in strength, a small tinge of carefully controlled rage.

"That buck there wanted more than anything to be free, and you gave him that belief, only to take it *all* away! I may have stopped him. I bear that guilt. But you didn't just hurt his life, you crushed his dreams by making him believe! You are an atrocity not befitting of the title 'Doctor.' Nor did you deserve Sunny's friendship. You betrayed her as much as you betrayed Murk! You likely cost Sunny her life from who has taken her! You bring a wisp of fury to my heart, 'Doctor' Minstrel."

I heard a rasping, colourful agreement nearby to me.

Minstrel raised a hoof, his face turning white.

"Look... I think... perhaps I should just leave and—"

"Yes. You will."

The single shot echoed off the giant gates, and one of the soft, slowly fading shapes in my vision slowly pitched over. I didn't feel any justice, even as I saw the vague black shape of Protégé turn and slowly trot back to me.

Behind him, the colossal gates slowly closed. No matter how hard I wished for it, they would not stop. For one horrible moment I had felt all my dreams within my grasp. But the great sunset was separated from me as the giant gates finally slammed shut... just as I passed

once more into a painful, tearful sleep.

“Hello wastelanders, this is your true, unknown if actually blue, and spellbindingly true of his word DJ! Well folks, it seems that amidst all of the chaos around Fillydelphia we reported yesterday, there is actually a little ray of hope! It seems that one slave got out! Actually escaped! The word got passed down the line by a merchant who met one on the highway out of Fillydelphia. Apparently the slave took on a Hellhound attacking his caravan! Was filled with all sorts of murderous rage and tore the thing apart with his bare hooves!

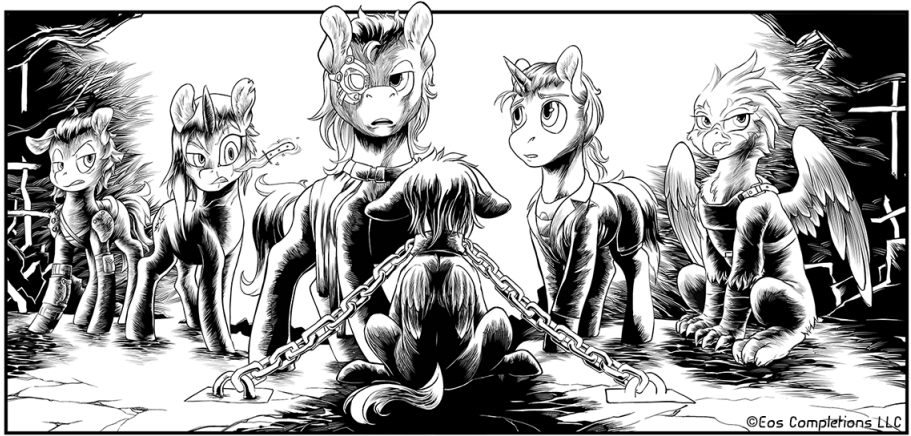
Unfortunately though, turns out said slave is one mean raider. I'm afraid so, my little ponies... the big nasty warlord is back on the maps. Red Eye did us all a service taking him in five years ago, but I'm afraid that big guy is out once again. Already I'm hearing of a bounty going out before he can get a band together. Only weird thing is though... the merchant said, after riding away very fast, that Warlord Brimstone wasn't interested in him. Just kept hammering on the hellhound corpse before, and I choose this word carefully, 'screaming in anger.' Not a warcry, apparently.

Well... I dunno what to make of it. But just to be on the safe side, keep an eye out, ponies. Although the merchant did say one curious thing, that Brimstone started heading back to Fillydelphia...”

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Skittish at the Bit – It may not be the fabled Pinkie Sense, but if you really concentrate, you have your own ways of identifying where others might be around you, whether through paranoia or a greater sensory ability. Add +2 to your perception while still and in no immediate danger.

Following in Her Hoofprints



“Kinda used to being a beast of burden to other folk’s needs. Very sad life. Probably have very sad death. But at least there is symmetry...”

“...so that’s why you didn’t get away. What did it feel like to fail after coming so close?”

Guilt.

“Huh?”

I felt guilty! How could I not? In my quest for freedom, I hadn’t just put myself in danger; I’d brought it upon innocents too. My wings were what made Minstrel consider me valuable. He hadn’t cared about me, only about the wealth that selling *the pegasus* would bring him. Now he was dead because of me. Cayenne had been shot while defending me. While Sunny, brave Sunny Days, had fallen and been pulled right into the same life I had been attempting to get away from. If I *had* escaped, how could I have ever lived with myself knowing the cost of my freedom?

Only now it was worse. At least while free I might have been able to eventually pretend that she gave herself up to save me. A sacrifice. But now we were both trapped inside Fillydelphia, having gained *nothing*. My wishes had ruined the freedom of somepony else and destroyed everything that she had in life. We weren’t even together to be able to comfort one another. She was The Master’s, and The Master’s alone. I dreaded to think of the conditions she was being kept in, or the brutal work she was enduring as one of his stock.

That’s why I felt guilt, wondering that perhaps it would have all been better if I hadn’t tried at all.

At least then nopony else would have been hurt because of my dreams. I had been so close! So hair-raisingly close to seeing freedom, for the first time. It hurt. Right in my heart, it hurt, because I knew that as much as I wanted it, I would never be willing to sacrifice the lives of others to get it. The Master would follow me to the ends of Equestria and beyond if he wanted to get me back. How many ponies would he hurt in his crusade to bring me

home?’ How many sleepless nights would I spend knowing that, out there, somepony else was being abused, hurt, or taken after they failed to give him proper direction? How many would become slaves to buy my freedom?

On the other hoof, I had a burning drive within me. Being out there, seeing the wastes from building-tops and feeling the true wind on my face, unspoiled by the rads and disease from smog that choked the air of Fillydelphia gave me a target, a fresh ideal that I could not deny. A tempting, big, and lovingly warm meal laid bare before me with a price on it that was just too high. But I wanted it anyway.

I couldn’t stop thinking. At what point do dreams cease to be realistic and enter the realm of impossible madness? At what point are you asking too much of what your life can give you?

All the same, those little voices in my mind reminded me of possibilities and consequences. One shrieked that I was *so close* to being free. The other harshly insisted that I was *so close* to making the biggest mistake of my life. One said rebel, the other said obey. Fantasy or reality.

Dare... or simply dream.

I couldn’t do it alone. Making sense of all this wasn’t something I could manage on my own while under slavers. No matter what I wanted, for the foreseeable future, I was now condemned to the work once again, separated from my friends. If I wanted them back, I would have to work for it, prove I could be a part of their ‘workforce’ once again.

I had failed. And now, it was simply back to the grind.

This was a familiar place.

Rusty, dark metal surrounded me in the cell. Vents along the floor allowed red-tinged smoke to filter through before being sucked out by industrial fans behind the vents on the ceiling. The locked door ahead of me was almost invisible against the wall, identified only by the small closed slit they used to occasionally check that I was still alive.

Roughly healed, as well as Doctor Weathervane could manage in the short time before Master Red Eye’s enforcers arrived and took me, I was left to sweat in the stuffy heat of the enclosed space. Bandages still around my chest, shoulder, and right hoof told of still-healing injuries. The fumes made me choke. My lungs stung and heaved as my sickness grew. No RadAway for the one who had defied them, no. None at all. Instead, my thick coughs only echoed, rang off of the walls, and gave me thumping headaches. I would have retreated to the corner, farther from it all, had I not been chained to the floor in the middle.

Abandoned without clothing or possessions, and left with a fuzzy head and a raging fever, my mind only raced from thought to dream to wish to fear. The Master had visited many times, sometimes entering to sit and talk of my place in life, others to just... stare. Those were the worst, looking up and knowing that those light green eyes would be peering in through the slit, silent and telling.

But by far the cruelest moments were his talks on the fate of Sunny.

Now she was the personal property of The Master, his to do with as he wanted. The same thing he had once wanted Littlepip for... and had come close to having me for. Now he had her. Horrible visions of what sick things he might do to her played in my head. At times he would grab my face, stare directly at me, and hint at how she was ‘his forever,’ as I would

soon be.

Sunny, like my abuse before, would remain far beyond help from the only ponies who might want to get her out of here.

A part of me wished I could help her, like I had helped Glimmerlight and Starshine Melody, but with The Master standing in the way, claiming her as much as he claimed me, I could not muster the courage to do anything. As he had left, leaving only the echo of sick laughter, I was shut in alone once more.

Another harsh coughing fit sent my body into spasms. Held down by chains, I had no way to brace myself, so I simply closed my eyes, and tried not to cry out too loudly while my rough throat flared on every one of the hacking expulsions. A wet splatter accompanied it; I didn't even need to look at the floor to know there was a new bloodstain across it. My wounds may have closed, but all the signs of rad-poisoning entering lethal levels were starting to show.

Behind the echoes of my own coughing, I didn't even hear hooves approaching before voices rung out through the door.

"Sir, you know you're not meant to be down here. The prisoner is under orders to not receive any—"

"On whose authority?"

"Standard rule for all prisoners, by order of Stern, sir."

"Yet I happen to know for a fact that Chainlink Shackles has been down here every hour on the dot. Can you explain that?"

The voices made me perk up as the guard paused. Through the thick doors, I couldn't recognise anypony in particular, just the dulled muffling of speech, barely discernible.

"I..."

"How much did he pay you each time? Or promise you? Tell you what, I'll keep this rampant abuse of authority to myself and save you from being thrown into the taint moat as an example if you go for a ten minute break."

"...Sir."

The sound of somepony trotting quickly grew to a hurried canter, as I heard the fearful guard make himself scarce as fast as possible. Half choking, I tried to push myself back from the door, feeling my head swim and throat swell as I pushed motion through my sick body. A thin copper taste in my mouth made me shiver. The next coughing fit would come soon, I could feel it.

The door's locks were thrown aside, metal joints clanked and squealed on their rusted hinges, and gave me reason to cover my ears as the huge door was pushed inward. A rush of clean air made me splutter as I turned my head to look.

A red eye stared back at me, glowing through the smog. Only this time, I recognised him for who he was. It was Protégé, clad in a dark brown weather cloak for protection from the acid rain. Quickly approaching me, he pulled a half-empty orange sachet from his saddlebag and quickly dropped it near my mouth. Without waiting, I grabbed it and sucked down the foul liquid so fast that I nearly choked. Wincing as the taste hit me, it became a fight to not throw it right back up.

"I... I need more. This won't do it..."

"I'm sorry, this was all that was left, Murk. Barb's lot were quite thorough with your cell as soon as they saw you weren't around to reclaim it all. If I can, I'll see what I can do, but even we only get access to so much at a time, and Weathervane is being closely monitored."

"Why... do you care?"

I saw him step back, his eyes narrowing as I voiced my question. This pony had stood in front of my freedom and shot me down to keep me inside. Bringing half a satchet of RadAway wasn't going to do anything close to enough to apologise for it.

"Why couldn't you have just let me go?"

Protégé sighed, shoulders slumping. Rubbing a hoof through his red mane, he looked at me with his one visible eye.

"I have a lot of explaining to do, and not just to you. I have other work-leaders inquiring why I kept you alive, and why I killed one of the ponies who was paid to help Master Red Eye. I tell you this because I want you to know how much risk I am involving myself in to ensure you are not simply killed outright. Like it or not, you were the last worker to be found out there. All others caught, including Barb's raiders and Glimmerlight, were brought home long before you were. That makes you significant, Murk. It makes you a target for punishment from everypony seeking to see it happen."

Shaking my head, I couldn't help but repeat myself.

"Why couldn't you just have let me go? Please, master. I just want to be free..."

Tears had already started rolling down my cheeks, leaving thin lines against the muck and soot. Glimmer's cleaning of my face hadn't lasted long in Fillydelphia. Even seeing him here still reminded me of that horrible moment atop the mill. When I was within sight of escape, with only him standing in my way. Somehow able to appear at the last second to drag me back.

"How did you even find me?"

Finally, that small smirk of his returned. Raising a hoof, he tapped his eyepiece. To be honest, I had been wondering what it was for.

"An Eyes-Forward-Sparkle, Murk. A gift from Master Red Eye. It can follow PipBuck locator signals if within a certain range. I've had it set to yours for some time now, tracking your position while I was on my way to reclaim you from Minstrel's home, but—"

"But *he* got there first."

"Yes. Shackles was the direct link to Minstrel and was far ahead of me by the time word got back about the escape. Look, Murk, you have to listen. We don't have much time. The call for your sentencing is going out as we speak. I don't know who is going to decide it, but chances are they're on their way right now. I had to speak to you ahead of time, get you to understand something."

Screwing up my face, I didn't even want to think on the ramifications of that eyepiece and how Protégé would always know precisely where I was. Had he just been testing me before, when I had snuck out of the Mall?

"All I understand is, I failed. And now I'm going to die..."

"No, Murk. What I need you to understand is you can still do this. Show forgiveness, prove to them you are a worthy worker who is seeking to help Equestria. You're a good pony, Murk, I can see you want to help others and live a good life. And that's just what I'm offering! Two years, Murk. Two years of hard effort and you can do whatever you want! A small portion of your life working hard, and you can earn your freedom for yourself. Rightful, guarded, and without danger of falling into it ever again. No slaver in the wasteland would dare take in a pony carrying the pardon of Master Red Eye. Give me your trust, Murk. I will keep you from the dangers as much as I can, help you become somepony better. Perhaps you will see the value you can have as a worker to me, or perhaps something

mo-

“SHUT UP!”

It wasn't my most elegant response, but the more he talked, the more I felt the rage and bile growing in my throat. Screaming led me to stagger even as I forced myself to my hooves, feeling my shoulder, chest, and every leg ache. Leaning against a wall to even stay upright, I had to bite back an angry snarl.

“*Stop calling me a worker!* I'm not! I'm a slave! Whipped, hurt, kept locked up, and abused! I'm dying of sickness because of this place! Red Eye isn't anything but a monster forcing ponies to work and die for him!”

“Master Red Eye is a visionary, Murk. I have told you this, that I accept this isn't the nicest way forward, but it is the *only* way, and it is working!”

“All it's doing is killing us!”

Protégé sighed. We were breaking into the same argument again. He paced on the spot, lowering his tone.

“Have you got any idea what Fillydelphia was like *before* Master Red Eye came along? This place was a blight upon Equestria; a horror-filled city of pain and darkness, where raiders and warring gangs were only the tip of the iceberg. There were... *things*... stalking the streets, things nopony has even yet identified, or discovered the source of. They still exist, somewhere beneath us in the old city tunnels and subways. They were only locked in there because Master Red Eye brought with him the leadership and charisma to turn Fillydelphia around and work toward such a difficult goal. He took a place where wastelanders were lucky to survive a day and turned it into the greatest industrial powerhouse in the wastes. We are producing books, cloth, resources, and tools for a protected generation of educated foals. He has done good.”

My voice sounded weak by comparison, my shouting had already made my throat feel ragged.

“At what cost? I don't want to be a part of this anymore! I never asked to be a slave...”

Sighing, he shook his head, glancing back out the door quickly.

“I respect that, Murk. You do not have to be a slave all your life. Believe it or not, I don't want you to be. If I could make you free, right now, I *would*. You don't... you don't deserve to have been caught up in all this. Nopony should be born without choice, but... this is how it is in our time.”

My anger simmered down, bubbling beneath the surface as I watched Protégé remove his eyepiece with his magic and store it on a clip of his clothing. Those deep red eyes were earnest, convincing.

“I do... care for you. But this is the hand we have been dealt. Master and slave. I cannot release you, short of Master Red Eye himself permitting it. All I can offer is whatever small measure of protection I can bring as you push on. These two years will make you a better pony, Murk. I am sure of it.”

“But I barely survived one day. How can I do two years? I can't survive a day without RadAway!”

Protégé simply looked away, sighing. Seeing his eyes fall, I pressed home.

“You know it. You know it's going to kill me. It's impossible! Nopony has ever done it!”

“No... it's not impossible, Murk. Allow me to help, work to get back to me and—”

Stopped short, he began paying attention to a sound that I had missed on account of how worked up I was. Multiple sets of hooves approaching.

"They're early... I had hoped to have longer to convince you, Murk. Please, trust me on this, your best bet for survival is to get back to me. Let me do the talking, say that you want to work to return to me. *Please*, Murk. Can you accept this at least? It will get you back to Glimmerlight."

Staring across at him from where I leaned against the warm metal wall, the thought finally clicked in my mind. Of course... she'd be back with him. But any train of thought was lost as the approaching party arrived. I heard a *lot* of ponies and griffons out there beyond the half-open cell door. Protégé was signalling for me to move back to the middle of the room, to stop straining my chains. Feeling the fear begin to build, I did so. There was a look on Protégé's face that I did not like. What was going on?

Lying down on all fours, I felt my neck shrink back and my hooves tuck in, as though trying to make myself as small as possible. The cell door creaked open to reveal a huge earth pony in battle barding that looked thicker than my limbs. Stomping forward, he moved to my right and took up position, facing toward me. Behind him came another, almost identical guard, followed by four griffons who took the corners. All carried shock rods or had hoof shackles at the ready. Finally, I saw the large earth ponies draw their weapons and point them at me. Even Protégé moved aside, his assertion to 'do the talking' blunted by the heavy guards. Trembling, they didn't seem to take notice of my whimpering, keeping their eyes fixed firmly for any movement. Why all the security? Was this a rank higher than Protégé? What was he... a tier four? Or was it three? *Was this Stern!?* Panic to make a bolt for the door was held in check only by the thick chains. Oh no, she would kill me for sure, she did that sort of thing... or just throw me back in the Pit.

The gentle tip-tap of hooves proceeded toward the door down the corridor. Pleadingly, I cast a glance at Protégé, who had been politely moved to the side of the cell, into a corner behind a griffon. Having slipped his eyepiece back on, I now once again saw the more disciplined look of a slavemaster on his face. Instead, I screwed my eyes shut, prepared for whatever pony general or slave overlord I was about to meet.

The hooves stopped just in front of me. By some insane stroke of madness, I allowed one eye to open.

The chains that held me to the floor and my own blood were not what kept me from immediately running terrified beyond all conscious control. It was a sudden, overbearing rush of terror to stay still and obey. Locked in my own unresponsive body, I could only now stare upward. Every bit of my every free will screamed for me to *get out*, yet I could not.

It wasn't Stern. It wasn't one of Red Eye's generals or overlords.

It was him. My Master above all. The pony who had bought me. Who *owned* me.

Red Eye himself.

With a start, I realised my error. Before any detail or close observation of his appearance could even register, I flung myself to the floor with my head lowered. My entire body trembled hard enough that I felt coughs ready to explode out of me, only being forced down by the desire not to make a sound in the presence of my master. The highest of masters. Maybe not the most personal, but by every law and rule of slavery, he owned my life completely. I could only await his instruction, be it to die or to live.

What I did not expect was the same kind, fatherly, and genial voice that I had heard on his broadcasts.

"My dear Murky, you need not hide your eyes from me. Come, stand before me and show me the same spirit you held to attempt the impossible."

He knew my name. Past the shock, it was an instruction. I obeyed. Avoiding as much whining as I could, I shakily pushed my battered body to its hooves and looked up. Red Eye was smiling warmly, his one proper eye showing not the hard glare that I had long associated with him from afar, but a gentle concern. Across his body he wore what once might have been a Stable suit, while on his right hoof, just like her... just like me... he possessed a PipBuck. But that crimson cybereye was all that drew my attention. Feeling unable to look away, it almost seemed to hypnotize me as Red Eye began to speak again.

"Much better, Murky. I must admit, to attempt one escape and survive only by the thinnest of margins is impressive. But to attempt a second one less than a couple days afterwards? Perhaps there is more to you than we first thought. Both in your determination, and in other more physical terms."

Through the slight filter of smoke I could see a light beam near his eye projecting outward. Trotting forward, he moved alongside me and gazed down at my broken wings.

"If things of late had been different, a pegasus like you would have been very valuable to me, Murky. You could have done great things for the restoration of Equestria to aid Unity in its pursuit of peace. I somewhat wish I had known of these wings all those weeks ago when I bought you. Such a pity that you hid them so diligently upon your arrival here. Tell me, do you feel ashamed of your birth?"

"Yes, Master..."

My eyes didn't leave the doorway ahead as I answered, almost mechanically.

"Such a tragedy. It is good you found us, Murky. The wasteland would have stricken you. It disappoints me that you saw fit to try and escape your destiny here in Fillydelphia. The mind is more powerful than the body, Murky. Did I not rebuild this city with words and leadership? I could find many uses for a pegasus willing to better himself and become stronger of mind away from the shackles of the slave. As I hear, you were doing rather well in helping to discover the secrets of a Stable. Why did you try to run, Murky? What drove you to such extremes?"

Gulping, fighting the itchiness in my throat, and attempting to wet my dry lips, my mind raced for an answer. His words were filled with a thousand different intents and purposes, like some unbreachable safe door that I could never break through to understand the true meaning within.

"I..."

My voice died, every idea faltering, like his very presence drove every element of free thought from my brain. Not in the invasive, overwhelming method of The Master, but with an almost tangible aura of calm understanding. Red Eye *controlled* the space he occupied. I was merely one little pawn within his great game.

"I wanted... to be free, master."

"To be free? Is that not what all ponies wish for, Murky? To be free of pain, suffering, and particularly, guilt? That guilt that sits in all our hearts, that guilt that says we *could* be doing more for Equestria, but aren't?. I understand. You may see me as a monster, as the dictator forcing your life into harm's way. But I offer freedom, true freedom. To face the world and be able to say in your heart that, 'I helped.' Is that what you seek? To go out, to be a better pony out there? Little Murky... do you know what freedom truly is?"

Red Eye spoke as he circled me, eventually coming back around to face me head-on. Without knowing why, I felt like I could look him in the eye and not feel in danger of insubordination. He seemed to invite an ease upon those around him, letting them see him

as a simple pony, bereft of all the mythical legends. Yet his question was deceptively well chosen. Unable to think, unable to consider, reason, or piece together any coherent thought, I could only lower my head again, sniffing.

"No, master. I don't..."

"Yet you have now made two runs for something you do not understand. I would ask why that is, but I believe I may already know the answer. A certain little Stable Dweller."

My head shot up, prompting Red Eye's brow to rise as he made a small grin.

"That would be my confirmation, then."

It took a few seconds, but eventually it clicked. Red Eye hadn't known for sure, but by playing my bluff, he'd just fooled me into revealing it for certain.

"What is she to you, Murky?"

"Everything, master. I... I believe she's going to save everypony, somehow."

Red Eye's grin became an amused smirk, before catching me completely off guard by nodding.

"I agree. Littlepip will be a great asset in the restoration of Equestria. She and I are not so different, you know? We are both seeking the same goal in the end, whether you believe that or not. Her role in this will be significant yet, more than unloading rounds into random raiders and creatures. But the mirror image is there. She and I, both fighting for Equestria's future, and both having to bear the burdens of our path. You may be interested to know that you, at this very moment, lie in the same cell she once occupied for the very same crime. Perhaps you and her are not too different, either."

If it weren't for all the security and my master's presence, I might have moved out of abject shock. She had been here? Prior to the Pit, she had been in these same chains? Or was this just a way for Red Eye to mess with my head?

"I... I want to try and be like her, master." It felt like the only honest answer I could give to try and deflect the traps his words were leaving for me.

"Admirable, if somewhat naïve. Be wary of putting others on a pedestal. No, I believe you are better off here, with us, creating the New Equestria, Murky."

"But... why all this, master? Why do I have to be whipped and driven to death?"

Biting my lip, I expected the lash any second. I had slipped up, letting too much out. *You don't question your master.*

"An excellent question, and one that, in a way, she asked as well. Our world is imperfect, sadly brutal and lacking in the Unity that will save it. Perhaps when all is said and done, I may face judgement for what I am doing to save it. But for now, this is merely my side of the same coin, the unfortunate period in history that ponies like you, I'm afraid, have been caught up in. I have never attempted to hide the truth, Murky. I do not deny the darker side to my work. But on the other side of that coin lies just as much grey morality in the actions of your beloved Stable legend."

"But master, she saves ponies!"

Somehow, I felt like I was being toyed with. That I was nothing more than an idiotic child compared to a grandmaster's artform of conversation and debate.

"Does she, now?" His head tilted, intrigued by my more convicted words. "She didn't save you."

Four simple words that wormed their way into my head. I knew they would not disappear easily.

"I... but... she couldn't! No pony can save everypony, master! To... to save this world, I

guess some ponies will have to be put in danger or... or wait their turn to be saved?"

"Then what is so different with Fillydelphia, may I ask?"

My mouth opened, then closed... then gaped and finally shuddered shut again. He had expertly weaved me into a logical trap. Resigning myself, I simply bowed my head.

"My Master," I heard Protégé's voice approach as he carefully trotted toward Red Eye, "Murk is rather idealistic, from what I have seen. Admirable in some ways, if tragically naïve, and sometimes void of cold facts."

Daring to open my eyes a notch, I saw the black unicorn stand to the side of his Master. Only now did the similarities begin to tell. The way Protégé wore his mane, his tail... even down to some stylistic patterns on his eyepiece were clearly inspired by Red Eye's, well, eye.

Red Eye smiled as he saw Protégé move over, turning as though to politely allow him into the 'conversation.' Very quickly I was beginning to worry if I was being judged without even knowing it. By supporting Littlepip, had I just ruined my chances?

"Ah, my faithful student. I was under the impression that Stern didn't allow past masters to visit their recovered workers."

His voice held a slight tone of challenge to it. As though he was testing his 'student' to find the proper reply, to work his way around the situation.

"An unfortunate necessity, Master. Murk was dying of an irradiated disease. He required RadAway immediately. I felt, after consideration, that you would prefer not to have a pony die pointlessly."

Red Eye's smile grew as he nodded, almost seeming to chuckle lightly.

"Very good, just what I might have done... and have done in the past. Now, time is valuable these days, with us closer to Unity than ever. I felt that it would only be right for me to finally meet this little oddity of a pegasus in Fillydelphia myself before deciding on his future."

Protégé didn't seem to hesitate, crossing a hoof across his chest and lowering his head.

"I am sure he will have been glad to meet you."

Speak for yourself, Protégé...

"Before you arrived, Murk was willing to offer his continued services under me, if primarily to be reunited with his friend, Glimmerlight, the unicorn. The Stee—"

"Steel Ranger Initiate. Yes, I remember her. From the same influx as the Great Warlord, I believe."

Red Eye seemed to catch a surprised glance on my face, turning back toward me with that ever-fatherly smile. I could feel myself wanting to please him, serve him. The loyalty he inspired in those working with him was easy to understand.

"You are surprised that I remember another worker, Murky? Within the rebuilding of Fillydelphia, I ask a great amount of you all. Is it so much that I be required to remember those whom I can, to honour your sacrifices and hard work?"

"No, master. Sorry, master..."

"Now, do you truly seek to return to Protégé, to continue your progress toward true freedom and choice? To help Equestria by the methods we have here? I do not require you to turn against the Stable Dweller in your heart... only that your mind sets itself to the task you *can* do. She is beyond your reach now; gone into the far flung places of Equestria beyond sanity's reach. Her tale is not yours to share anymore, past the crossroads of history that saw you so briefly within her influence. So, Murky, you wish to retake your place as a worker under me? To follow my student's path that may see you do better things for all

ponies? Truly and honestly?"

A sudden dark tinge overtook those last words... a narrowing of his good eye... the loss of the slight grin. Very quickly, I began to sense what would happen if I were to do anything but agree. My master was leaving me no choice. Despite what he said, this was no question.

"Yes, master. I... I am sorry for trying to escape you..."

His gaze fell upon me, witheringly intense and full of indiscernible intent.

"...I deserve to be here."

Saying those words was like ripping my own newly found spirit clean out.

"The punishment for at least one escaping worker is simple, but you have complicated things by being a consistent troublemaker, Murky. Not to mention that chaos almost seems to follow in your wake. A dead slaver in the threshing mill, perhaps? Or the Terminal slave riot? Normally, I would offer a choice between summary execution—for I cannot have other workers following in your rebellious wake—or to join the next Pit Arena event."

I couldn't help the squeak escaping my lips, and tears began to fall as my history seemed to be repeating itself. Lowering my head, I didn't even dare defy or beg... my master had the final say. Do I take the quicker certain death or... or try the Pit.

Protégé trotted forward.

"Master Red Eye, I—"

He was silenced by a raised hoof from Red Eye.

"However, Murky, you have done me a great service. One few ponies have. You showed kindness, and a braver heart than you may feel you have, by helping to rescue one of my dear children of Unity and Equestria. Starshine Melody asked of me just yesterday, 'Where is the little pony? Is he okay?' This is partly why I am here, to meet the pony who brought one of those for whom I am doing all of this back to me. I would like to believe I have a generous soul, Murky. However, I cannot allow you to go without punishment, for fear of repeat occurrences both from you or others. Thus, I am left with a clash of ideals."

Shivering, my fate hanging in the balance, I raised my head once again to look at him. The smile was, amazingly, still present. Still reassuring, like I could half-expect him to genuinely care for me.

"Within my messages of Unity, I speak of hard work being the proof of the willing. That those ponies willing to take a stand and say 'I shall do my part' are the true bearers of Equestria's future. Therefore, it seems appropriate that you should be set to prove this. Murky Number Seven, you shall reaffirm your worth to my student. To be accepted once more into the two years of salvage missions, you will work a full shift within the Parasprite Pits. Show the courage, resolve, and determination required of the ponies who would bring about our salvation and you shall be forgiven for your blind and unfortunate mistakes. Do you feel this is fair?"

The question was not directed at me, but at Protégé. I saw the younger unicorn cast a look toward me, away from his Master. His one uncovered eye, hidden on this side from Red Eye displayed his immediate concern. Terror was gripping me, the Parasprite Pits were, without a doubt, the single most dangerous job in Fillydelphia; reserved only for troublemakers and rulebreakers because nopony else would ever actually volunteer. They were set to find, collect, and destroy the masses of flesh eating, flying, and lethal Parasprites that swarmed to and fro down there. Horrible memories of hearing the agonised squeals of those suffering bloody deaths when I had I passed by the pits were too fresh... too real. That might be me, now.

"This is fair, Master. If I may, I feel that Murk will show a good effort."

"I truly hope so, my student. If the future for him you discussed with me is something you still believe he can achieve..."

"It is, Master."

Red Eye paused, watching his student, before smiling, and resting a hoof on his shoulder.

"Tell me, my most loyal student, is there anything you have learned from all this?"

"Yes, Master." Protégé nodded diligently. "I have learned that even those we believe in may falter sometimes, but we should not casually dismiss one failure as a complete loss. That we can do better for Equestria, to put them on a better path for themselves and for the world as a whole. Be it a raider being repurposed and kept away from others to help rebuild homes, or a hurt little soul who has lost his way from the path of his life..."

His Master seemed to agree with this, smiling and patting his shoulder once before standing tall and proud once more.

"I always did appreciate your rather poetic tone," he said with a grin, "from the first day you conversed with me. When you initially spoke to me of Murky, the notion of history repeating itself did stand out from your words. I ask you to stay by him, if that plan is still your choice, but this task he must do on his own. Murky will be taken to the pits by his old overseer, Whiplash. You understand?"

Protégé nodded. "I do, Master."

"Good... good. My time becomes more precious with each passing day in the weeks to come, my student. Unity approaches. Continue to write to me with your findings in your studies, if and when you have something to report. Until then, I wish you good fortune. To you too, Murky. I would not begrudge you giving your prayers to Littlepip's safety, I assure you I am just as concerned about her as you are."

He turned, nodding to the guards and trotted from the room. As though on cue, the security began to march past me, each thump of their hooves making me shiver all the more. No matter his friendliness, the sentencing left me in abject terror. Dread images of carnivorous little beasts tearing at my skin... pushing their way inside to the muscle and organs and multiplying all the time. A horrible, and painful death... no, I didn't want to die like that.

If Red Eye's influence hadn't kept me where I was, I might have simply thrown myself on their guns. That thought alone chilled me. I saw him depart, a last glance back to me with that glowing eye being the final sight before he moved away. My meeting with the great slave master of the wastes... the legend that had brought even Brimstone Blitz's clan low. For all his calm and politeness, all his fatherly speeches... he terrified me. Only now did it even filter in, he'd called me *Murky*. Like he was a friend. The way only Glimmerlight did. Other ponies rarely said it... only ever to degrade me like Sooty had. But Red Eye used it genially and respectfully.

Somehow, that scared me even more.

Protégé stood in the doorway, watching as the procession headed away, before slowly turning his head to me, glancing back over his shoulder almost sadly.

"I'm sorry it had to go this way, Murk."

"Pr... Protégé?"

He turned almost suddenly, as though surprised I hadn't called him 'master.' In the wake of Red Eye, Protégé seemed almost trustworthy.

"I... I don't think I can do this, I—"

“You can, and you must. Your friend is waiting, Murk. For now, you simply must endure.”

Collapsing to the floor, spluttering and coughing between sobs, I couldn't stop imagining little brightly coloured sprites bringing an unthinkable end.

“Simply endure. I wish you all the luck I can, Murk. It is one shift. Master Red Eye would not have given you this chance had he not believed you could survive.”

There were no more words I could say. Protégé simply stood in the sole light of the doorway, looking half way between me and the corridor. Long seconds passed, before he sighed with resignation and trotted out of the cell, closing the door as he spoke.

“You endured for your whole life... just a little more, Murk. A little more. Good luck.”

A few seconds he had left, I heard a violent slam.

The sound of somepony outside it bucking a metal wall. Hard.

Being marched toward the wagon waiting outside was like the Pit all over again. My legs were shackled and tied to another three ponies taken from the cells. Each looked rough, liable to strike back against a careless slaver. No doubt they were in here for just that, sentenced to the same punishment. Between two large unicorn bucks, I trotted with my head low through the steel corridors and hissing pipes that made up the prison, it having been converted from an industrial plant. The rattle of reactivated machinery did little to let me try and relax.

But it had been Red Eye who commanded that I was to go. Thus, I couldn't disobey.

Only now was my mind beginning to drift and fret over other issues. My possessions were likely all gone. Sundial's PipBuck, my beloved journal, and all my clothing or loot from the Stable. Barb apparently had stolen all the RadAway I had left behind at the Mall, too, given Brimstone hadn't been there as a deterrent. Feeling the brief respite of the small amount Protégé had saved already beginning to fail in its resistance, the shiver of cold fear passed over me. The Parasprite Pits were heavily irradiated from the trapped smog underground. It was all a matter of what would kill me first.

Either I would be torn muscle from muscle and devoured alive by small creatures over the course of one long, agonising minute... or I would choke and drown in my own blood as my lungs ruptured. No matter how hard I tried, my mind kept going over and over each fate, filling my imagination with what it might feel like. Every time was the same, surrounded by uncaring slavers who would simply laugh or turn their backs.

Sniffing, wishing I could dry my eyes with a hoof away from the shackles, my mind only wished it could deny the reality that was my life. Even as we were led through the cavernous doors into the red mist outside, the sight still shocked me. Fillydelphia was hell, truly and utterly.

Marched out on the ashy gravel next to the broken tarmac road, we were ordered not to move by one of the multiple gas masked guards as we awaited the wagons. I never, ever, got used to a view of Fillydelphia. Of trodding lines of sick and broken slaves moving ahead of you, the whips and shock rods dragging screams from their parched throats or blood from their broken bodies. Back and forth, ever moving, like a great unceasing machine, the cycle of slavery and labour only kept going. When one slave expired, another was found to take his or her place like a replacement part in the engine of industry. Even as I watched, one

Marching back on the road simply keeled over, spasmed sharply, and finally lay still. Masked slavers simply threw the body on a passing corpse wagon headed toward the mass graves and incinerators, ignoring the wailing mare being pressed back into line.

All just one big, utterly efficient, and unthinkably brutal machine...

"Stay in line, ya wretches... wagon's coming. Make a move, we'll slot the lot of you." The stallion's voice was muffled behind the mask, but he made his point clear as he jabbed one unicorn's side with a riot shotgun. My legs felt locked in place (well, technically they *were*), not daring to move one inch.

To the right of us, around the corner of a ruined employee building, a scrap-built wooden wagon rattled and began its lurching gait down the road. Slaves scampered from its clearly uncaring path, avoiding the big hooves of two big earth ponies dragging it. Each bore fresh whip marks on their back and hoods over their heads. They were nothing but a source of movement, not even allowed to see where they went...

Upon the back of the wagon, my old overseer, Whiplash, glared at the four slaves waiting. Standing up, his front hooves on the front of the wagon, he cast an imposing figure against the crimson smoke and tall funnel chimneys of the Fillydelphia horizon. Turning between the mesh fences surrounding the entrance to the prison, I could see his eyes focused only on me as the wagon pulled up.

"Well... well... well..."

Hopping down, Whiplash trotted around the wagon, standing before me. Without a word, I saw him reaching for his whip, slowly and carefully. Taking his time, he let it unfurl and got a good bite on the leather grip; the whipcord itself dropped to the ground right in front of me. Whimpering, I felt myself stagger back from it. I knew it was coming... he was just drawing it out.

Wringing his neck side to side and almost chewing the grip a little, Whiplash finally swung the whip... and pulled back. My squeak of shock when it came near my head only betrayed my fear of it. Finally, after making 'test' shots another two times, he finally did it. Shackled to the spot, I couldn't even dodge.

The whip lashed forward. Searing pain erupted across my forehead, burning and throwing my head back. Squealing, I tripped when my hooves tried to cover me face. He wasn't nearly as strong as The Master, but my skull jarred back from the strike on my still vulnerable head wound. Balance waving and vision swimming, I shivered on the ground, pleading my apologies to him in between cries of pain. Eyes clenched shut, I could still hear him shouting above me.

"That's for taking my whip. For stealing from your overseer! If you weren't going into the Sprite Pits anyway, I'd probably put you in for twenty lashes for theft!"

"I'm sorry! Please, I'm—"

"Shut up! Just shut up! I had to put up with Slit bitching for an hour after I went looking for my whip, Betsy! You can take your hit and you can like it! Now get on the fucking cart, all of you!"

My shackles were already being pulled. Staggering along, with the chains getting tangled between my legs and a few incidents of bumping into the rump of the stallion in front of me, I was half pulled and half pushed up and into the wooden cart. Forced into a small section near the head of the open top wagon, I tried to curl up as best I could and cradle my skull. In the dry Fillydelphia air, my throat burned with each whimper, leading to me dry heaving a few times and fall just short of a coughing fit. Rumbling off, the wagon departed

oward the great pillars of smoke from a parasprite incinerator. Around me, the other slaves just tried to stay as far from me as possible, muttering that I was 'bad luck.' Whether due to that demonstration or my wings, I wasn't sure.

"To think, you were a pegasus all that time under me, Murk. Disgusting. Should just have you shot in the back of the head, I think. Right?"

The last word wasn't directed at me, but to the driver of the wagon beside him. I kept my head down, feverishly trying to get rid of the horrible feeling of a gun being placed to my skull and fired. But then, wouldn't that be nicer than what was about to happen?

"Aye, Lash, any thievin' little whelp takin' any of my stock isn't lookin' to get much favour from me now, is he?"

Wait... that accent. I hadn't even looked at the driver with my attention on Whiplash so entirely. Glancing up, he turned back to face me. Another face from before my first escape attempt... one I had last seen tauntingly laughing at me when The Master had paraded me through the streets.

Sooty Morass. That grey, braided mane drooped down over the back of the driver's seat even while his head turned to wink at me.

"But... but you're a slave!"

My jawline whipped to the side, my head following. Whiplash's hoof slapped across my face. Yelping and falling to the floor of the wagon, I shivered and sought to find the best words to appease my overseer. I felt that tooth loosen again, just as the chains pulled were pulled to get my head up for one swift slap across the face to remind me of my place. No talking without permission.

"Aye, laddie, that I am. But life ain't so bad if you know who to let a few caps pass to now and again. 'Wagon driver' is pretty cushy... handy too, to meet all the contacts. Lash here just knows a good business stallion when he meets one. So how's that RadAway hunt goin' for ye laddie? Still ready for the off?"

I didn't have much choice with him. No doubt Sooty Morass could read me like a book. With Protégé, Red Eye, and now him, I was quickly beginning to remember how pathetically small I was in Fillydelphia. As such, I could only sniff and sadly nod before coughing almost on cue. Throat rattling, I had to take gulping breaths just to get my lungs to function again. Pulling a hoof back over the wagon seat, I felt him roughly tussle my mane as though he actually cared.

"Well there's me answer... shoulda' stuck with me, lad. You know who has the RadAway you need. Me business door is always open if you're willing to pay the price, o'course."

Undoubtedly something absurdly high and bonding me into future 'favours' that would ruin every ounce of freedom I had scraped together in my mind. All the same, he had the things I needed, while I had no leeway right now to try and steal anything.

"After all... can't be nice to be sitting back there knowing that radiation is eating away at you inside... slowly... never going back down on its own. I hear it's quite the long process when it finally all adds up. Tell ye what, if you get out of the pits here, come see me at the ol' Terminal. Got some new directions of trade I could use you for. I'm sure me new business venture's customers would appreciate having somepony as, well... exotic, as a pegasus."

The degrading cackle as he rubbed my mane once again before returning to driving was so demeaning that took all the effort I had to not burst into tears.

"One RadAway per day, laddie, for each job done, after ye work off what you stole from

me. Come see me in the if ye want. Ye'll find I'm quite open."

Staying silent under Whiplash's harsh gaze, I wasn't sure what sickened me more.

The fact that once again I was so far into servitude that even other slaves had leeway over my future options.

Or the fact that part of me felt so hopelessly indentured and desperate to survive that I actually considered his offer...

"All off! Five seconds, move it!"

The back of the wagon was lowered down and masked slavers crowded around to yank at the chains that bound every slave on board. We weren't even given the option to move, simply dragged as one conjoined line off the wagon. Having been sitting with my head down, my world turned upside down as I was pulled from the wagon, dropped and shoved across the ground. Yelping from pain flared from injuries, I was dragged across the gravel with the others by half a dozen slaves battering us onward so hard that I couldn't make head nor tail of my surroundings. Just red sky then grey dirt, crimson clouds then ash covered road... again and again as they kept pushing me and the others over and over, rolling us and clipping us around the ears to keep us docile and disoriented. Panicking, I tried to keep going, to do what they wanted, but their painful shouts in my ears made it difficult.

Finally, mercifully, it stopped with a last hoof standing on my back and forcing me down upon the ground. Glancing back, I saw Whiplash himself taking responsibility for me, while the Pit Slavers held the other prisoners down. Behind me, Sooth Morass almost gleefully leaned back on the wagon.

Coughing hard enough to spray up dirt before me, my eyes finally focused on a hoof right in front of me. Covered in a dull yellow containment suit, I glanced up to find a scraggly looking earth pony mare. She looked older than most slavers, perhaps over fifty, with a patchy mane. The suit's headpiece was hanging at her neck, her dark purple mane stringy and filthy against her deep blue coat. She was utterly hideous. Covered in sores, old bite scars and with a smell that stood out beyond even the pungent reek that resided on most slaves.

Glaring down at me, she made a rough sound of displeasure.

"That's it? Four slaves for me today? I lost ten yesterday, what the hell makes you think this is going to help?"

Raspy and uncultured in the extremes, she simply scratched herself as much as she talked. I could see her head twitching on every other word. Her eyes were lifeless around a drooped face.

Whiplash shrugged in response... "Rest of em got claimed already, Hive, you know the rules. Go check with Grindstone if you want more, I hear he's got ponies to spare right now."

"Yeah, well... Grindstone is a cranky old bastard to get anypony off of. Just see what you can do about it if any slave you want rid of gives you lip. The sprites are playing up lately, warm season for them, more aggressive. Can't seem to keep the slaves alive too long..."

Her eyes travelled downwards, looking me up and down with distaste before almost deadpanning with a lazy glance at the slaver above me.

"...you having a fucking laugh, Lash?"

"Come on, Hive, you're used to working with small creatures. Just give him a good clip around the ear. He'll do what you tell him."

She sniffed. "Eh... more that he won't fit in any of the suits properly. Doesn't look too useful anyway. We'll just tie him in and if the sprites get into the loose parts, I guess they'll get some wings for dinner. What? Don't like the sound of that, little chicken?"

She had heard my whimper of fear as she reminded me of the sprites. Already, in the distance, I could detect the sound of buzzing and flitting tiny wings in their masses. Behind Hive I could see the pits, stretched out over the open field with cage wiring fitted over the top. The elevator down was kept in the middle, with some pits giving out a thick pillar of sickly smelling smoke. Beyond that lay the outer housings and above them... the great Wall. We were close to the edge, far away from anything 'important' should a parasprite containment breach occur.

"Hah... oh, chicken wings. I kill myself."

Please, do.

Hive turned and wandered off, her containment suit proving to be just as matted and filthy as she was, with the helmet and tailguard flopping around behind her. Feeling Whiplash's hoof lift, the chains were unlocked by the pit guards. Whiplash wandered around to me, raising my head on his hoof.

"It's been brief, but I spent too long with you since you were dropped on me out of nowhere, with no proper procedure, to not feel like I'll be embarrassed if you screw up again. *Don't*. Or I'll come hunting for you myself. Twenty lashes, Murk. You know the punishment."

"Yes master..."

"Good, now get going. Hell, if I could ever find who it was that gave you to my stock, I'd lynch him myself."

Wrapping a hoof around my head, Whiplash threw me forward. Not expecting it, I staggered across the mud before my injured right hoof gave out in a sharp stab of pain. Before I could so much as yelp, I tripped and fell flat on my face onto the caged pit. With a sharp springing sound, I found it mercifully painless as the chicken wire flexed beneath me. Holding my right hoof to my underbody protectively, my eyes finally focused and-

Oh Goddesses.

Below me, through the cage, the parasprite pits were in full swing.

A red-hot workhouse lay down there; made up of pony-powered cranking conveyor belts, slowly moving carts that were all filled with rank honeycomb-like nests of all putrid colours, and dozens of the weakest and most horrifically pitiful looking slaves I had ever laid eyes on.

Each one of them would have tried to escape or cause Red Eye problems. Their rations were lower, their sleeping locations were often simply their workplaces, and their sicknesses went untreated. They huddled scraps and small pieces of cloth and clothing over themselves in a vain attempt to hide any exposed flesh from the parasprites.

Oh... the parasprites...

Buzzing everywhere in the air in small groups, they flitted all over the pits. More would shoot out, trailing smoke, when each nest was fed down the conveyor into an incinerator. Several flew from the fire each time, causing at least a few slaves to scream and hide under the conveyor or carts while guards equipped with flamethrowers sent searing blasts toward them. I saw them drop from the air, little more than drifting ash, while the higher or more agile ones rammed against the cages or swooped toward the screaming slaves. Many tried to

swat with large metal fans or sticks, others simply ran before being turned back at gunpoint by fully suited slavers.

It just went on and on... terror after terror amongst hard, savage work that was never allowed to cease. Seeing my dripping tears evaporate in the thick warm air before even hitting the ground. The reason why pit workers were so strung out, paranoid, and weak became perfectly clear. How would I— ARRGH!

A parasprite hurtled right at my face, leading me to throw my body back from the cage. Innocently cute, I saw it gnaw on the bars with tiny fangs in an effort to get at me; just a small, light blue ball of carnivorous intent. Shaking, I quickly retreated over the mud, seeing a pillar of flame rocket out of the cage and burn it to cinders.

“Come on, you four. Get inside!”

Hive’s slavers were already herding us to the elevator; their shock rods giving me plenty of incentive to not dither around. Half cantering, half limping, I moved onto the sheet metal floor of the lift with Hive, two armed guards, and the other three prisoners.

“Right, now get this straight. It’s simple. There’s four stages to Parasprite work.” Hive spoke to the wall as the lift juddered and began descending. “Import, chop up, move, burn.”

The surface fell away. After a few foot of soil, I felt the ambience warmth hit me. The caverns were laid out before us, outside the skeleton of metal that made up the lift shaft into these pits.

Already, I found myself backing into the corner and curling up as the lift. Its open and caged front end became a target for many little stray creatures bashing into it repeatedly to try and get at us. Behind them, I could see the work pits stretching between tunnels and hollowed out basements. The heat was already unbearable, choking all the air from my lungs.

“Import. You get on the carts and pull the nests in from wherever they’re found. Chop up. Use auto axes to carve the nests into pieces. Move. Get them on the conveyors and fan away any strays trying to get out. Burn. Throw them in the fire. You’ll each get a job.”

Straightening on the helmet and tailguard of her filthy contamination suit, Hive kept the lift descending onto a level apparently below the work floor. Dull grey overtook deep red as we descended into the underground rooms where I saw slaves trying in vain to sleep and guard their meagre armour from the intentions of their co-workers at the same time.

“You, the big earth pony. Auto axe, chop up. Tiny horn, you’re on conveyor. Other unicorn? Yeah you, you’re on burning. Chicken?”

Sighing at the acquirement of yet one more name to add to the list, I looked across at her.

“You’re on import duty. Lash tells me you’ve done carting before. Probably all you’re good for.”

Sighing, I rubbed my shoulder. This was going to *hurt*.

Finally arriving at a level one below the lowest work pits, the elevator opened with a clattering racket that pounded through my head like a machine gun next to my ear. Beyond was a small ready room with a sealed cage door leading into a mesh walkway beyond. I could only imagine that it led back up to the main chamber and was designed purely to keep sprites from this safezone. Around me were rusty benches and old abandoned lockers. A couple of slaves cowered in corners, small bite marks bleeding while they shivered and pathetically licked empty bowls. Beside me, I noticed even my three rough prisoner companions beginning to cast unsure glances between themselves.

“Here’s your suits. Grab one that fits and follow me.”

She pointed to a pile in the corner. Filthy leather, metal plates, rotted fur, and old cloth were patched and sometimes nailed together into the most mishmash clothing I had ever seen. On top seemed to lie a smaller one. oh, that'd be a lot better if I could—

The other three shoved me to the floor, rushing by me and clambering across the ten or so empty suits. The one I had seen was stripped apart, used to quickly cover the exposed sections on others.

“Wait, wait! That’s the only one that might fit me!”

Heedless, I was roughly bucked back away from them and left to clutch my chest. By the time I could pull myself to my hooves, they had torn it apart to cover their own flanks. Hive glanced back at me, rolling her eyes behind the visor of her containment suit.

“Whiplash was right about you, chicken. Absolutely useless. Might as well write that letter to Protégé already, telling him I’m not releasing you from my service.”

What!?

Seeing my look of shock, she raised an eyebrow. She seemed to be a little shaky and short-fused right now, biting back an annoyed scowl.

“Didn’t you know? That’s how things work around here. You prove yourself back into normal work. Red Eye did you a good turn by putting you on my shift instead of having you hung for our entertainment, something he should have done to a *pegasus*, I might add. To ‘prove yourself,’ you need to first prove yourself to *me*. I can find plenty of suicide jobs for a pathetic pegasus who can’t even fly, but I’m not going against the rules just to satisfy your wordy little master’s whims. No... you don’t impress me today. And you get to stay here until either you do... or you die. That clear enough for you?”

Without waiting for an answer, she lifted a random protective suit on her hoof and hurled it toward me.

“So get your flank in gear, pick that up, and follow me.”

The rotten, half-ripped, and often repaired clothing slapped heavily onto the ground at my hooves. Metal trays nailed onto the sides as protection clanged and slid to a halt. Grabbing the heavy fabric, I realised that even crumpled up, it was clearly for a pony far bigger than myself. Hive’s disapproving glare watched me, before she turned and trotted away. I began to realise that Protégé’s one comfort to me, the assurance that I need only endure till the end, was now gone. This slaver had it out for me in particular. If I wanted to get past her, I had to *excel* at something I’d never done before. Either that or come up with some idea to get out of here without simply running away from it.

Hoofing it into the mesh corridor after them, I felt it shake and judder from the scaffolding holding it above the carved rock corridor. Every so often, a single parasprite flitted around outside it or rammed against the cage in an effort to reach us. Winding through a few corners and back up to the work pit level, we came to another suspended room, built of stable bulkheads and mounted on concrete pipes. Open windows and tunnels leading away were lined with thin mesh, looking back on the slaves working alongside the conveyors we had seen on the way down in the elevator. Clearly, this was a chamber to prepare suits, enter, and exit without the parasprites having a chance to swarm out of the main chambers, like an airlock.

Checking inside the foggy window, Hive opened the main door and, with a nod of her head, indicated that we were to enter. Trying to keep my whining to a minimum as the shouts, screams, and fierce surges of the incinerators drifted through the last door ahead of us, I trotted in, almost falling against a bench with the weight of the suit. My entire body

was already feeling weak... I... I needed RadAway *now*. An entire shift wasn't survivable, even if I did excel at the job.

"Get dressed! That door opens for a shift change in three minutes. If you aren't ready, tough."

The three prisoners began throwing on their suits. Around us were the benches I had spotted, along with racks of various equipment. Behind a locked cage door, I could see crates of weapons and flamer fuel tanks mixed in with more valuable looking devices I couldn't even identify. Near the door was a large bin that Hive tapped.

"You have any bits not attaching properly, have a check in here. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you'll get scraps to tie them up or patch them."

Checking my suit, pulling it up, I found it to be a mostly heavy leather construction. The two dinner trays were pinned to it, with flexible cloth covers on the joints. Around the face was an old welding mask with clear plastic soldered onto it. It *looked* tough at least.

It wasn't.

Even as I tried to fit my hooves in, the cloth began to rip. The headpiece of leather and wool felt flimsy and ready to tear. All along my underside, the entire suit had a great opening where the ties had been stripped off. It was entirely too big by at least a good few inches and I didn't even want to think why that ripped section near my flank still felt wet.

"Aaah... old Ladybug's suit. Yeah, we stripped the lace off that." Hive chuckled, leaning against the door and preparing what looked like a tiny flamethrower to sit around her mask. It was connected to a small battle saddle wire running down her hoof. She toyed with it, incessantly twitching restlessly. "Good old worker... till she sat on a nest. Tore right through the material underneath and, well, kept going."

Trying my hardest to not let my imagination take flight, I slipped the suit on as best I could. The leggings were loose, the bottom hung open to leave a huge gap to my exposed flesh and at least three holes ripped open as I tried to fit the vastly too large suit around my body properly.

Hive simply snorted at my effort. She slipped her own hood off for a second, and I watched as she popped a small white tablet into her mouth. Her hoof seemed to be shaking even more as it fought to keep the tablet from dropping until it was in. A few seconds later, she inhaled deeply, shuddering, before breathing out and relaxing.

"Fuck... really?"

The words were just muttered under her breath as she strapped her suit back on and slipped the little rusty box back into her suit. Drugs, likely. Many of the slavers in Fillydelphia used them. I'd seen Whiplash go through a few inhaler like things before. But watching Hive, she just seemed to jitter on the spot. Her pupils widened and seemed to stop blinking for a while. Looking back at me, that hazy darkness in her face faded away and was replaced with a bright fury.

"Hey, Toolset?"

One of the masked slavers turned his enclosed head. Hive indicated upwards.

"Know if that rat bastard Sooty's got any more mint-als? I'm out."

Without a word, the guard just shrugged. Hive swore under her breath, before turning to see me looking.

"You waiting for a fucking invitation? Get in the barding!"

Immediately turning back to my suit, I fought with my own hood. Settling my face into the headpiece, I had to fight the urge to throw up when I wiped the visor to find those

bloodstains were on the *inside*. She said there were spares in that bin right?

Trotting unsteadily forward in the ill-fitting gear, I hopped up to put my front hooves on the lip of the bin, stretching on my rear ones to peer in. There were a few things. Perhaps there might be a wire for me!

“Oi! Get out the way!”

A heavy force knocked me clean off my hooves onto the floor. The big earth pony prisoner, a stallion, was staring through as well. One of the unicorn bucks quickly joined him. They pulled out numerous rags, small plates, and scraps of leather. Moving away, I saw the unicorn use his magic to lift two threads out and weave one around a hole to close it up. I only needed one! There was enough for both of us!

Trotting up, I waited beside him till he was done, holding my hoof out for the second one. His suit was enclosed now, he wouldn't need it. Finishing up, he turned back to me.

“Nope, I need it.”

Feeling my own face droop, I stepped forward.

“But... but you don't have any holes!”

“Want a spare.”

“My belly is open!”

“So? Get your own.”

“There isn't any... can't we share?”

“I'm sorry, isn't selfishness what you pegasi do? Go ask your rich parents on the clouds for one.”

He wandered off toward the door, leaving me muttering ‘I can't fly...’ behind him. Storing the thread loosely on his side, he hooked it through a small pouch that dangled and nodded to Hive. They showed little obvious fear... probably because of my presence. I could see it in their eyes, all this bluster and acting tough was just trying to hide the truth.

In the presence of working with the parasprites, they were just as terrified as myself.

Hive nodded back, glaring at me as I tried to hold my suit together beneath me, looking for all the world like I was hankering for the toilet as I crossed my hooves in an attempt to hold the suit shut.

“Please... Hive, I need something to close this!”

“Don't use my name again or I'll throw you out there naked. Your fault for not getting in faster.”

“I'm going to die without something to close this! I'm—”

My sentence was cut by having to let out a shrill, high pitched squeal. Growling and storming forward, Hive lifted me, carrying me while wailing toward a bench. Her shakes were gone, replaced by a calm and horribly efficient displeasure toward me. Was she going to hold to her threat? Planting me down, she stamped on the side of my face, holding it to the bench. Her voice was dangerously low, possessing a sudden intelligent and lethal tone missing all of the aloof shakiness of before...

“I am through fucking playing with you. You think *any* slaver in Fillydelphia wants you? No, you're bad fucking luck. We *all* know you. From Grindstone, all the way to Whiplash, Slit, Protégé, and Shackles. The insufferable whiner, Murky Number Seven. Not so lucky as his name implies, eh?”

Squirming under her hoof, I heard the door hiss, as it was about to open. My apologies were cut off immediately.

“I don't want you here. You cause problems. But I'd hardly relish handing you over to

that upstart in the Mall, either. So if I see you've got an untied belly strap, don't expect me to do anything but look the other way."

Her other hoof prodded my belly.

"You've been getting too soft under Protégé, Murk. Forgetting your place in Fillydelphia. You're not special. Not somepony destined to escape. All you are is another number to me; more than most. Time to remind you what proper slave work is..."

I clung to the bench. It was a death sentence to go in there! But she was pulling me, wrapping her hooves around my stomach and roughly hauling me free. The gates behind us slid open, racking upward to reveal the searing haze of the incineration rooms and the pit itself.

"You'll kill me! Please, don't! I'll... I'll..."

I had nothing. No bargaining chip. Just a slave.

She hurled me backward with a deceptive strength in her old limbs. Tumbling, I flew through the door and collided with the unicorn who had taken the threads. Collapsing together outside, I felt him swear and knock me twice with his hoof, eliciting cries of pain; even if it wasn't much more than just a shock. Cowering and trying to pull myself out from under him, he gave me one last small kick on the knee before cantering off.

Behind me, Hive snorted and closed the door behind us, before using her small flamer to burn any parasprites that had gone inside of the shift change chamber. Lying on the bare red rock ground, I found myself in a mass of activity. Flamers belched from slavers on walkways, carts were drawn up and down ramps on all sides of me that arced around the edges of the pit and while dozens of slaves rushed to and fro. The great conveyor trundled across the floor, from one carved room to the next with an incinerator below each of the cage meshes in the roof. From the surface it had looked like a small circular pit, but down here it was more clearly a series of caverns, all interlocked with ramps or conveyors running through the mined out earth. Within seconds, a parasprite fluttered in front of my visor, prompting me to lash out with one hoof, the other trying to keep my clothing together. It eluded me and buzzed off to pester a slave working a cart to the end of the conveyor.

"Hey you! The idiot in the bad suit! Get over here and get to work!"

Pulling myself behind a rock, I hoped only to buy myself some time. My collision with the unicorn hadn't come off entirely without reward. Held tightly to my chest, the spare thread dangled from the little pouch the bigger pony had possessed.

"Oi! Stop hiding, get over here now!"

Quickly, tie it shut, tie it shut...

Desperate, my hooves dropped it multiple times as I heard the slaver approaching with his heavy tread. Come on... I can sew, this should be easy! But with the fuzzy visor and ill-fitting materials it was like trying to thread a needle while blind with a numb body. Right, one hole... now just a dozen more...

"I can see you hiding, dumbfuck! No pony gets breaks here!"

The slaver rounded the rock. Maintaining my work on the belly, I kept trying to tie it shut, four down... eight to go.

I only managed one more before I heard a sharp click, and my neck was squeezed roughly. My scream couldn't even emerge as anything other than a wheezing cough as something closed around my throat. Feeling myself pulled from the rock, trailing the thread behind me from the still open hole, I saw the slaver's magic held a sort of extendible lasso that could grab hold of slaves' necks. The wire bit deep, even through my thick clothing,

making my legs kick and flail when no air would come in. Gurgling and choking, I was pulled before the slaver.

"Tryin' to take a break, eh? We'll see about that. You're on carts, so grab that one and get moving!"

Finally, the noose came, well, loose. Dropping my head to the floor, I struggled to take breaths through the enclosed headpiece. Seemingly, the only air that came into it was through the small holes that were hopefully too small for a parasprite. Rolling to the side to avoid a fully laden cart topped high with a huge nest, I felt the slaver shove me in the direction of the still empty ones coming off the end of the conveyor. Afraid of the noose, I cantered as best as my sore little body could take me

"Hook yourself to the one on the end and get up that ramp into the storage! Just don't drop the damn cart off the edge and I'll not have to beat you for it!"

The buzzing was everywhere. Holding my clothing closed with one hoof, I tripodded my way toward the carts and tried to ignore the occasional bumps on my body from a parasprite getting too close, or landing for a little ride. Every so often, I could feel one gnaw on the tough leather until I shook it loose. A few landed near holes, sending me into a frenzy of panic until they were swatted away. Seemingly, I wasn't the only one with such troubles. Around me I could see blood leaking from small bites on other slaves as they tried to cover exposed holes in the failing suits. Only slavers seemed to have properly enclosed barding and masks, or containment suits like Hive's. I could see her, having re-entered the pits, cantering around spurting fire from her mini-flamer and bellowing at slaves who were struggling to lift the cracked and crumbly nests onto the conveyors. It was hard to see exactly at this distance... everything kept clogging up over this visor, and it was already beginning to mist up.

Even with the flimsy visor, I really missed my goggles right about now... and my journal... and Sundial...

Part of me wished that Protégé still had them again, a slim hope that stopped me from falling into the abyss of loss that I had felt after the gang took my journal.

Even traversing twenty feet down here was an obstacle course. Twice a cart thundered past, sprays of shredded hive belched from auto axe zones, slaves crashed into one another when they felt a parasprite's teeth gain purchase, begging for somepony else to knock it off. Much to my surprise, most slaves *did* help each other. The notion seemed to be that if they all watched one another, somepony would come to their aid if it were them.

Any lift in my heart at this sight was quickly drowned out by the knowledge that they likely wouldn't help *me*. No. Pegasi didn't get preferred treatment in the pits.

There were about six carts yet to be pulled off, the remaining five I presumed belonged to now dead slaves I was replacing. Carting being the most dangerous was of no surprise to me. Travelling along with a huge hive at your back while locked onto the cart itself and unable to run was a horrifying thought. Glancing behind me at the auto axes spinning and whining alongside the conveyor (with half a dozen ponies galloping on a treadmill to power it) I saw the slavers were a little distracted with controlling two poor ponies who were getting swarmed. Masses of sprites had flew from the incinerator, seeking to get through the tough suits of their targets.

The thought of what would happen if I let this huge open gap in my stomach get noticed gave me the courage to crawl under the cart and try to do it up again. The movements had unthreaded it again.

"Oh no... oh no, come on!"

Fluttering sounded around me on all sides. I couldn't tell if one was nearby or not. Sweating, my hooves fumbled and struggled with it. Every time I got it through one hole, it fell out of another.

"Oh come on... come on *please!*"

I felt something land on my back. My heart almost stopped while I held the gap shut with my hooves, crying and silently praying it would leave. Mercifully, after a few seconds it did. After another three whizzed by the front of the cart I kept trying again, just to get it—

"NO!"

Fluttering at speed right under the cart, a bright red parasprite made a beeline for the gap the moment I had opened it again to try and tie it up.

"Help! Somepony, anypony! HELP! HELP ME!"

Fighting me, the sprite kept trying to dig away, pulling at the material with its tiny jaws and evading my hooves when I tried to knock it away, while holding myself shut with one hoof. It got inside for a brief second, before I pushed it back. Undeterred, it kept shoving forward, three of its friends beginning to lazily float over while taking notice. Two others seemed to cluster around my back, niggling away at the leather as they hunted for weak points. Panic was giving me volume, even on a hoarse throat, to scream for aid. Many looked, but none helped.

Only after three of them made a concerted effort to push their way inside the gap did it hit me. They could smell the blood of my wounds through the gap... that's why they knew! Backing out from under the cart, my one hoof batting away as the agile sprites, I felt their powerful little mouths beginning to pull away at the gap.

"Haha... stupid fuckin' pegasus. Doesn't even know you roll to get them off you..."

The line was muttered in passing to another slave, clearly not intended for me to hear it or be helped by it. But my hearing picked it up all the same and I didn't waste any time. Rolling frantically on the ground, I felt little crunches below me or heard the sound of them flying away to avoid being crushed by holding onto me. My wings ached from hitting the ground, I could feel the fragile bone structures in them grinding and shifting away while my shoulder felt dangerously close to reopening the stab wound. Weathervane was right. I needed rest and lots of it, yet Fillydelphia was not willing to give it to me. Amidst my mad thrashing to ward off the sprites, I could feel my body itself begin to wear and tire much faster. Pain built in the joints, the effort making my head spin and the air intake needed caused my lungs to burn. Finally lying still, feeling each breath in like swallowing shattered glass, I simply held myself shut and recovered. Gradually, slowly, I began to carefully tie myself up again, finally getting it far enough to pull tightly shut.

Finally, I could breathe a sigh of relief.

Until the hoof caught me around the head.

"Whiplash wasn't kidding, you are fucking useless! Get up, chicken! Get on the cart! Go! Go! Go!"

Each 'Go!' was accompanied by another skull wrenching blow to the head as Hive clipped me around the ear so hard it was almost like a straight out kick. Cantering in pain ahead of her, I strapped myself in even as she berated me. Shouting I was sorry and promising to be better didn't help her mood.

"Get. Moving!"

With a final slap across the flank, I took off with the cart, wishing I could wipe my tears

under the hood and visor as my aching hooves pulled me onto the big earth ramp that circled around the pit into a higher level for the nest importing.

Nothing she hit me with was particularly damaging in the long term, indeed after so long in Fillydelphia regular beatings were almost expected. But as I whipped myself into shape and made a pull of the empty cart for the ramp, it wasn't the pain that made me cry. It was that every strike was a stinging reminder of my place in the world. The place I so wanted to change... but just seemed incapable of doing so. Every effort had only landed me lower. First into harsh work in Stables and now into a literal pit where I would likely die soon.

Even as the bumping parasprites followed and toyed with me. Even as my throat itched from the growing ambient radiation down here. Even as my mind fought over which death would be worse... that one line of Red Eye's kept banging around in my head. It was stupid, illogical to think it should have happened... but I couldn't deny its significance and how upset it made me feel.

"She didn't save *you*."

Working down in the pits, it turned out, *sucked*.

It had everything a 'normal' job in Fillydelphia might entail. I was tied to a cart and given a simple route that, bizarrely, seemed to be uphill in *both* directions. Slavers watched us like hawks, or eagles, in the case of griffon sentries. Any sign of slacking resulted in a sharp beat across the back or head, given whips couldn't penetrate the thick clothing to allow proper incentive.

But the similarities ended there. Trudging on the hard hewn rock was rough on my hooves for a start, but the sheer heat of incineration chambers in tight underground areas led to a sweltering atmosphere. Add in the thick clothing, and unceasing hours of hard manual labour, and it was a recipe for heat exhaustion that exceeded even that of Slit's forge. Around me, slaves sometimes dropped where they stood. A swift strike would either force them to their hooves again, or they would simply be dragged off. A single gunshot was usually heard following them.

The parasprites were a lethal nuisance. Small bites before a location was sealed or covered led to almost incessant yells of pain, creating an almost hell-like atmosphere amongst the flames and red rock. The punished were sent here to work off their sin in the eyes of their masters up above, almost appropriate to the old tales of Tartarus one master had scared me with as a colt. He'd told me that disobedient slaves were sent there if they caused any mischief.

Guess he was right.

Most of the parasprite injuries came from the auto axe wielders, who regularly got swarmed when slicing open nests to fit on the conveyor belts. Those on the carts, while noticed by less of the loose sprites, had a harder time dealing with them. Stop, drop, and roll didn't work when you were padlocked to the cart itself.

But the worst things about the job were the masks we wore. They were not filtered gas masks like the slavers' or powered containment suits like Hive's. The only area to breathe through was a thin layer of cloth near the mouth that if you sucked enough breath in, you might get half a lung's worth. With the dry air and stifling temperature, that made things very difficult before my lack of air intake in general was factored in. The result was that,

while trudging up sharp earth and rock ramps and straining my back to pull carts laden down with nests, it felt like I was trying to breath through a wet and sweaty towel being held across my mouth.

Numerous times I collapsed, believing I was dying while coughing up inside the sealed mask, until a slaver would start kicking me to get up. Half blind and unable to focus as my vision whirled and became little more than a red blur, I struggled to keep putting one hoof in front of the other, to drag myself that one step further.

This couldn't last. I wasn't even one third finished with the shift and already my body was failing. The radiation wasn't even having a chance to build, I would suffocate in this long before the end!

Finally arriving once again at the import area, I dropped while they loaded me up. Loading took twenty seconds on average, the only rest I got each trip. Unable to lie down from the wagon straps, I ended up just hanging in my loose suit. The loaders heaved the great nests from the covered wagons that had transported them from wherever in Fillydelphia they had been located. Covered in horrible juices and sticky fluid, they stank even above the smell of smoke.

The route back after being loaded was up a ramp, through a suspended mesh corridor into the main incineration chambers again, and then down another ramp that ran in a circle around the conveyor on the ground floor to reach the unloading area. Once I'd offloaded it all, it was back up the opposite ramp to arc back here again.

It felt about as inefficient as it was.

Hive had continually ignored me all throughout the shift. How was I meant to prove myself down here? What was the goal? All I was doing was dragging carts, something that I didn't have the strength for in this heat. Maybe if she'd let me sew up the suits to protect slaves or... or... well, that was all I really could do for her. The unfortunate fact that she likely didn't care for the slaves didn't particularly compare to the fact she had no interest in being impressed by me or even caring about my survival.

"Laden up, get going!"

With a groan, my aching back muscles stretched once again as I set about tugging the heavy cart. The buzzing in my ears from the masses of parasprites still inside the nests once again became an irritation as much as a danger. They were strange creatures, irradiated to the point of carnivorous intent and yet, oddly playful. They allegedly had moods. Often, a little 'love bite' was their standard fare with ponies that were mostly covered. But if they sensed a hole big enough to swarm in they could strip a pony to the bones in less than a couple of minutes. The swarming mood was rarer, apparently, only created if they hit a certain critical mass, which was why the guards had so many flamethrowers spurting gouts of fire through the nests and into the air. Sometimes they sprayed my cart in an effort to keep the bugs down. Yet every time they did, they burned up much of the oxygen in the area, making me gasp and wheeze.

Slowly tugging the cart one step at a time up the earthen ramp that led back into the main chamber, I groaned as I felt my shoulder wound suck and stretch under the harness. Whether it had opened I didn't know, my entire body was so coated in sweat and aching from the labour that I could be covered in blood and not know.

Ahead of me the incineration chamber appeared through the carved rock passageway. A frantic rush of ponies was being beaten back into work from near the fires by slavers while the conveyor sat still. Hive strode among it, bashing heads and shoving ponies back to their

workstations even while two guards magically carted off a limp looking pony. Enough blood streamed from the neck area to make my stomach turn. Closing my eyes, I pushed on. The parasprites in the cart behind me stayed in their nest, but their increased buzzing at the scent of blood was enough to make them itchy.

All the same, I felt one of them land on my head and simply sit there for a ride. These creatures were *weird*.

“Get a replacement from Grindstone! I hear he’s been taking in a lot lately. You lot on the axes, back to work! I didn’t say you could stop!”

Hive’s voice rang out around the pit, echoing off walls while she strode back and forth among all the workers. Even a few lazy looking slavers got a clip around the ear or flank from her.

“Carts! What’s the hold up?! Just because one idiot ripped their suit and got their jugular eaten doesn’t mean you get to hold up, get moving!”

She confused me, just when coming in I had seen a jittery and aloof overseer. Where had this sharp and perceptive personality come from? Unless... had that thing she had taken been some sort of chem? I’d heard that ponies addicted to such things could have almost two personalities.

Spears of flame shot across the conveyor, making ponies duck under it. The parasprites that had killed the worker were turned to black dust in the air itself.

Wandering on in our convoy, I passed a mare crying to herself behind the visor. She was carrying an auto axe out for repair, bawling as she trotted. Another buck nearby was controlling another axe with magic, balancing on three legs. A small patch over where his suit’s front left leg might have been telling the horrible tale all too clearly.

I remembered the slave in the thresher mill who had been shot for losing a leg. Clearly, rules differed from slaver to slaver.

Nopony walked strongly. Heads were low, running on what energy they could muster in the tiny breaks inside a rusty safe room. If only I could breathe properly, I might be able to work harder and show my worth to Hive.

Pushing harder, whinnying softly and snorting hot air into my own face off the visor, I set out with the cart again. The parasprite on my head gave a small hop and squeak (Oh, great, even some *parasprites* had deeper voices than me) as the speed increased downhill into the room itself and curving around the edge of the wall the corridor hugged. With wheels squeaking, I kept up the pull until I was behind the one in front of me again.

Below me, off the rather unnervingly close edge, I could see the giant pile of nests ready to be cut up. The surface shifted as sprites rustled around on the larger pockets of activity. Flamethrowers held by armoured slavers were pushed into said pockets and ignited to flush them. Even through the suit, I could smell the milky aroma of their disgusting homes.

“Get back! Everypony get back!”

Huh?

“BACK! SHIT!”

The screaming was coming from the incinerator again. I could see half a nest sticking out of it, bulging and stretching at one end. With a spray of ichor, it burst.

“SWARM!”

Pandemonium broke out. From within the nest, far too large for the opening to the incinerator, a pocket of dozens, maybe hundreds, of sprites belched forth with a slopping rip and buzzing drone. Slaves scattered before the surging little beasts that washed over and

around them like a wave. Some slaves fell, or hid beneath the conveyor. Auto axes shrieked and bit on rock as they were dropped, still active, on the floor. Flamers roared toward the great mass, but could not stem the tide. The swarm instinct took over, and every loose sprite in the room joined the horde.

A bell was ringing to warn to workers further away, and slaver after slaver rushed in through the gates, but the sprites just kept coming. How could they multiply like that? How could they move so fast?

How could they move so fast this way?

Shrieking, I tried to gallop, but the wagon lurched and refused to move, the locks jammed in place. Straining, I realised that even if I could pull the weight again, the wagons in front were unable to move due to one that had overturned in the panic. My hooves paced on the ground faster and faster, head whipping from side to side before it finally settled, wide eyed, on the gigantic swarm.

My ears vibrated, aching and pinging in pain while the pressure of so many wings on all sides felt utterly unreal. Screams from around me only joined with my own as the cart behind mine pushed forward, steadily knocking me toward the edge.

“Stop pushing!”

The pressure increased, my cart tipped as one wheel fell.

“PLEASE! Whoever you are, stop it! STOP!”

With a great shifting of weight, the sensation of it slipping removed all pressure from me only momentarily before the harness squeezed tight around my waist, and dragged me over the lip after it so hard that my ribs felt like they shifted inches to the side.

Pulled from the swarm, below me I saw the wagon explode into fragments and planks as it landed in the nest pile and punched right through to the concrete floor. The locks around me snapped on impact as the wagon landed first, dropping me over the top of it and onto the pile of sprite hives. Punching through the weak material, it only marginally supported my landing before the hard rock knocked the wind out of me and sent lances of pain shooting from every wound I owned. Crying out, even within the nests, I simply curled up, clenching my teeth and seething in pain.

Hooves shaking, I knew I had to move, now! The nests were waking up, dully popping out one or two sprites around me at a time. I could see the slavers herding the sprites up into the cages with fire, where slavers on the surface sprayed them with more flames. Mists of black ash fell like dark snow into a pit still gripped by panic and chaos. Individual small swarms that had branched off were chasing ponies, pulling at clothing and fighting with hooves to get into gaps the slaves and slavers desperately attempted to hold shut. I saw some groups pressing their gaps against one another in an effort to help out. Some lay shrieking in agony on the ground, holding shut gaps where a parasprite had devoured a piece of their leg, an ear, or a tail.

Pulling myself with my good hooves, keeping my hopefully still bandaged right hoof held close to my underbelly, I made my way through the soggy, rotten nests toward the conveyor. I could hide under it!

One hoof plunged into a pus-filled crevice of a nest, bogging me down. The sticky liquid bubbling up and sucked hard at my hoof as it finally came loose. The reek that wafted up and through my nostrils was sweet and sickly, like the bodies I’d sometimes woken up screaming beside in the FunFarm when someone had died in their sleep. My visor was dripping with the stuff, the moisture getting through gaps to stain my hooves and clog up

the inside of the loose suit. My own sweat, blood, and whatever else had accumulated through gaps sending the stink nowhere but to me.

Enough to make me want to—

—to... oh no...

My throat began to spasm. Tripping forward, I dry heaved. I hadn't eaten in almost a day; there was nothing to bring up. Trapped inside my suit, I was glad to not vomit properly, but it kept going. Finally falling free of the nests and dropping to my side, the retching turned worse. My throat seared in pain as the copper taste entered my mouth. 'No, please no', I begged in my mind, I just needed a while longer... I'd get RadAway soon!

It didn't cease. Staggering, trying to keep my balance, my hooves were forced under me again. My right hoof's injury stung and burned in infected pain; the shrapnel injury from the mines having only gotten worse, apparently. Eyes watering, I slipped or fell every few steps before finally rolling under the conveyor and pressing against a buck that was calling for his big brother to come help him. I could appreciate the feeling.

Sprites sometimes flew down to us, making the buck and myself scream. Along with the mare on my other side, our warding hooves sent them flying off again for easier prey... or they perhaps simply got bored of taunting us. Ahead of us, I saw one slave trapped in the open and swinging an auto axe at them in a blind panic. Swearing, cursing them with all the names in the world, his front hooves threw the massive whirling axe in all directions. His wild momentum over-balanced him, and eventually I saw him trip. The auto axe swung low and sliced across the side of another buck who looked no older than Protégé. By some miracle, it only cut the suit and not him. Stopped on the spot from attempting to gallop toward us and relative safety, he stared in disbelief at the hole, clearly having just seen his life fly before his eyes.

"It didn't cut!"

We waved him toward us, there was still room. He looked at the gap and dodged away from the frantic axe swinger again before cantering over carefully. Big dopey blue eyes showed a slave not long introduced to this city.

"Hurry!" I screamed. "Get in! There's room!"

"I'm coming! I'm— AAAIIIEEE!"

With horror, I saw a sprite fly right into the gap in his suit, immediately forcing its way into the side of his torso. He fell, scrambling with his hooves at his own suit. A trio, then half a dozen more followed, ramming into and tearing the gap into a full blown hole. Unable to stop them all, screeching in pain as they bit into his flesh, he flailed at his suit and rolled back and forth, but it was too late. The anguished cries that followed as the parasprites frenzied cut into my skull. The creatures multiplied within his own suit, shifting and swelling through it like a pulsating sore. Seconds later, I could see them buzzing around *inside* his visor. Already screaming as the swarm devoured his body from inside and out, the sound of his voice wailed higher, becoming a shrill wail of terror and agony.

"Help! Help! MY EYE! MY EYE!"

Spreading, multiplying in seconds and growing, the suit was little more than a raging mass of parasprites stripping him to the bone. His shrill cries finally died a few seconds later.

One slaver turned his flamer on the swarming heap, a roaring burst of flame aimed to turn the parasprites and their victim to ash. Perhaps it was intended as a mercy, but the buck was already gone before the flames found him.

Amongst it all, away from the screams, the blood, and the gunshots of panicked slavers, I

retreated as far as I could into the mass of cowering slaves. There, I simply curled up between a few of them while trying to think of better times than this place.

There were precious few.

“She didn’t save *you*.”

I know...

The aftermath was as short as it was quickly forgotten. To me, the swarm had been a mind bogglingly hellish event. To the slavers in the pits... it was routine. The dead were collected, the critically wounded brutally executed before my very eyes, and the rest thrown into the prep room for recovery. For everypony else, it was back to work.

Left without a cart, I was suddenly jobless. The spares from earlier had disappeared as more shifts came on, and there didn’t seem to be any other job that I knew how to, or could physically, do. As such, it was a rather depressing piece of information that I would need to locate Hive and... oh boy... ask.

There was a rule as a slave. One I had learned long ago. *Never* ask. Never say that you have nothing to do. No slave master was ever alive that did not possess the mythical skill to locate work from seemingly nowhere. But to be found trying to ‘slack off’ carried greater punishment in Fillydelphia, one often resolved with violence. My body was already aching enough without another beating to push me into dangerous territory again. The illness was still building and doing that just fine on its own. Each breath was a wheeze and that metallic tinge in my mouth wasn’t going away. That wasn’t a good sign. Any more stressful activity might bring about a set of spasms or... well, worse...

Left alone in the pit, I felt surrounded by a whirlwind of activity. From the floor beside me in lines around conveyors to the curved roads running around the edges with carts, it all moved and twirled in ceaseless brutal activity with me in the eye of the storm. The brief calm before the inevitable plunge right back in.

“I don’t care if there’s ten or ten thousand, we need to get that place cleared! Red Eye will have my neck if they destroy anything in there after last time!”

Hive wasn’t too hard to find. Shouting amongst a congregate of slavers, she was waving a hoof in every which direction; mostly at other ponies. Approaching meekly from across the room, I worried about how was best to approach while trying to avoid thinking about whether this was me acting to try and win my way out of here... or just acting to look for my next task. I really wanted my journal; to just sit and draw, let it all out and create to help me sort things out and know what I really was...

“And *you*!”

Stopping dead in my tracks, her head whipped around. At least twelve different forms of apology were on the tip of my tongue, but her eyes were elsewhere. Nearby to the slavers, a slave worker was being held down by two heavily barded guards.

“Isn’t it a bit damned obvious that thing wasn’t going to fit in the fire? I’ve lost workers ’cause of you! Now you’re going to have to clean up. See that gap up there?”

I glanced up at the same time as the blamed slave. Above us, I could see the red tinged cloud layer through a cage. Guards were still fighting to reattach a segment of mesh over a six inch hole.

“One of those idiots hit the cage when firing about like a bloody loony! Apparently, ten

parasprites got out. The surface guards kept them from getting near the slave dens, but they've fluttered over and gone right into the Ministry of Image! *We only cleared that fucking place out a few days ago already!*"

Her voice rose until both slaves and slavers were glancing over at the outburst. Remarkably, the slave before her just sat quietly.

"Ah'm not goin' in..."

"I do believe you are. This is your mess and that little unicorn isn't around to wave her magic horn and do the job now, is she?"

My eyes visibly perked up. My ears would have too, had the suit not crushed them down.

"Mister Shiny did ask for her again, sure, but that little bitch isn't around anymore since the pitfight, is she? So I need you to go in."

"Dun care, ah'm not goin' in to die huntin' parasprites. Shoot me if you want, ah dun care anymore..."

The earth pony looked in his early thirties, his coat and mane hidden in his suit, but his posture showed complete loss of will. Was that how I looked sometimes? From afar, the stance was a stark reminder of the dangers of being in slavery too long. You eventually just stopped caring entirely.

After all, I knew I had once stepped on the edge of the control tower too.

Hive bristled. "Oh, you do tempt me, slave. You really do, but I need every worker at their post. Get back on carts. Least you can't fuck up there. Perhaps handing you over to Shackles or Grindstone might change your tune, they've been looking for more lately. Hey! Misty Sheen! Yeah, you!"

A young mare looked up from the conveyors, the bright orange leather around her suit was like camouflage against the red haze.

"You're going topside, we need the Ministry cleared, sprite hunting. Get on it!"

She visibly recoiled. A buck beside her stepped closer. Hive marched right over to them, voice dropping.

"Did I *say* you had an opinion?"

The stallion was between Hive and the mare in a hurry.

"She's never fired a gun! Don't take her, she'll just die! Please!"

"Oh break my fucking heart, get out the way, loverboy." Hive snapped at him. "Unless you want to do it yourself?"

"I..."

The mare tugged at him, imploring with her eyes that he don't send himself in for the dangerous mission either. At the sight of it, Hive groaned, trotting in a small circle.

"For crying out... ONE of you is gonna go! Choose!"

Holding the mare, sadly, the buck turned to nod before being pulled back by clearly the slave who was his marefriend.

"Don't!"

"Sheeny... I have to, I can't let you go in there."

Already she began to wail, simply holding onto him as more and more slavers began to grab hold of him to begin tugging. Eventually dragging both across the ground, I saw the mare struck with a steel capped hoof and held back, crying at the top of her voice.

"Don't take him! PLEASE! I'll do it!"

"Sheeny! No! Don't!"

"I won't watch you go off to die! You... just..."

Rolling her eyes, Hive turned.

"I've had just about enough of slaves whining in my ears today. One of you is going, and that's it! Guards, just pick one of them.

"NO!"

"I'll do it!"

The third voice rang across the pit in a raspy and tired tone. Mine.

Silence overcame Hive and the pair as they all turned toward the sick little pony in ill-fitted protection gear.

"I'll... do it. I'll go."

The words felt impossible to speak. To choose. To overcome the obedient nature to be told what my next job would be. But this pit was killing me slowly from radiation and heat. At the very least this would get me out for a while. The danger of the task hadn't quite entered my mind yet, but some part of me knew this might help convince her... somehow.

Hive slowly trotted toward me, leaving the pair in the back to clutch one another and quickly retreat to the conveyor again. Her eyes were lethal, thin and serious.

"You think doing this is going to make me suddenly like you, chicken?"

"I..."

"Don't even answer. You've volunteered. Get topside, find Mister Shiny, and make sure those parasprites are gone. I expect either the building clear or you dead trying to *make* it clear. Understood?"

I nodded meekly, stepping back and lowering my head. But Hive moved forward, keeping the distance close until I was backed onto an inactive conveyor.

"You dare set foot outside and it isn't done, you can rest assured you'll be eating a parasprite before the night is out. I've done it to one pony for failing me before. Don't think I won't happily watch it happen to you."

The imagery haunting my thoughts, I quickly nodded again.

"...you're still here, chicken."

realised I'd missed my cue to leave. I'd gotten sloppy as a slave lately. That was going to cost me before long.

But even as I retreated into the elevator and began ascending to the surface again, I realised the truth of the matter. I hadn't chosen this because it was a job to obey. No, my place here was assured with Hive's mentality. This was a test for me so kindly given by the Great Goddesses.

They had placed before me the same challenge that my beloved legend, the Stable Dweller, Littlepip, had once faced. An opportunity to live the legend. This may have been something Littlepip had done with both hooves tied and one eye closed in her sleep, but to me it was one small chance to prove Red Eye wrong.

Time to follow in her wake, if only for a little while.

Limping, struggling, and fighting with the headpiece as I went, I emerged out of the elevator to the surface once again, filled with a frantic zeal to taste the sickly air once again. Throwing the visor off, I braced my lungs and took a deep gulp of the dry air. Compared to the pit, this was the purest and cleanest air I had ever tasted. Despite the rattle of my throat and several stifled coughs, it brought a little light of escape to my mind. At least from the

trial by fire down below.

Spending about a minute, I simply sat on the curb and breathed deeply, trying to get my lungs used to taking in more oxygen again. My head felt dizzy, and my throat was warm and swollen. No matter how much cooler out here felt, I was sweltering as though I had a fever. Coughing, and seething in pain from my throat and chest, I panted and tried to just get used to breathing normally again, clutching my hooves over my body.

"Well, well, laddie. Don't I recognise this little sight before me, eh?"

Oh please, not now...

Turning on the spot, my eyes widened in surprise to see a set of large tables laid out in some of the drier earth by the roadside. Wares, scraps of metal, threads, and leather lengths rested beside old oatmeal and a few odd pieces of clothing. Slaves clampered around it, shouting and haggling with raised voices while the tender, Sooty Morass, completely ignored them. The earth pony had his eyes locked on me, waving me toward his stand.

I didn't look back at him. Instead, I spotted the bright orange sachets on his table. RadAway!

Heaving myself up, I made a sorry little limp across. All the wear and tear of injuries and work was just one dull ache across my back and shoulders now. Even as Sooty turned back to his clientèle, I just sat on my rump in the mud to wait and rest. Slaves bought strips of metal, leather, and thread to maintain their suits. Pulling the bigger slave's pouch out, I took a look inside before struggling to hide my glee. Twenty five caps! They weren't worth too much in here among slaves, but ponies like Sooty and guards would still use them!

Ahead of me, a mare dropped what looked like a book on the table, receiving a few strings of thread in return. Behind her, a buck wandered up. Only half-wearing his containment suit, I could see the telltale signs of radsore across his cheeks. I recognised that weak gait too. He was dying just as much as I from the radiation in the pits and air of Fillydelphia.

"H-how much is the RadAway?" His voice was cracked and rough.

Sooty put the book he had just received down, leaning over the table.

"Heh, had a little run in, lad?"

"The pits, I keep throwing up blood, please..."

"Twenty five caps or trade, lad."

The stallion had pulled out his pouch, before recoiling in shock at the price.

"But... that's all I have!"

"Not my problem, laddie. Buy it or die quietly, you'll put off my regulars."

Biting into the sachet after dumping twenty five caps on the desk, the buck galloped off. Dazed from his sickness, he never even saw the hungry looks the other rad-sickness-ridden slaves gave him. The sounds of the brawl that erupted behind me and the buck's pitiful whines as they tried to tear the vaunted RadAway from his hooves almost made me miss that it was my turn. There was no honour here. Only desperation.

"Aah! Hello little Murk, lad. Now can't I guess what you're after, eh?"

He was entirely ignoring the buck fighting behind me. Straining to keep my attention focused on the canny trader, I almost felt guilty for trying to tune him out too. These things were tragically all too common in Fillydelphia.

"I need RadAway."

"Coulda' called it. That'll be fifty caps or equivalent trade, laddie."

About to dump out my caps, I just felt my ears wilt, mouth tremble and eyes tear up. He

was *extorting* me!

"But that buck—"

"Wasn't immediately dying of radiation in his insides, lad. He's got a few days left in 'em if I've seen me sick ponies right. But you, ye little winged thief, I know you've got it bad, am I right? We've been over this back in the Terminal, remember? Not to mention you owe me for stolen stock. I'd beat ye but yer too good a potential customer. Course, could always put ye down for me other work. Got a few clients been askin' for somethin' with wings."

Screwing up my eyes, I forced down those horrid thoughts.

"Sooty, please, I—"

In an almost identical repeat of history, my lungs seemed to swell and remind me that they were the exact reason for this sales bias. I felt it deep in my lungs, before convulsions and agonising coughing erupted through my body. Staggering in front of his stall, I had to place my injured hoof on it to keep myself up. Sooty's eyes glanced to it even as I pulled it back in pain.

"An injured hoof too, now? Oh, come now, lad. You're just making this too easy for ponies like me to take advantage of ye. Why, I almost feel a little bit sorry for you. Oh wait, you're a thief. Well, there goes any niceness I might've had. So, shall we talk employment? Or do ye have anything else hidden inside that suit?"

So it had really come to this again. There *had* to be a way. I willed myself to think. Screaming internally over and over, "Think, Murky, *think!*"

Looking along his bench at the plates of metal and leather, one idea gradually and horribly began to slip into my mind.

I didn't like it. Oh no, I didn't like it *one little bit*.

"My suit."

"Oh?"

"I'll sell my suit."

Welling up, the risk factor of choosing parasprite death over sickness felt shocking even as I heard the words come out my mouth, but suit or not, I'd never survive this job without the medicine. Sooty was the only merchant who could solve at least one of my problems.

Grinning suddenly, he leaned forward.

"Now, yer talkin', laddie! Now let us get to haggling. So, ye say you'll be giving me the one suit, eh? Two metal plates, cloth, two ties and some leather it looks like... hm... throw in the twenty five caps."

"One suit for one RadAway! They each save a life!"

Sooty just laughed, then laughed some more, and eventually broke into a cackling roar of comedic screaming as he slapped my back hard enough to make me yelp in pain.

"Oh, this is just cute, lad. You're trying to *barter*? What makes you think you have anything to stand on in this? When I said haggle what I really meant was, I'll tell ye what I want for one RadAway sachet."

I really wanted to argue, but he was right. My throat felt like it was throbbing, and my spit was no longer clear. I had scant hours before it would be immobilising, maybe even sooner.

"Now, I'll be taking yer suit and the twenty five caps. Come on, laddie. Undress like a good partner in trade."

Choking back both a cough, I began untying and pulling myself from the horridly sweaty and ill-fitting suit. My coat was drenched under it, coated in dark red blood; whether mine

or someonepony else's, I didn't know. Thick goops of nest slime still crusted around the bottoms of my hooves.

Sooth didn't miss a thing.

"Oh, well now, bandages! Now that's a surprise."

My body still had some around my chest and shoulder as well as the yellowed and pussy on my front right hoof. My head hung sadly, until his next words bit ever deeper.

"I'll be takin' those cleaner ones too."

"What!?"

"Truth of the matter is, little Murk. I can ask what I want. Name any price. You *have* to take it to live. The very definition of 'over a barrel,' me friend."

He was *not* my friend. But for all my defiant looks, Sooty just motioned with his hoof to the bandages.

"Strip em off, lad. I gots customers that might want them."

It felt terribly slow. Not entirely painful but making me feel horribly vulnerable. The bright pink and red welt on my chest from Protégé's bullet seemed to pulse and sting in the air, while my shoulder revealed that it had slightly opened. Even looking at it made me wince. The memory of a foul, frothing raider holding me down and plunging that wicked knife into my shoulder still haunted my thoughts. I handed over the thin strips of bandage that weren't right over my wounds.

The RadAway was finally handed over to me. Leaping forward, I almost hugged it to my chest to prove that it was really in my hooves. Without another word to the gloating trader, I glumly trotted off to the side with the RadAway in my mouth. It was thin and diluted, likely to get more sachets to sell. It wouldn't be as effective as the real thing, that I knew. I just hoped it'd be enough.

The pits cast enough smoke around the muddy field and broken concrete that I hoped to find somewhere secluded to drink my RadAway. I wanted to avoid a repeat of what had happened behind me. Then I'd, well...

Something, I'd do *something*. I had to. Every advantage I had was gone. The pits would tear me apart, they almost already had. Now I had no choice but to find a way to avoid going back. One visit had been brutal enough.

Guided by the gruff nods of Hive's guards on the surface, I made my way to the 'Ministry of Image,' apparently one of the buildings near the edge of the pit fields. As I slipped through the muddy fields surrounding the pits, my mind briefly wandered. Brimstone Blitz had said something about the Ministries, as had Weathervane. Many ponies across my life had mentioned them, talking of how they either 'ran Equestria' or, to ponies like Brim, 'destroyed' Equestria. Sundial, it seemed, had worked in the Wartime Ministry himself. But in all my life, I'd never knowingly seen one for sure; mostly due to a lack of being able to read signs. Having Brimstone or Glimmerlight around had made things so easy.

"Hey, you! Pegasus!"

Stopping dead at the sharp words, I almost felt confused when they were interrupted afterwards by a hacking cough. Turning on the spot, the RadAway hanging in my mouth, I saw a bruised and bleeding figure limping his way toward me. It was the buck from before, who'd had his own sachet stolen.

"Lucky you, getting your RadAway..."

His eyes were full of almost lust and mad determination. I recognised them, I'd once seen them in my own eyes in the desperate struggle to stay alive day to day in this wretched city.

But in this case they didn't look at me. They just looked at the sachet of orange liquid in my hooves.

"I think I'll be taking that..."

Without even waiting, I just turned and tried to run in a blind panic. The buck's hooves kicked up earth as he hurled himself to land atop me even as I curled around the sachet. He wasn't getting my RadAway! No pony was! It was mine! After all that I'd had to do, it was *mine!*

"Give! Me! It!" He shrieked, desperation driving him.

The sick buck turned aggressive, trying to shove me away and tear it from my hooves in selfish greed. I could smell the result of a long life in Fillydelphia off of him, no doubt similar to myself, but tinged with an infected reek from the mass of radsore across his face and hooves.

"I need it more! I'm in the pits every day!" He shouted.

"I won't live a day!" I screamed back!

Keeping it held tight, his greater earth pony strength was prising me away, gripping it between his hooves. We pulled on it, my mouth and good hoof against his two stronger front hooves. Muffled by the sachet, I tried to plead to him.

"Rease! Ust et o efore it-

The sachet slipped from between us. His panicked cry matched mine. We both dove for the falling, and already opened, liquid pack. The ground came up to meet us hard, and we both fell belly down, his body haalf lain across mine. The shock of it drove me to hiss and cough, while I heard him gasp in pain. But mercifully, the medicine had landed in my grasping hooves.

With one painful roll, I threw myself away from the buck and clutched it to my chest. The liquid was leaking, but by some stroke of luck it hadn't spilled. I was breathing heavily, wheezing again like I had in the pits.

In that quiet, stunned moment, I saw him stare at it from the ground. He looked almost too weary to move, fresh cuts and bruises across his radsore covered face all too clear from the failed defence of his own sachet. Below them, tears slowly dripped down his face.

"Please..." He whined, as though the harsh impact of the fall had driven the fight out of him. He was weak, and scared for his life.

The adrenaline in my body died off like a switch had been thrown. In its place came nothing but a shared pity. Temptation tore at me. Run now. Survive.

But after everything recently, having had so much denied to me, I just couldn't.

"Give me your empty sachet." I said, as I started measuring half of it out.

For a few minutes, I did little but lie there and hold my bandaged hoof closely after the buck had stumbled away. Or at least what bandages remained.

He had barely said anything, just drank his portion, mumbled something I guessed might have been a hesitant thank you, and then scrambled off nervously. I'd stared after him, almost in disbelief of what I'd done before quickly gulping down what I'd had left.

My own illness had died down a tad after that. I had gotten enough to last perhaps till tomorrow. That was, if I didn't go back to the pits again. Part of me still wished for somepony I knew to appear, somepony to help me up again, like Glimmer had in the Mall.

Giving the RadAway time to work, I rested against one of the mound of dry soil for a minute. After twenty long and silent seconds of lying on my own, the thought was beginning to solidly drift home.

I really missed my friends.

I missed my belongings, too. Right now, the DJ might have said something to inspire me, or I might have heard one of Sundial's reassuring messages of happiness while I was down lower in the pits. I missed my journal and the self confidence and comfort the freedom of art gave to escape the harsh reality surrounding me. I was trapped in Fillydelphia. Likely, for a very long time, under the shadow of what, in here, was a terminal illness. Then I had masters who hated me, other slaves who loathed me, and a dream that was being crushed *daily*.

Why couldn't I just be like everypony else out there?

Not wanting to move, my body curled up on the rocks and soil. It had been a wild ride since that one beautiful moment when I had learned to choose, filled with unceasing danger, galloping around and enduring pain. I'd tried to escape twice. I had almost died, well... who was counting by now? But it all just kept coming back to this. Ponies came and went. Some stayed, some left, just like had happened right now. The mare had been in my life only to disappear. Brimstone had escaped, likely never to be seen again in my lifetime. Sunny was with The Master. Even Sundial had been taken from me.

Glimmer was with Protégé still, at least. But my path back to her was being blocked. I wanted her around. To hear her cheeky jokes. For her to tease me or ruffle my mane. I wanted my Big Sister Best Friend Forever back.

Even through the depression, part of me was trying to kick my rump and say that this job could bring her back, that if I impressed Shiny enough he might talk to Hive! I tried to encourage myself to be like Littlepip, and do what she did! To prove I can. But they were the voices of hope, dreams and daring bravery. Each of which had been gradually stripped from me in failure after failure.

Better to just lie here and wait for some slaver to shout at me, to order me that I could just back in line again and not think about anything. That way it wouldn't hurt so much.

"Hey! You! You the one Hive sent up to clear the Ministry?"

Opening my eyes, my head lifted from the ground and spotted a slave master wandering over the muck toward me. His face betrayed more curiosity than rage.

"What you doing lying in the muck, you daft thing? Come on, get on over, work to be done."

The voice wasn't harsh or angry, unlike most slavers. It seemed oddly kind, almost reminiscent of Protégé if you took out the wordiness and replaced it with a strange earnest nature that seemed to 'ask without asking' rather than demand. Sighing, I lazily stood and trotted after him.

"Yes, master..."

"Eh, can the master talk, I'm Mister. Mister Shiny. Well, let's see about getting you set up to work then, shall we? Here's the Ministry."

Almost to my surprise, it was a fairly nondescript building alongside several others like anything else in Fillydelphia, with white cladding over the ubiquitous brickwork. Tall windows were shielded in black metal bars, but otherwise I could have mistaken it for any of the half dozen similar ones in this street. I'd been lying almost right beside it. Weren't

Ministries big and fancy? They sounded it.

“Ever worked with parasprites before?”

Without even answering, I just gave a slight shrug and nodded toward the pits I had come from.

“Right, stupid question. Now we got to wait for the spark batteries to charge for the rifle. Only problem is... how to fire it. It doesn't have a mouth sight. I *was* expecting a unicorn like last time. Was sort of hoping they'd send that little one with the PipBuck again, was pretty good.”

That grabbed my attention.

“You *met* her!?”

“Who? The mare with the PipBuck?”

“Yes!” The sudden exclamation made me double over with a heaving cough. Small spots of blood fell to the ground. Mister Shiny grabbed my torso, pulling me back up. Apparently the meagre amounts of RadAway were still working their magic before it would die down properly. No excited shouting... got it.

“Woah, there. Seems Fillydelphia has gotten to you a little, might want to ask your master about getting into Hearts and Hooves Slave Hospital sometime soon. But yes, I met the little mare. Why? Relative? Marefriend?”

Stupidly, through my recovery from the cough, I hoped he couldn't see my sudden blush. I wished.

“No... no, just, uh... I only saw her a little then, um... lost her. Sorry, mas-I mean, Mister Mast, uh, Mister Mosi- um, Mech- or... Smiley?”

“Shiny.”

Trotting back, I corrected myself quickly.

“Sorry, sorry! Mister Shiny!”

Mister Shiny just shrugged and trotted over to the building. There was a small table near to it that was being hastily set up by a few slavers. A rather makeshift magical energy rifle sat on it beside a few spark batteries. The batteries were hooked up to an odd contraption, like a bank of glowing gemstones.

“Whatever, let's just get you readied up. Um... didn't they give you a suit?”

I nodded lightly, trotting over and sitting obediently nearby.

“Right... and it's not on you, because? I used to have one here, but we didn't exactly expect to have to clear this building again.”

Fumbling my front hooves, I mumbled quietly. “I... kinda lost mine.”

Mister Shiny stared at me for the longest time, before sighing, clearly already checking me off in his head.

“Now, we've got at least ten parasprites in there. The last mare took on fifty or so and managed it, so hopefully this shouldn't be a problem for one slave to do, suit or not. Just stop drop and roll if they get too close. Ten shouldn't be able to swarm you.”

Mister Shiny was surprisingly friendly sounding, although it was clear that he was still a slaver and expected the work done as much as any other. Looking sideways at me as I tried to figure out how to hold the rifle, he even smiled. The grin seemed dead inside, despite the pleasantries.

“Often wondered what became of that little mare, so busy getting things done with Hive and the like breathing down my neck I tend to miss things. Eager little thing, though, about the same size... perhaps age as you?”

Again, I lightly nodded. Right... she'd done fifty. I could do ten, right? Just point and shoot.

"Had that look in her eyes, determination and spirit. Hah, what am I saying? Probably just trying to get on our good sides here in Fillydelphia. Wouldn't be the first to try and join the ranks from slave to slaver. Damn few that ever make it, though. There's only one in recent memory, I think."

My thoughts drifted to Sooty Morass. That slimy trader likely had his eyes on that goal, too, as soon as he had enough dirt on somepony with authority.

"Now, the rifle doesn't have any real kick so somepony your size should be able to mouthfire without any trouble. Low power energy, so two spark batteries. Twenty shots should be enough."

"What... what if I miss?"

"Find something to blat them with! The mare used a bag, I think, to capture them. You'll figure something out, I hope."

Gulping, I glanced at the door, and then him.

"Are... are you sure I can't get another suit?"

That mirthless smile turned to me, before Shiny shrugged and began strapping a small saddlebag to my side, probably to sweep up the ash into. "Sorry, kid. I don't make the rules. You lose the one you were given, you don't get another. Hive would know. She always does. When she's on those damn mint-als you can't slip anything past her. Look, do it quick enough, and I'll see about getting you something for the trouble, off the record. It's a lot off my back if this place is cleared before Red Eye finds out his presses are infested again, so you'd be doing me a real favour."

'Something for my trouble,' huh? Perhaps a letter of commendation? Did the chain of command work like that? Oh, what I'd have done for a scrap of paper and some charcoal so I could organise this. I had to figure out how to get on Hive's good side and then survive the remainder of my shift, still.

The problem, of course, was that if I spent too long in here, my only support from Mister Smi—I mean... Shiny would be lost. Whereas if I tried to finish quickly and please him... the pits would likely be my return destination. Being down there any longer was a death sentence in and of itself without a suit.

Why was nothing ever easy?

Argh! Why was nothing *ever* easy!?

Crying, sweating, and bleeding, I galloped down the metallic hall, screaming at the top of my lungs in sheer panic. The almost empty energy rifle swung madly where I had pushed it through my saddlebag straps. Behind me the small swarm of parasprites surged toward me at a frightening pace. Rounding another corner of another infuriatingly identical (to illiterates) junction, I gave it my all. All I needed was an open door!

My shots had been pathetic, missing almost every shot I had been given in my first charge pack and all but a few in my second. One parasprite had been hit, but it had just made it angry, if awkward in how it weaved through the air from the glancing shot.

The rest had converged and flown after me for daring disturb their rest in the rafters of a storage chamber. Since then it had been a dangerously tiring game of tag around the

Ministry building. I'd galloped through offices, collided with heavy terminals, and knocked over shelves containing enough books to keep Protégé grinning like a kid until the second apocalypse. That, and obstacles on the ground, I had discovered, had little effect on flying creatures.

The low buzz became louder as they rounded the same corner twenty feet behind me. Pushing my skinny little legs as hard I could, I made for the closest doorway I could see and prayed it was open. (What sadistic idiot would lock them all just before a balefire war!?) Pulling with all my might on the mouthgrip handle... it didn't budge.

"No!"

The parasprites whizzed toward me, little mouths chomping open and closed. Already one had nipped me on the neck when it had ambushed me through a ventilation duct in the chase. The pain had been sharp and brief, but a horrible reminder of the reality should they catch me.

"Come on, door!"

It wasn't shifting. In sheer frustration, I bucked it, only for it to swing open easily.

Oh. Right. A *push* door. Well excuse me for not being able to read, you *arrogant pre-war aristo-whatsits!*

Hopping through, I swivelled and pushed it back shut again. Really, I should have known. Every door in here had been a push door thus far. I heard dull thumps on the other side, before the buzzing ceased. I'd bought myself a little time, but they would find another way, I was sure of it. Spilled among dirt or not, that RadAway had likely saved my life for me to be able to keep up that gallop as long as I had on a wheezy throat and swollen lungs.

Catching my breath a second, I slowed down, turning to the area I had entered. A security corridor of some sort, but it was wrecked. An upturned desk warped from some sort of heat or energy lay on the floor next to a wrecked terminal lying on its side. The drawers lay open, with three bottlecaps spilled on the floor. Beyond it I could see a smashed turret still sparking on the roof. A few dots of ash were dotted about the floor amongst a mass of energy rifle scars on the walls and ceiling.

Eventually it began to all stick together. This had been *her* work. It was all so obvious! She'd come in, used the desk as a shield from the turret, likely hacked it from the terminal using her awesome PipBuck, and turned it against the parasprites! That'd explain the marks on the walls from magic energy shots. As if *Littlepip* would have ever missed or had to resort to brute strength, hah! A hero such as herself probably didn't even break a sweat.

But oh, the feeling just to wander amongst her handiwork. I felt a small surge of pride and satisfaction to see the results of her passing once again. Hee! She'd been here! She'd been here! She'd been here!

After a few seconds, I figured that prancing around the room on an injured hoof *probably* wasn't the best way to let it heal. Apparently Littlepip ranked higher than self preservation on my mental priorities. At least I could—

Sudden shock overtook me as I sensed motion in the air behind me. Spinning, reaching for the energy rifle in vain hope... I didn't see any parasprites. Not any organic ones anyway.

It was a Spritebot.

Metallic, rounded, and floating silently, a big screen on the front of it lay dormant as it seemed to just stare at me. After a second or two when my smile had faded, it gradually floated off in a rather wobbly fashion down the corridor. I *really* hated those things. Creeping up on you, acting strangely, and then just buzzing off.

Scoping up the three bottlecaps she had left behind (So charitable!) into my saddlebag, I cast my eyes around. Right... where would she have gone next? I knew I should follow her methods and do what she did to the letter as much as possible! That'd help me survive. To learn from the legend. There were a few exits, one a corridor leading back toward the staircases, another the way through the security gate, and the last a small maintenance room off to the side. Well... a great hero would be resourceful, right? She probably went toward the maintenance room.

Trotting over, I cast my head in around the door.

The small room caught my attention immediately. It was *covered* in pegasus memorabilia. Finding myself wandering in, my head spun in a slow circle along the walls. Posters lined the walls, the most prominent making me almost blush in embarrassment at my pathetic comparison to them.

Blue and yellow clad pegasi; pictured rocketing in formation. The artwork was *fantastic*, filled with blurs and lines showing just how fast they were going. If I could only have reached high enough, I'd have taken it for myself. They looked incredible, with their brightly coloured manes and whipping smoke trails, they were what pegasi should be like.

What they should be like...

My eyes tried to avoid glancing sadly back at my rather threadbare and non-functional wings.

Pulling my eyes from the poster, I let them settle lower. To my amusement, there was more blue and yellow pegasus 'team awesome' stuff, mostly clustered around that skelet—

My eyes popped wide.

"Ske... ske... skeletARGH!"

Backpedalling intensely, I fell into the shelves of the maintenance room. Tools and boxes showered down around me as the buck's skeleton stared, lidless, from the floor up at me. His limbs were splayed out, unnaturally posed and clearly the result of some sort of spasm attack. I'd had enough by now to recognise it.

No! Little... Littlepip had been here! She hadn't been scared by skeletons, had she? Of course not! She had taken the things she needed and calmly left. So could I. Just... just as soon as I stopped thinking it was going to suddenly get up...

It lay beside a workbench. From the dust, I could tell somepony had worked here recently. Rotten food lay across the floor and bench, tipped out of something. Had she really built a weapon or something from the scraps she had found? Probably some sort of really advanced perfect tool that saw her through the escape. That's how it had always happened in my mother's stories.

Even through my slightly immature love of anything related to that wonderful mare who had shown me the way, I recognised that it was simply a reminder. She hadn't just been some one-off wonder. Littlepip, the Stable Dweller, really had been there in the Pit with me. She had existed, had worked in Fillydelphia, and was still out there. Seeing more evidence of it... well, it sounded stupid but... even this sort of aftermath helped remind me of how her heroic escape had inspired me right in the beginning of my new life.

My eyes crossed to the side. A whole pile of magazines sat there. Ooh, perhaps she had learned things from them? I dragged one across, opening it quickly before shutting it even faster, blushing madly.

I hadn't ever seen a pegasus mare before. Certainly not *those* parts. The magazine sat under my hoof, the rather sultry cover now more obvious. A logo of a pair of erect wings

were emblazoned the top of it. I was sort of tempted to open it and take another look... for... for research, y'know? Wings were tough to draw... yeah, that's all it was!

No! What was I doing? I was trying to follow in the hoofsteps of my idol! She wouldn't have stopped to take time reading... reading smut! Neither would I!

Turning, I huffed and swung my head high before marching across the room to the door.

I got a very impressive three feet before hurriedly turning back to shove a small amount of the huge collection into my saddlebag, and then gallop from the room.

It's just... just reference material! Pre-war ponies were healthier, I had to learn to draw them! That's all! I wasn't... wasn't taking it because of those athletic pegasus mares... with their well rounded curves and... and... it was just to help my art! Some of those poses looked good to draw, and... and an artist had to be varied, right?

Shaking the justifications to my own nerves aside, I looked ahead of me. The corridor opened up into an office. Probably management, I guessed. The entrance lay behind small widened section of the hallway, behind a turret and a severely smashed assistant's desk. Trotting across shaky floor panels and winding by exploded circuits from the roof, I cast my eyes over the elaborate photos of woodland areas, or the elaborate designs on signposts on the walls. It all felt so beautiful and otherworldly, not the one I was in now.

Briefly, my mind drifted onto just how strange it was that even after two hundred years, and after living my entire life in like this... the loss of 'what once had been' still felt like a fresh and horrifying scar. Equestria's real form was still ingrained in us as ponies, the macabre ruination that surrounded us was not what we were supposed to live in.

Advancing into the office itself, I saw large glass panels to my right. Thick and misty, they overlooked the huge printing presses that Mister Shiny had talked of. Not for the first time, the ambition of Red Eye's task in Fillydelphia impressed me. Books and folders could be made once again for those foals he was protecting. Either that, or they could be used to mass produce artwork! The thought of one of my sketches (well... one I'd feel fine showing others, anyway) being on ponies' walls across Fillydelphia or the wasteland was a wonderful one. Could Protégé be right? Could us ponies in here as slaves be doing the right thing in the end? Trapped behind the great Wall, we were hungry, dying and enslaved to a life of labour, but if this was the sort of thing it might produce in the end, at least it—

Sighing, I turned away from the presses. No, it would never be worth it, and I couldn't bring myself to even accept the 'upside'... It was easy to think that while alone in a somewhat secure room, but outside, in the irradiated air or struggling to survive in the hellish nightmare of slave life under Red Eye, reality would always slam home very quickly. Fillydelphia was an abomination, one we were all tragically still a part of. And yet, seeing these presses, I dreamed of the day when Fillydelphia's industry might be taken by somepony kinder. Too many ponies died every day in here in this method of iron rule. In their sleep, shot by guards or killed by the work like that poor buck in the pit. It had to end. This... this wasn't right, no matter what rhetoric Protégé gave for it.

Turning back into the office, there was one more desk where an active terminal rested, its surface bearing a few folders and books. The walls were lined with more posters. A lavender pony was pictured with a sparkling book, another showing war technology. Amongst them all, I saw those same six mares. I wished I could keep remembering their names. Rainbow

something... what was it? The only one I invariably remembered was, of course, Pinkie Pie. Her toothy grin stared at me from across the room. Around her were a number of happy looking spritebots. No doubt it was to try and sell the idea to a populace. To reassure that they were always watching you.

Well... they certainly had managed it. As if those creepy eyes looking at me down the left side of the poster weren't bad enough, thanks to that spritebot earlier I certainly *did* feel like I was being... well...

...watched.

Come to think of it, hadn't I seen one that close to me before in the FunFarm, too?

Sighing, I made my way to the desk, passing by the Pinkie poster and hopping up to stare at the terminal. As if I could ever do anything to these... Littlepip had probably activated something really cool or solved some mystery from it. Best not to touch. Not like it could actually help me anyway. What was a *terminal* going to do to kill parasprites? Instead, I glanced at the book beside it.

It was a scrapbook of sorts. No pages seemed even vaguely identical, being crammed with a clippings, pictures, photos, and so much else besides. Really, it was more of an album. One page had a small image of that yellow and pink medical mare, the one from the Ministries. I wished I could draw her. She seemed really sweet. Brimstone's assertions that these ponies had somehow destroyed Equestria seemed almost stupid when I looked at those caring eyes.

Flicking through more, there was little to be discovered without the ability to read. The most I got was a really cool picture of the rainbow mare standing victorious atop a *dragon!* Catching myself making a 'woah' sound at the heroic sight, I spent some time looking at it. Was that what pegasi could really do? The huge beast looked dead; its hide the same colour as Brimstone's coat.

I placed the book back down carefully. Clearly, Littlepip hadn't spent a huge amount of time here. Really, there was little but odd memories of the past. Funny really, that after the Stable, and after Glimmerlight's advice I felt a little better. Like my experiences were forcing me to confront that fear of the past, and quell the terror.

All the same, too long in here, and I figured it might become unnerving. After all, I was alone in this big... empty... dead... Ministry. All by myself other than sprites of all kinds creeping around.

Shaking my head, I set out to continue. No, I couldn't get bogged down, a Stable-style freakout was not what I needed. Just keep to Littlepip's trail. Advancing through the office, a door on my right caught my eye, a simply bathroom. But within, it held within it an unopened medical case! The sing-song of 'Potential RadAway!' (a sure fire hit with the slaves of Fillydelphia) lit in my head as I rushed in.

Someday, I would probably stop running into skeletons, but not today. As fast as I had galloped in, I shrieked and backtracked in a flurry of backpedalling hooves. Half-hidden beneath a collapsed piece of ceiling, the crushed mare's skeleton betrayed her no doubt painful last moments. From where I had fallen against the desk, my eyes remained locked on the empty sockets, struggling to stop my mind imagining being trapped under a chunk of rock while my world died.

No, my world *had* died. The only difference was she had known what it looked like.

Sucking in breath and steeling myself, I trotted back in. There was precious little amidst the fallen pipes from part of the wall tiles that had been torn off, but one thing caught my eye.

A set of shackles on the floor, fallen in the exact same shape as my own cutie mark.

They had been hers.

Alone in this place, she had found a way to break her chains. To leave them behind her in light of her coming great escape from slave life. How long had Littlepip worn these? Not too long, I guessed, judging by the DJ's reports. But all the same, these had been the chains that bound the Stable Dweller into the life of servitude... and she had simply removed them.

I wanted to take them. They were something that had, in some way, belonged to her. Something I could have as a reminder of her, to feel connected to my great inspiring hero. But it wasn't right. These shackles had bound her, the same way they bound me. As a symbol of freedom and escape, they were entirely unsuitable. A reminder of a dark part of her life that she had willingly broken away from. Littlepip had left these here. For me to take them seemed to go against what she had sought to achieve.

Elsewhere, around the bathroom were only the partial rags of clothing, having probably belonged to the poor, long dead mare, and a couple of small tools. There was a half-squeezed tube of wonderglue (Yoink!) and much to my delight, a medical box on the wall! Those wonderful butterflies, the same as my old saddlebag, promised so many things! The Stable Dweller clearly would never have needed these. She was too good to be hurt!

It was locked, and even my patented pathetic whine of 'please?' couldn't convince it to give up the healing items trapped within. Instead, I took the wrench from the mare's toolkit and jammed the clamp into the rusty edge of the medical box. It wasn't going to be exactly dignified or clean, but these cases hardly looked tough. A few seconds of pulling at the wedged wrench with my teeth would do it!

Fifteen minutes and an awful lot of swinging and pulling later, I finally fell back on my rump as the now somewhat destroyed box popped open and its contents fell nicely into my hooves. Hah! Little Murky wasn't as weak as they thought! My grin turned to a moan as my loose tooth made its presence known from all that pulling, before I looked down at the one item the case had contained.

A... packet of sweeties? In my hooves was a little tin box marked in bright colours. I could hear small mints or something tumbling around inside it. I couldn't lie, after all my wishing, it was somewhat anticlimactic. No wonder Littlepip hadn't bothered with this here, what would she ever want with a few little sugar sweeties in the middle of her busy life being a hero and all?

I popped the lid open. The little white and pink tablets certainly looked tasty, identical to sugar treats I'd seen occasionally. Biting back the temptation to upend the tin into my mouth, I had to reason with myself a little. They had come out of a medical cabinet, and I really wasn't certain as to what they were. Maybe foal medicine?

My curiosity was broken however, as I heard something fall behind me.

I poked my head out of the bathroom. I could have sworn that sounded like...

An air vent grate falling to the floor...

On cue, I could hear the fluttering and whimsical buzzing that betrayed the location of parasprites somewhere down the hallway I had come up through. Panic raced through me. This was a dead end! Throwing the mints in my small saddlebag, I grabbed the energy rifle off its strap across my back and got to my hooves once more. Did they know I was here? The sound wasn't getting any closer.

Carefully, I trotted out of the bathroom. Glancing back, I almost jumped as I saw myself in the mirror, before forcing myself to breathe and control my movements. Once again, my

eyes passed to my cutie mark... then to the exact same symbol from Littlepip's chains on the ground. If only mine could just be removed like that.

"I'll do it, Littlepip... please, I haven't given up yet. I... I just don't know how. If you could only show me something to give me a little hope again... something to prove to me I can do this."

A small *thump* from a parasprite knocking something over sounded a lot closer. I had to get moving. Ripping my eyes away from the chains, I began to look for a way out.

As before, there was none. The parasprites could be heard approaching down the security corridor, still unaware of my presence, owing to that they weren't rushing in. Instead, they seemed to be moving slowly, if I was gauging the increase in volume correctly. But a door out was needed. I'd never get past them!

"Oh, what to do, what to do?" I muttered quietly. I only had three or four shots left! I couldn't hit anything short of a huge wall with this thi—

"...aaah."

I pulled the magic rifle into my mouth again. I'd have to move fast. Terror made my heart beat faster as I tried to steady my grip and move my tongue into position. The barrel pointed directly across from me, right at the windows that led to the walkway above those huge printing presses.

I only had one shot at this. Well, I had three. But *figuratively*. Steeling myself, I pulled the trigger hard, again and again.

Energy flared from the barrel the first three times, blinding my eyes and streaking across the room. I heard the blasts screech on impact with the window, and saw the shattered glass melting from the area where the shots had landed. The window remained unbroken, but hopefully it was weakened enough for me to—

Off to my side, high pitched little squeaks grew much louder, and the buzzing of parasprites grew in volume just as much! They were coming!

Gazing sideways, I saw all ten of them swarm in through the door. Galloping, I leapt at the window with all my might and screamed as my injured shoulder and chest impacted against it. The weakened section of glass sheared right off the panel of the window, punching a hole through onto the walkway. Sliding across its smooth surface, I barely grabbed the edges of the walkway itself to stop my falling into the presses below. Even turned off, I could see there were enough sharp edges to tear me apart. The energy rifle though, dropped between a great pair of rollers.

This was why you need safety railings, pre-war ponies! Was it *really* too much to ask for somepony to have a lick of sense in this world!?

Straining and grunting in pain, I rolled back onto the balcony and immediately had to dive to avoid the parasprites rushing through. Swishing my tail at them, I galloped off before they decided my tail was a meal unto itself.

Of course, a big disadvantage of me being a ground pounder meant I had to use the walkways. They simply cut across the corners after me. Yelling in stark fear, sweating, and trying to avoid looking back, I simply ran around the edge of the room, slapping each doorway in an effort to find one that was open! The noise increased behind me, the deceptively quiet buzzing from those little wings ringing in my ears, signifying the sound of oncoming death. A sharp nip on my rump led me to scream and knock my hips into a wall hard enough to knock it off. Tears flew from my eyes. The walkway only had stairs to go down to the printing presses in each corner, but I'd be caught if I slowed down to go on

them! Instead, I kept running in a big circle around the printing room's walkways, trying every route I could come across, begging for somepony to have left their door open. For there to pleeease be somepony be generous enough to have left their room unlocked!

One last door remained before I was back where I had started, and the hole I'd shot in the window was too high to climb back through. Okay, the doors in this place were, uh, pull, right? The last one I had pulled to open!

Springing up, I clasped my mouth to the door and tugged hard enough that the resulting lack of opening almost pulled a tooth right out. Squealing in pain, my eyes widened as the parasprites closed in. I simply screamed as loud as I could, I didn't want to be chewed and eaten to death!

Trying to ward them away, I fell backwards into the door... falling through as the door *pushed* open behind me. Not stopping to even curse anypony for the inconsistency, I crawled and kicked out at it. On the impact, the door slammed shut... and bounced inward again.

"NO!"

Struggling to my hooves, I galloped forward into it. A small red sprite poked its face through the door even as I slammed it shut with a great cry. I didn't even see if it had dodged back or been crushed when I threw all my weight against it. Pounding my hooves in a panic, as though it could somehow shut even more, I finally felt convinced that it was properly shut. Tired, sweating, and bleeding lightly again from my neck and flank, I slumped against it with my head in my hooves. My matted mane drooped over my eyes, my teeth hurt and my entire body was shivering in adrenaline and fear.

I'd... I'd just stay here a while...

At least until the tears stopped...

Scared, confused, and alone without my journal... I took some time to recover and collect myself. But finally, I let my wet eyes look up to gauge my latest environment. I expected some other random office, but what I got was anything but.

Around me lay the single most lavish office I had ever seen. A thick carpet, dusty and grey but obviously once pure white lay beneath me. Decorative furniture sat by the walls around a low table made of a dark wood. Atop it sat a rather spectacular set of teacups and teapot. Dead plants betrayed the presence of greenery that must have once offered a lovely green, while a cat basket with faded colours in front of a large airvent sat next to an incredibly elegant and undeniably *beautiful* desk. Curls of polished wood gleamed in the lights, filled with patterns both natural and stylish. The top was laid in glass, while I could see sockets with gemstones embedded into them on the legs.

Trotting carefully, I felt almost terrified to break anything, as though I half expected somepony to come charging in and scold me for it. Around the back of the desk, I found its layout worryingly precise and neat. The feather quills were stacked in size order, for crying out loud. Either somepony had one big thing about cleanliness, or it just hadn't ever been used.

Investigating the boxes behind it revealed little but old documents beyond my skill to read, and short rolls of fabric in half opened mail packages. With little of worth, I instead carefully began to peek through the drawers. Smooth and quiet, they slid out as though they

ran on silk. Even the minor noise of the first drawer felt like an offence to how well ordered the entire room was. Truth be told, in my filthy and sweaty state, I felt rather undressed for this area. My hooves were leaving little ashy and dirty hoofprints all over the pristine (if dusty) white carpet.

Within the drawer there was little of worth. A few quills, notepads, crayons, and some long out of date cat food. But at the back, I found a small row of recorders like the ones in Stable Ninety Three. Tugging with my hooves, I drew the pack of four out.

Only one seemed still operational, either that or the other three just hadn't ever been used. Wondering why it seemed active without being attached to a PipBuck, it finally occurred to me that the small stand the four were attached to was like a hub to allow them to play. Lacking anything better to do while I searched the room, I set it playing.

Kssh...

"Right... ah, yes! There we go."

A mare's voice. Even from those few words, her diction and eloquence was obvious, like every word was being deliberately crafted into a feminine and well mannered tone.

"Due to a rather ruthlessly busy schedule, I have elected to record myself with the day's events. I simply cannot believe the distractions and problems even one day away from Canterlot can create. As such, for my own sanity, I must do this instead to remember. Oh, for the days of my simple Boutique and only having one product line to follow..."

Moving from drawer to drawer, found little on the left hand side of the desk other than the bare essentials of an office. Clearly, whoever worked here was rather picky about keeping the things *they* knew with them if they travelled away.

"The investigation in Fillydelphia turned up almost nothing. Clearly, the intelligence handed to me was not accurate as this has been a fine way to waste three days searching. The head of the Arcane Ministry here, Aurora Star, did offer her rather elaborate and generous levels of aid. But even with their support, the missing papers on..."

She seemed to hesitate. My ears had perked at the mention of Aurora Star. The Overmare in the Stable had said she was into the memory research, hadn't she?

"The missing papers haven't turned up. It is something of a travesty that they even got copied from it in the first place, let alone taken out of Canterlot. Less than a dozen ponies even knew of their existence. I swear to Luna, if I ever find whoever let those things slip—"

With my head buried in the drawer to see into the back (Damn unicorns and their magic...) I slipped and whacked my head as I heard the door suddenly open. My heart skipped a beat at the sound.

Yet, the door was still closed. I let out my breath as I realised it was in the recording.

"Oh! Oh my! Fluttershy, my dear, I didn't expect to see you!"

"Oh... I'm sorry, I could go back and make an appointment if—"

"No, no, darling, of course not! Do come in, it was just a surprise, is all! I do apologise, Fluttershy. If I had known you were in Fillydelphia as well..."

The second voice almost stopped me in my tracks. It barely transmitted from the recorder at all with how quiet it had sounded. Indeed, without my hypersensitivity, it may not have been audible.

"It's alright... I've been too busy. I... I just wanted to see you before I had to go."

"...darling, what's wrong? You look most upset. Please, do take a seat, sorry, I am being most ungracious. Would you like something to drink? We could go to that

delightful little café near Pinkie's rather garish FunFarm, if you'd like."

A sound of the recorder being placed on the desk sent the quality into static for a second, before I heard two ponies trotting farther away from it. Rustling my hooves around, I found a small selection of coat and mane dye. Pink, light blue, red, and a few other colours too! I felt like doing a little dance, I could use them as paints! Dye worked like that, right?

"No, really, Rarity, I'm... fine."

"Forgive me, Fluttershy, but I've been your friend too long to not see when something is troubling you. Well, more than this whole thing troubles us all. You can tell me anything, you know that."

"Yes, I do. Well, you see... I was checking in on the refugees."

"Mm, yes. The Ministry of Peace Refugee and Aid Initiative, I must say you most impressed me. I toured the facilities and camps yesterday, and you're saving so many ponies who have lost their loved ones or homes. Granted, I may have cheekily given them a few pointers on getting blankets warmer, but I supposed you wouldn't have minded, and I simply could not resist. It felt good to get back into the old needle and thread again. But whatever about them could be upsetting you? You are doing a wonderful job..."

"That's just it... I'm not."

"Oh, Fluttershy. We talked about this, remember? You are doing everything in your power to—"

"No, I mean, the refugee camps and houses. There's something wrong."

Sitting back while I stuffed the dyes into my saddlebag, I listened for a few seconds. The talk of Ministries between this Fluttershy and... what was it? Rarity? The talk was helping me attach names and voices to faces. This Fluttershy was clearly the one I had seen on all the medical posters. Her voice made me wish I could go to her Ministry for help with my illnesses. I'd want somepony with that kind and gentle voice to take care of me.

The other, Rarity... probably either the lavender or white one. I couldn't quite remember them enough to tell which was which. It occurred to me that I must be in the office of a *Ministry Mare*. The voices I were hearing were likely things very few ponies back then would have gotten to hear. With the parasprites infecting this place before Littlepip came along, nopony must have been able to explore it. Sitting more attentively, I listened further.

"Wrong, darling? Whatever do you mean?"

"Yes, the poor things; there are refugees going missing, Rarity. Often the poorer ones. Oh my... I just worry for them. I was trying to find out where, but nopony knows. They just get up and go somewhere... but they never came back."

"Hmm, I can see why that would concern you. How many?"

"Dozens... but at this rate, it could be over a hundred. The camps are so crowded since the villages in the Vale were hit that it's hard to keep track of everypony. Oh, I'm so worried. This is my responsibility, but with things back at Canterlot, I can't spend anymore time here to look for them. I... I don't know what to do, Rarity."

"Fluttershy, darling. You have an entire Ministry behind you, searching for every single lost pony isn't something you need to do yourself. I know you feel like you want to, but go to your hub in Fillydelphia. I'm sure Doctor Flowerpot will be willing to look into the matter. He was the one who gave me that tour."

Flowerpot? That was the ghoul that Weathervane had locked up under Hearts and Hooves Hospital.

"I suppose. I just see the mothers and fathers missing foals, or children missing their parents, and I just wish I could comfort them all. Rarity, when can all this just end?"

"It will sometime, Fluttershy. It will. We've all got our problems to work through."

"Oh? Applejack said she was coming to Fillydelphia in a week's time to investigate where three of her Ministry's workers from the refugee camp went. Why? Did you lose something too, Rarity?"

"Oh... me? No, no, no, nothing at all, darling. Why would you think that?"

There was an odd silence for a few seconds where even I felt awkward. Eventually, I heard Fluttershy sigh lightly.

"I think I need to go... Aurora Star needs to see me before I leave Fillydelphia for Ponyville."

I wasn't exactly the master of conversation, but Rarity sounded very glad to change subject.

"You too? My... that mare has been busy, hasn't she? Probably to give you one of those new memory orbs she's been working on. We're all getting one as a gift, all six of us. She's looking for funding to make more of them, you see. Some sort of design that records you as well as your voice, showing you when it plays back. Rather impressive, I simply must say, but there is no way I am committing myself to history until I get some proper mane attention from all this heat. Fillydelphia is far too hot this time of year. Tell you what, Fluttershy, if you're still in Ponyville when I arrive there to get the train back into Canterlot, we should meet at the spa. Perhaps that will help you settle down... just like old times, yes?"

"That would be... nice. I'd like that."

"I shall see you then, darling."

I could hear hooves getting up. Curious myself as to this old tale of ponies going missing and Rarity hiding something from another Ministry mare, apparently her long term friend, I began digging through the drawers on the other side. There was nothing, just letters that likely held the answers, if only I could read them.

"Oh my... Rarity. Is that a gun on your desk?"

"Oh... haha! That old thing? Applejack sent it a year ago, protection against infiltrators she said. She called it 'Rarity's Grace,' as though it ever matched the real thing. I tend to just leave it in my desk out of the way. She did her best and meant well, but it is still a rather repulsive thing."

Almost on cue, my hooves slid open the last drawer to reveal the very item. Tiny, slim, and given a white ceramic finish with a single blue gem near the very short barrel, it almost looked delicate. The sort of weapon a noble or, well, 'proper lady' might carry. The mouth grip was smoothly carved, and coated in thin polished silver. Guns weren't really my thing, but even I had to admit this was one beautiful-looking piece.

I heard the pair say their goodbyes, and then overheard Fluttershy leaving the room, before Rarity's hoofsteps tapped back along to her desk. The sound of something being flung in a drawer (likely *Rarity's Grace*) and her sitting down with a sigh played through the recorder.

"Oh well, time to—"

Then, with a small click, the recorder ceased. Clearly, in her negligence to remember it when Fluttershy entered, its memory had filled. Likely the caretaker for the room had replaced it in the drawer after she had left.

That had been a strange experience. These had been two of the highest ranked mares in Equestrian history. Even from a brief listen, I had a much greater sense of the sheer scale of the Ministry operations. Missing refugees? Secret documents? Was Flowerpot being regarded a prophet by those crazy zebra worshippers something to do with the refugees? Perhaps Weathervane would know...

Tnk!

Startled, I felt my voice squeak and swivel my head to the door.

Tnk! Tnk!

Above it, the small vent to allow airflow into here was being nudged. The rusty nails were shuddering. Through one of the small windows looking out, I saw multicoloured little balls flying upward. My heart clenched. This time there really wasn't a way out...

Having to fight to stop my own hoof hitting my face, I shook my head. Of course there was! Galloping over, I threw the cat basket out of the way and tugged at the vent I'd see there. Surely, I was stronger than sprites to get rid of a vent cover before they did!

The small lock on the top of the vent was proving me wrong. It wasn't rusted at all in this carefully preserved office.

"Oh come on!"

Tugging, biting, bucking... nothing would break it. Behind me, I heard a tinkle as one nail fell from the door's vent. I could see little coloured bodies struggling around the edges. Any second they might burst through! Running back to the desk, I grabbed *Rarity's Grace* from the drawer and aimed it directly at the vent lock. Closing my eyes and clenching my teeth around the comfortable mouthpiece, I gently pushed my tongue down on the trigger... bracing for the loud gunshot sound on my ears.

Instead, I got what had to be quite simply the most... polite... gunshot I had ever heard.

Somewhere between a small cough and a curt rap on a door, the sound even kicked up at the end, like a highly spoken word of great eloquence. It wasn't a silent weapon. It was simply... elegant. The vent's lock popped off from the small round blasting it clean off the metal, betraying that while it sounded prim, it had a punch behind those small bullets. A quick check revealed it only had space for perhaps two or three rounds at a time loaded, no doubt simply a self defence weapon.

Clambering inside as fast as I could, I heard the other vent pop off, followed by the deathly fluttering of the sprites. No time to close it behind me, I simply climbed into the dull grey maze as fast as I could.

Oh... this was a bad idea.

Now I was simply going to be trapped as they flew in and devoured me from the hind upwards.

Panicking, I forced myself in deeper, blinking to try and get my eyes to adjust to the darkness. Pushing around a corner, curling my body uncomfortably to squeeze through the tight, claustrophobic gap, I scrambled and pulled myself deeper into the system. The noise on the thin metal sheets that made up the vent echoed back and forward, hurting my ears, but all I cared about was trying to lose them in the metal maze. Behind me the fluttering changed tone as they entered at a shocking speed. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw them come around the corner.

"Go away! Don't!"

Screaming more out of habit and fear than choice, knowing they wouldn't stop, I kept pushing onward. Up ahead there was a t-junction. I needed a way out!

I couldn't look back anymore. The top of the vent was too low to turn my body like that. On my belly, I scooted or crawled forward, hearing the fluttering closing closer and closer behind me. For one horrifying moment, I felt my saddlebag get jammed. My hooves skittered on the floor as I kept pulling, unable to take it off in these cramped conditions. The thought of being devoured and not even being able to move or thrash made my heart tighten with horror.

"COME ON!"

I tugged and strained until I felt fabric tear and fell forward again. The parasprites were a mere ten feet away; toying with me, playing and staying as one small swarm. Soon I'd be exhausted and unable to evade them any longer. Everything was misty through my eyes, they were wet enough that I could barely see, only hear and feel as I pulled myself to the t-junction. Yanking around to the right, I saw only a large fan at the other end... with a dead end on the way I had chosen.

I was trapped. Stuck in a small metal box, I was trapped with parasprites.

I didn't want to die... not like this... please no... please no... *please no!*

Screaming, I kept pushing myself into the dead end, thumping the edges, maybe one was weak! They weren't. Maybe there was a hidden hatch! There wasn't.

This was it... I was backed into the corner, such a small area I couldn't even sit up. Claustrophobic feelings began to set in again. Turning and facing them, I saw the ten parasprites buzzing toward me. The one I had shot at even looked angry.

Rarity's Grace fired twice more before the weapon ran dry. I didn't hit a thing. The second shot even led to me dropping the weapon in fear. I couldn't even properly hold a gun, let alone shoot something with one, even if it were of high manufacturing.

I could swear the lead one grinned, before they swarmed me.

I couldn't even say where I was being bitten or chewed on. I could only scream again and again in pain as I felt bits of me get grabbed and bitten. My hooves waved, warding them off, but they kept dodging and biting again. One of my ears was nipped and tugged at, my legs, my lip. That dreadful fluttering almost becoming a sharp buzz with them so close and moving themselves into a frenzy, always biting. Soon they'd stop hounding and savage me for the kill. In a panic, I slammed myself back and forward against walls, and felt my hoof hit something sharp edged that shocked me with an energy discharge. Shivering and trying not to scream in fear of them getting in my mouth, I bit my teeth together so hard my loose tooth jerked. Three of them landed on my stomach, starting to try and dig in as I fought to push them away. I fought to stop then trying to tear the wound open. Small little streams of blood began to drip off me from the bites. I could feel myself tiring.

This... this was it. Alone in a vent, devoured slowly and painfully by parasprites to be nothing more than another skeleton for somepony to be scared by someday...

A gust of air brushed across me. Was it from their wings? No, it couldn't be, for it grew and grew in strength and sound. The biting began to cease, and I felt air begin to rush from small grates in the vent walls. The parasprites were slowly moving away from me, but now struggling to fly. One of them bit painfully into my back leg until I knocked it off. I was bleeding in a dozen places onto the floor, but the flow of air kept growing.

Down the vent, I saw the fan chopping away. A bassy '*whup whup whup*' that slapped the air so much as it did cut through it. The surge of air grew stronger, nothing near enough to move me, but the tiny parasprites were being sucked toward the fan at an ever increasing rate. Beside me, sparking, I saw the control panel I'd hit with my stinging right hoof. The

bandage was blackened from the shock.

Even as I saw the parasprites sucked in and sheared apart, I couldn't stop trembling on the spot. The feeling of them flying over me, eating me... it wasn't disappearing quickly. Trying to stem a dozen wounds and feeling my ears and limbs stinging from shallow bites, my head felt dizzy already.

It took me a good while to finally crawl back to Rarity's office and use what bandages I could spare from the thick wad around my right hoof to tie up the bites. Exhaustion from days without a proper rest were quickly mounting. I needed... needed to rest. Just a while...

Staggering, I managed to limp over and lie in the cat basket (I was small enough... it was fair game...) before falling into a restless doze when my heart finally slowed down.

I wandered the Ministry after that.

I didn't really know why, only that I didn't feel ready to go back outside. Blood dripped around me, but an examination in a mirror within Rarity's desk had shown that each injury, while painful and bleeding, was not serious. I wasn't tough, but most of my days had been spent under the pain of some cut or bruise, this didn't feel too unusual once I'd gotten a brief sleep. For now I could afford to just stagger about and try to think.

I'd completed the job, but somehow I didn't feel heroic like I should; like Littlepip. I'd 'won' out of sheer luck and chance alone. Survival though drawing the right card, rather than by my own skill or wit. That seemed to be a running theme of my life.

Yet, I had done it. One way or the other, I had faced something she had come up against and stayed alive at the end of it. Sure, I had faced a lot less than her, but it still kept me going to know that I'd walked the same path as her. The same challenge. Perhaps... perhaps some day I might be able to do as she did. To always keep thinking and staying determined. Where she remained steadfast in my mind, I faltered and tripped on my own lack of confidence and fears. Did she ever get scared? Were there times that my hero might cry alone, afraid that she may fail? How had she felt being brought into Fillydelphia?

Wandering back into the office that held the bathroom and her discarded chains, I simply stood and looked at them. The same... but so different.

Someday, perhaps. But I had endured. That was enough for now.

There was one last objective to today, I still needed to convince Hive that I was worthwhile, somehow. I'd taken far too long in here for Mister Shiny to likely get me anything of reward. In desperation, I emptied my saddlebag on the steel floor and began rooting through. Hive likely wouldn't care for dyes, and three caps wouldn't win me through either. *Rarity's Grace* would likely get me in more trouble to produce than to keep. At most, the best idea I could do was wait until I could hand it over to Protégé. He wouldn't punish me for finding something, would he?

Then again, he had been the one to shoot me down. It bewildered me. Why did I still feel a certain trust that he would be nicer to me after that? He just confused me. My last memory of that confrontation was of him holding me in his hooves, trying to save my life. He hadn't *wanted* to shoot. Why not? It couldn't simply be that he liked me. All his talk about plans for me was infuriatingly vague and contradictory. Why was he acting like this?

Shaking my head, I returned to the immediate problem. What had Littlepip left behind that I might use? Tools? Wonderglue to repair her suit? Nothing Hive likely couldn't get on

her own with but a word.

My eyes fell to the small tin of mints. My memory began to pick up. Mister Shiny had called her drugs ‘Mint-als.’ Mints. Like... like...

Suddenly, I was very glad I hadn’t downed them all as sweeties.

But this was only one small tin. Likely something she would just grab from me and then not care. I needed leverage, I needed more drugs. But who did I know that had that much —

“...oh!”

Stuffing everything back into my saddlebag, I made a run for the maintenance room. I had a few... items, to collect before I went outside again.

“Well little laddie. Nice to see you’ve come back alive. Would hate to lose me most *generous* customer.”

Sooty Morass had been making a killing. His RadAway was all gone, but his drugs container was still somewhat bulging with Artery’s stocks. I staggered up to him, both half-exhausted, and half under the weight of my saddlebag putting me off balance. He grinned down at me, flicking his braids as I spoke.

“I... I want all your mint-als.”

Sooty seemed genuinely surprised. The look of unexpected shock was worth every pain I had been through.

“Now just when I thought ye couldn’t get sillier. What makes ye think that you can—”

I slammed forty copies of *Wingboner* Magazine down on the table.

“...ten tins. All yours.”

One hour later, I was waiting outside the pits beside Hive. She had been a lot tougher, being genuinely surprised I was back, and willing to give me a few bruises for losing my suit. Even as she had thrown me against one locker in her ready room, the savage slaver mare had caught attention to the one half empty tin of mint-als I’d thrown down. The rest I’d buried in the mud near a pit, bargaining that I’d give her the location when Protégé arrived to take me back. Hive hadn’t been too happy with it, but had finally reasoned that at least she ‘wouldn’t have to put up with me whining anymore.’

The drawn chariot clattered across the road. Almost regally, I saw Protégé step down and trot across to us. His face betrayed nothing when he glanced at me, before turning stoically to an impatient Hive.

“I’ve come to retake my lost worker.”

“Oh fuck off, upstart. Don’t give me that ‘worker’ shit, you’re a slaver. Get over it and don’t lose your slaves ever again. Take the little rat.”

She turned and half bucked me toward him. Yelping, I landed in the mud beside Protégé. He didn’t break eye contact with her.

“Get into the chariot, Murk. Glimmerlight’s waiting for you.”

I didn’t need any further telling, scampering up into the wooden transport and turning to watch Protégé again.

"I hear he did a good service for you, Hive?"

She spat in the mud. "Get fucked, hornjob. He's useless, unless you're trying to groom the little chicken for some sort of bed buddy I can't imagine what *you* want from him."

Protégé didn't react in the slightest. Indeed, he if anything simply trotted toward the side of the chariot without even maintaining eye contact any more.

"A containment breach, so I hear. Infesting one of the Ministry Hubs. Mister Shiny was so good as to inform me of the details of his exemplary service to you."

"Did you hear what I said? Murk. Is. Useless."

I saw Protégé grin toward me with a surprisingly cheeky smile.

"So why did you write to me informing that he had proved himself?"

That shut her up. I had to fight to not snort in laughter as I saw her fall for his verbal trap. If she explained why, it would be to admit to Protégé that I had held her addiction to ransom. My master clambered up beside me.

"To the Mall, riders. Take your time, if you please."

Smoothly, the chariot rumbled off. Hive watched me intently as we rode past and back along the road. She continued to watch until we were twenty feet away before the cap finally dropped. I saw her rush forward in sudden panic, unable to catch the chariot.

"Oi! Wait! You didn't say where the fucking mint-als were yet! You little chicken *BASTARD!*"

In the aftermath of her hellish pits and the parasprites, the elation of escape was too strong to not do it. I couldn't help myself.

I waved.

"It is good to see you remain alive, Murk," Protégé looked back from directing the two stallions pulling our chariot through the slaveworks of Fillydelphia, "I must admit I was worried that you might not return..."

We'd been sitting in silence since he had relieved me of my saddlebag's contents. Most of it he'd given back (I had blushed as he hoofed over a couple magazines I'd saved) but *Rarity's Grace* now sat in his own pocket. Only now, as we were far away from the pits did he speak. I remembered his frustration at the sentencing, I presumed he was being honest. But it wasn't going to excuse him for what he'd done.

"You shot me. You stopped me escaping. Why?"

"I had to. Master Red Eye does not permit workers to leave until their due is—"

"You don't want me to suffer!" I cut him off. "You've been giving me second, third, and more chances every time I've met you. You give me medicine... return my things to me and... and even seem to care for me. You... you've shown you aren't like the others... so why do you keep torturing me by keeping me in here?"

My eyes were probably going to tear up soon. The thought of *how close* I'd been stung deep in the wound across my chest. Taking a few seconds to simply watch and presumably judge me, he eventually sat in the moving chariot and looked across at me.

"Would you believe me if I said I had been nothing but truthful with you, Murk?"

As ever, I felt like it was a loaded question. He kept staring with that inscrutable look, one eye hidden behind the symbol of his studentship to Red Eye. I spoke more quietly.

"Yes..."

Finally, almost with relief, I saw him remove the eyepiece and sigh.

“Murk... I am glad to have met you. Fillydelphia is not an easy place to live in; for any of us. Now, I know that is not much comfort, coming from a... well... a slaver. But I try. I try to care for those ponies who I know are being hurt in this place. I *believe* in Master Red Eye’s vision, with all my heart, Murk. We are making Equestria better. You would have seen the printing presses in there, those will be used to print school books. In time, ponies like you, unable to read... that will cease to happen.”

He looked away, as we passed by a group of slaves weighed down by scrap. Boils and wounds slowed them while they trampled through dry earth with dour faces and weak bodies.

“I’ve never said I *liked* it here. Ponies are ponies. I do not see slaves. My job entails problems, like the raiders... like Shackles. The other slavers dislike me, as you’ve seen. But it’s all necessary, we all do our part. I *chose* to be here. You didn’t... and I wish that hadn’t happened. But it has, and you must now play your part to earn your freedom.”

“But master... I don’t want to be here...”

The chariot drew up in front of the Mall. I could see some slaves returning from shifts on tired and shaking legs. Protégé stepped off, with me following at his heels.

“I know, Murk. But you are. I’ll do what I can, but I cannot defy Master Red Eye. He orders that no slave escapes. That we all *must* do our part. I am his student, his faithful follower. His methods are my life and his decisions my code. You heard me talk of loyalty to Minstrel. Well, I am loyal to Master Red Eye.”

He trotted toward the door. I simply stood before the great Mall... my home for the next two years in his service. My thoughts drifted to that moment of Protégé holding me desperately in his hooves, clamping on my wounds. He had been crying.

“Master...”

“Yes, Murk?”

I saw him begging again, pleading me to just come with him, trying to avoid me defying him. He wanted me to *follow* him. To show that same loyalty. Not to Red Eye. To *him*. Because he wanted the best for me that he could, short of what he couldn’t allow.

“...you... you were tempted, weren’t you?”

Protégé continued to stare back, a blank look on his face as his eyepiece hung in his magic field nearby.

“You were tempted to let me go.”

Time stood still. Protégé and his home was ahead of me and the slaves returning to it surrounded us both. All were filthy, coated in as much blood, sweat, and tears as I was. All suffering. The full might of Fillydelphia’s labour in vista all around me. Eventually, I saw his mouth seem to twitch, before he finally replied.

“Yes, Murk... yes I was.”

Firmly placing the eyepiece back on. The student of Red Eye and my master turned once more to return to his place of work.

Passing the cage door, filled with conflict over my master, I found the survivors of the Stable excursion lying on mattresses that had been dragged out into the plaza to accommodate the injured.

My heart almost broke as I saw the heavily bandaged form of Glimmerlight being cared for on the far side of the plaza. The slavers hadn't been kind to her on recapturing. A bloodied bandage smeared her forehead while her two front legs bore thick padding. A nurse was tying more across a thick welted wound on her side.

That didn't stop her pulling herself up and launching toward me, until we simply held one another amongst the city of slaves we had failed to escape.

"D-don't worry, Murky. We know it's possible s-someday... someday. I promise..."

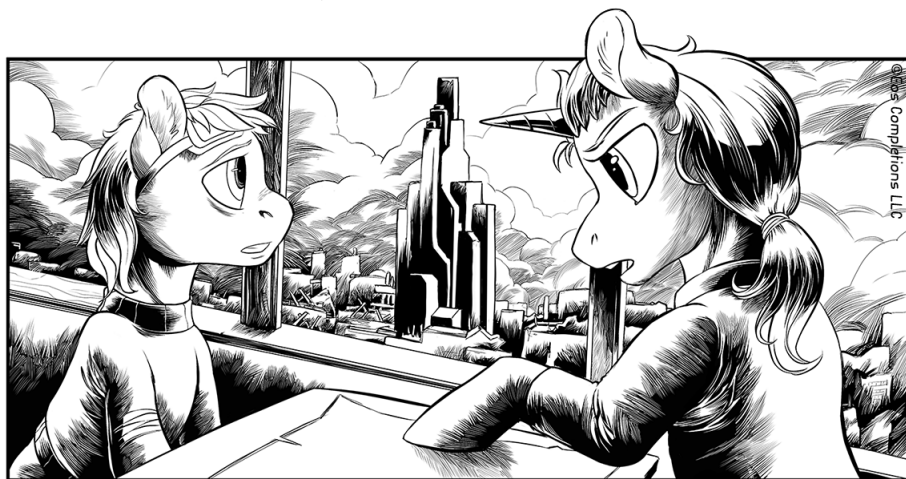
Footnote: Quest Perk Attained!

Path of the Lightbringer – Hers is a story to not cross paths again... but the legend of the Stable Dweller and her unceasing determination to save Equestria will inspire ponies for years to come. Once per encounter, if reduced to less than 10% of your health, you will immediately gain a small health boost to keep you in the fight that little bit longer.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Organiser – Some ponies stay neat and tidy to keep efficient belongings... others just learn how to cram things in really hard! One way or the other, it helps you carry those little extra things. All items with a weight of two or less weigh half as much in your inventory now.

A Long Way From Equestria



"All the other ponies in the world told her she was wrong, for believing in something we're all dreaming of."

"So where do you go from there, when it might feel like you've just reset to where you were?"

It's... like being caught between worlds, feeling like you can almost reach the other one, but just unable to escape the routine. Before I realised I had a life of my own, every day was just the same monotony. To simply wake up, sigh, and go about your business. Never thinking, complaining, or questioning. But with open eyes, it becomes harder. You *see* what slavery is doing to your life. How it had damaged mine.

The biggest threat, I had discovered, was losing momentum. The moment you started to feel like you weren't going anywhere, that was when you would falter. That was when desires started to feel impossible.

I'd almost lost desire once already, up on the precipice of the control tower.

Of all ponies, Protégé understood this most. He saw that I needed to taste freedom to truly understand what I wanted and where I belonged in life. He hadn't meant it how I'd read into it at first. It wasn't about knowing it because I'd fail without it, it was about knowing it to give me the drive to actually go the distance when things go wrong.

It was a valuable lesson, one that I had to take to heart now that I was back in the Mall.

It was confusing, looking at him. I didn't feel threatened by him. Every time I told him he didn't know where I'm coming from, he did. Every time I cried, he knew why. Every single facet of my life he just somehow understood.

And that's why I think I forgave him for stopping me. Because I had a feeling something was amiss with him, something I didn't understand yet.

That, and him being one of the few ponies in the whole of Fillydelphia that didn't just comfort me or tell me things could be better. He actually took steps to try and *make* things

better. Whether I agreed with his 'way' or not, he tried to make the lives of those around him better in some way.

What's it like to near enough hard reset on your progress? It's awful, being stuck between two worlds, being on the brink between slavery and freedom. It was enough to make me feel like I hadn't advanced anywhere. That was the lesson I needed to learn, that those experiences make you stronger.

The problem is it's so hard to notice about ourselves. To go back to feeling we're useless.

But even before I got a chance to feel lost once more, *he* was already trying to light my way...

I was galloping, corridor to corridor, scampering around corners, terror gripping my every muscle so hard that my very skin crawled with stings and aches. He was out here somewhere. Oh Goddesses, why didn't I just stay with Protégé? He was hunting me, stalking me, and... and I couldn't hear him!

Rounding a corner, I glanced ahead. Wasn't this the way back to the cage? No, this was the Mall! I could run out the back door and get away! But before I could even move, that cackling voice drifted through the thick air and darkness...

"Murky is my bestest slave... woohoo... whoopee..."

Shrieking, I kept galloping. He was following me, following from nowhere and never leaving. The sound of the chains being pulled across the ground followed my every move. I screamed for Glimmerlight, for Protégé, for *anyone*. As I ran, I tripped and fell again and again. My hooves just wouldn't stay under me, like they were being weighted down and trapped, unable to move. Please... please!

"He's the smallest, sickest, all around weakest pony... pony..."

I couldn't stand. My legs just stopped working. The gunshot on my chest sucked and bled. The knife wound on my shoulder was cold and numb. Tears ran down my face. Why couldn't I stand? I had to go, he was coming, *he was coming for me!* Why couldn't I gallop anymore? Desperately, I crawled, pulling my heavy body along behind me on tired limbs, my eyes unable to focus, turning the dark corridor of the Mall into a misty and indistinct environment. Again, that voice, *his* voice, drifted through, closer. I could hear his hot breath and heaving mass as he closed in on me. Almost laughing, playfully muttering the haunting tune.

"I bet if I chain him all nice and tough into slavery... slavery..."

Screaming, pulling, I felt his hooves wrap around me and drag me back before the thick collar snapped into place around my neck. I shrieked, feeling my own mind pull me into his sway.

"He'll give the whole rest of his life to ME!"

Flipped around, thrashing as the length of chain yanked my neck and head up, my eyes were forced open to see that leering face. I could smell the sickly breath oozing through rotted teeth, and see light green eyes gleaming; pits of despair showing the true depths of sheer sadism and control within him... and that welted scar sealing the deal.

Even as he laughed, lifting a white hot branding iron in the shape of an eternal chain, I kept screaming and pulling from his grip. Even if I got away, that chain kept pulling me back. Pulling me closer and closer to the huge figure of The Master and that burning iron

that stabbed downward onto my cutie mark. My mouth opened and *howled* as—

—I fell and landed in a crying heap. Curled up, bawling and shivering, I kept pulling my hind legs in, expecting to feel the searing pain of the iron. Hooves were trying to hold me down. Fighting from under the blanket, I weakly kicked out and tried to scramble away until finally I heard her voice.

“Murky! Murky, it’s okay! It’s me... it’s me...”

The blanket was pulled from my head, and azure eyes sparkled in the darkness before me. Behind me lay the shop cell’s sofa, where we had been sleeping. Breathing hard, my face was so wet with tears that it had dampened the woollen blanket. Slowly, I felt my heart rate drop as Glimmerlight hugged me and stroked my back.

“I... I...”

“It’s alright... you’re not the only slave who gets nightmares, I’ll bet.”

Clinging tightly to her, I tried to reassure myself. Just a bad dream. But as I looked around the dark, misty interior and heard the eternal industry outside, I found little comfort in the reality that was Fillydelphia. The Master had been strangely absent since I had returned. Somehow, him not being where I could see him only made things worse, it allowed my fears and memories of him to become bigger... more intense and mythical. Every time I looked in a mirror or felt my own forehead, it brought more hurt and than any taunt or crack of a whip could ever do.

Somehow, I had a horrible feeling he knew that his disappearance was having that precise effect and was doing it for *just* that reason.

Sighing and sitting back from me, Glimmerlight glanced across to the doorway and saw the Mall was still fairly dark. Likely, it was still night time, or a cloud of smog was just passing over. The past few days had become nothing but a whirlwind of activity, to the point that I didn’t even know anymore. All we knew was what Protégé told us, that we had a few hours to bunker down and rest before work started again. Glimmerlight and I had curled up on opposite ends of the sofa, with her insisting that I have the one blanket. Still sitting on the floor, I glanced from side to side, watching the darker corners of the room through teary eyes. It seemed all too familiar from my dream... like somepony was watching from the shadows.

Of course, knowing certain ponies in here, there may well have been.

Glimmerlight wrapped the blanket up, tucking it into the arm of the sofa. “Don’t worry about it. It’s over now, okay?”

Still sniffing, I felt my breathing return to normal, and nodded shakily.

“I... I know...”

“Want to talk about it? I’m all ears to any dreams. Raunchy ones with Pip or not.”

Despite myself, I couldn’t help but snort with laughter and blush while wiping my eyes. But I still shook my head.

“I don’t really want to think about it. Sorry, you can go back to sleep. I’ll... I’ll just... sit around and draw or something. I don’t really want to sleep anymore.”

“Murky, you’re tired. Come on, I’ll sleep beside you, so you know your big sis’ won’t be far away, alright?”

I smiled warmly as she reminded me of our ‘bond’ of sorts. I was tempted, but even a

vague glance into the darkness of the stockroom felt too close for comfort. I could feel my body jittering with nerves and fear. No way could I relax into another sleep. I needed to think and clear my head a little.

“Don’t think I can sleep any more.”

Watching me carefully through her clearly tired eyes, Glimmerlight pulled my saddlebag over with her magic, opened it, and placed my journal before me. Apparently, Protégé had dropped off my things, much to my delight... and further confusion as to his intentions.

“Well... alright, Murky. Hey, listen, why don’t you go up to the roof? The back door Brim and you got open should have a fire escape nearby. Get a little fresh air, or as best as Filly ever has, and try to calm down a little, alright? I’ll be just down here if you need me. Don’t think twice about waking me up, alright?”

Picking up my journal with my mouth, I adjusted my reacquired fleece, after having messed it up in my post-nightmare thrashing, and nodded to her. With a muffled thanks and a promise to see her in a little bit, I trotted off sullenly to make the long climb upwards.

Pulling the door shut behind me, I couldn’t help but see her still lying awake and glancing across at me, looking rather concerned. Waving gently, I heaved the door shut and moved off toward the rickety old fire escape.

“Hey there, wastelanders! How you all doing on this cold wasteland night? The answer should be ‘We’re doing great, DJ! Because you’re still on the air!’ Haaaa! Far be it from me to be egotistical to all of ya, but it sure will be what you’re saying with our late night line up!”

Carefully, almost lovingly, I put charcoal to parchment and drew a line.

The singular motion seemed to finally allow my heart to settle and my frayed nerves to gradually ease. Despite the wonders of having a friend and the relief that my success in the pits had brought me, that one moments between just me and my artwork were never going to lose their calming impact.

I sat atop the roof of the Mall, alone, simply drawing and listening to the DJ’s show. Nestled in a hidey hole between a few vents and metal... boxy... things, I was hidden from pretty much every angle while still being able to pop my head up for a look if I wanted. The air was thick and warm with that ever-present iron tinge to it. If anything, it was just irritating my throat and burning my eyes, but the lazy wind on my sweaty and shivering coat and mane was at least some comfort after the claustrophobic and dominating nightmare. My eyes were still heavy with sleep, but the idea simply seemed too terrifying. No, better to stay awake up here and let others dream. I wouldn’t be alone, for I had my oldest companion to spend the night with. The DJ.

“First up, we’ve got a great little newsflash for you all. Turns out, the recent troubles over at Sweet Apple Acres have mostly calmed down. That mysterious Stable up there seems to have been saved from the Steel Rangers by... yup, you guessed it, the Stable Dweller!”

Ee! I had to stop drawing for a second to hug myself and remember that she was still a force for good. Red Eye and Protégé claiming or hinting that she had left me behind and wasn’t all that heroic was not going to last long in my mind. To even hear one tale of her exploits was enough to refresh my mind, and immediately my charcoal raced to yet again

illustrate that brave mare.

A flutter in the air made my skin crawl. Dropping the charcoal, I ducked under the vent and watched the shadow of the passing griffon team flash past along the rooftop. They would have needed to be directly above and looking directly down, anyway. But there was no sense in advertising. That and random little flutters still made me nervous and started my stomach aching. That moment short of the wall still stung.

Raising my head to be sure they were away, I got a good look at the surrounding area from the roof's height. It provided a commanding view of Fillydelphia, just high enough to see across the city, but too low to see over the huge wall. When I had been climbing up the creaky fire escape, I had tried to distract myself by imagining Fillydelphia as it once was before all this. But the effort was just too great in the light of being dragged back here. The chains had tightened all the more, locking and pulling me in. Now I could not see it for anything but the horror it was. Processions of slaves marched under guard away from the colossal crater. Others could be seen hefting the heavy auto axes in earth pits while guards trotted back and forth on suspended platforms. All were just tiny figures from up here. Through a set of tall, smoke-belching chimneys, I could spot the rickety roller coaster of the FunFarm above the petting zoo and helter skelter. The sight was unsettlingly nostalgic, even for less than a week since I had left its scarce, harsh life.

Now, however, things felt hardly different. We had failed in our escape, losing our most reliable friend in the process. Now, we were simply back in the machine. Unable to take on any more salvage missions due to their losses in the Stable, Protégé's stock was waiting to rebuild its numerical strength. Until then, we were all being relegated back to standard work shifts in the factories. So much was different, but nothing really changed for the slaves in Fillydelphia.

"Now I'll bet many of you are saying 'Hey, wait, you told us that earlier!' Well of course I did, but now we've got the happier ending to the story. The survivors are comin' out! Pave way, my little ponies, there's soon to be a new settlement in the wastes near Shattered Hoof! Get your trades all ready, folks, cause things are taking a turn for the better today. As for all you less than stellar raiding bastards listening in to try and spot a weak target? Forget it! You had enough trouble with one Stable Dweller, well here's a bunch of 'em! That, and they are under the protection of the Talons, so I hear, so don't even think about it. Now, just to mark this occasion, why not a little bit of music created by a pony from that very Stable? Yes folks, we all gotta have our rock and roll. Take it away, Velvet!"

Glancing and smiling at my PipBuck, the catchy, fast beat kicked up (my rear hoof tapping away without even intending it to), it occurred to me that Protégé would know I was outside with his tracking to my PipBuck, but I frankly didn't care. The link to the voice of truth and hope was too much to give up. No, what I needed wasn't worrying, it was time to think. Which meant time to draw.

Charcoal slid, stopped, and changed direction. It hesitated and then struck out boldly, waving to and fro before arcing around. I never checked drawings midway through, it just felt... natural to let my imagination work and flow until it was done. Eventually, pulling back, I saw my creation.

A rearing earth pony mare. Sunny. Below her, the rough-coated form of Cayenne bounded around her master. The wide-brimmed hat atop Sunny's head flew back as she shouted something unknown to me. Fighting back guilt, I allowed my eyes to drift upwards

from the drawing to see the vista of Fillydelphia once again.

I felt so very sorry for bringing this upon her.

Part of me wanted to make her my next, well... mission? But I was just one little pony, hurt, weak, and unable to make a difference inside the city of slaves. Wherever she was, Sunny was out of my reach. The thought of what she was no doubt going through was likely going to haunt me for some time.

Shivering, I had to resist my mind telling me that the *real* reason I couldn't help her was because she was *his* and that even trying to help her was to go against his will. My dream had been proof enough of that, his shackles were still firmly entrenched in my... soul? I had run from him outside the walls, but that was different. Trying to rescue Sunny would be going up against him. Not just running away from him.

Sniffing, I turned the page. A new blank canvas of the yellowed parchment sat waiting. These last few days, I had been forced to confront my own worst fears of the times long gone. I had been working in a Ministry, moving through long-abandoned houses, and even lost in the depths of a dead Stable. Memories long gone terrified and upset me in a way I couldn't describe, particularly those related to the 'last day.' But Glimmerlight had shown me something else: how to look for the memories that could do things other than simply hurt. Without even realising it, I had done it in the Ministry of Image by listening to that audio recorder.

I had been learning a little, instead of burying it all under a mountain of sadness and loss.

Without really knowing it, I felt my head descend to start drawing again.

Aurora Star. That name had turned up a couple of times, hadn't it? The leader of this city's Arcane Magic Hub who had visited Rarity and Fluttershy to hand over some sort of special memory orb. Then there were the scientists in the Stable. They had worked under her, bringing some of that memory research in with them.

Below me, small sketches formed, little wisps of creativity to show my mind's version of Rarity, Fluttershy, and the Overmare. All had known Aurora Star to some extent. It was nothing drastic. She had been a leader in Fillydelphia, so it only made sense they would know of her. Between some sketches, I drew light lines. From Fluttershy to Rarity, two friends, the Ministry Mares. From both of them to a new sketch, Doctor Flowerpot, the pony Rarity had mentioned that I now knew Weathervane had also worked with. I added him, then drew a line from the old ghoul to Flowerpot. Lastly, I added an older mare with a star on her flank, my version of what Aurora looked like, given I had no idea what 'Aurora' even meant...

To her, I drew lines from the Overmare, Fluttershy, and Rarity.

Weathervane had been involved in spell storage, right? His name had turned up from the Stable details that Glimmer had found. Leaning down, I drew a line from him to Aurora Star.

Others might organise their thoughts by writing it all out, but to me, this was worth so much more. In front of me lay my understanding of what little I'd learned about this city long ago. It was meaningless, a few bits of dead research that someday might prove useful to somepony else. Incredibly basic, perhaps, but it was the train of thought that it permitted. Each dot was a separate piece of the past unto itself, with the connections being the 'links' between them all. Like a... a... what had my old master called them? Star shapes? Consta... con...

Shaking my head, I looked back down again. They *were* linked. Frozen moments of Old

Equestria, pictorial, by connections that created an overall picture. It was like drawing the very fabric of the past itself, rebuilding the shape and form that was their lives.

What would it be like to find more? To complete the puzzle and find out... well, everything. What had happened, why had the world had ended this way, and who was responsible? Perhaps there were hidden secrets only permitted to those who found enough of it; who might complete this tapestry of memories. What might such a pony who delved into the past enough discover out there in the wastes?

Sighing and sitting back, I could only look at my half finished collection of sketches, occasionally joined by some lines. Strangely, seeing the past like this, in my own drawn style... it made it easier to contemplate. It got it out of my mind and down on paper, like any emotions I had expelled into art to escape the pain or sadness.

Beep!

That... and there was this, too. The music was interrupted as the beeping started. In truth, I had expected it by climbing up here, almost hoping for another message from Sundial to help me relax. But after drawing out what I had, I looked on it as another opportunity to see the past with new eyes. Or ears...

Beep!

Click.

"Uh... hi there."

"Hi..."

"Well, uh... I'm not sure what to say here. But, well, I need to get this out somewhere. Oh Celestia, what is going on in my world..."

A shot of cold fear passed through me. Sundial's voice was breathless and scared. Like he'd just galloped for a long distance.

"Look, I... I may have to do something bad, to do something good. This world is coming crashing down, there's been reports of crazy huge spell testing going on, and the shifts just keep going up. This entire thing is escalating again. My father's been recalled out to Hoofington to help cope with all the casualties there. Already, these Stables aren't seeming quite so stupid. I need to get the money to afford a ticket for Skydancer! But I... I may have found a way..."

My drawing forgotten, I now held the PipBuck in my hooves, feeling myself sweating as I just stared at it. Sundial's life, to me, was a perfect image of a buck earning real pay in a job he wanted with a lovely special somepony by his side. What had happened?

"When I came off shift today, I was just crying, I couldn't stop. I've worked the maximum seventy hours this week and I'm still not earning enough! I'm just... sorry, that drill I mentioned? We had another one yesterday, but they don't tell us it's a drill till they lock the door shut! Every time my nerves fray, and I feel so guilty. It's tearing me apart having to abandon her... again and again. Each time it could be the real thing. But, even when I sat in the alleyway behind the factory, this... this figure approached me. He just appeared from nowhere! I never saw his face, all cloaked up, but the accent was pretty exotic. I'm not an idiot, it was a zebra. He dropped this huge bag of bits at my hooves and said that... that I could have it if I brought him some plans of what it was we were working on. Celestia help me, I'm tempted. I just want to protect the one I love! I've got no one to turn to about this, the Ministry of Morale is everywhere. Every sprite-bot I see I'm afraid is watching me now, like they're just waiting to spring if I dare do anything."

Even today, in Sundial's far-flung, unfortunate future, I could relate to that feeling. When Pinkie Pie had set out to watch everypony forever, she had meant it.

It was silly, really, me worrying for what would happen here. Sundial had been dead for hundreds of years, I'd *seen* his skeleton. Had he given his ticket to Skydancer in the end? Was that even allowed? Or had he just been unable to get there in time? It only now began to occur to me that, given enough time, this PipBuck would likely lead me to his death on the day the balefire was set loose upon Equestria.

Yet something compelled me to keep listening, recording after recording. Sundial's messages were meant to be heard. He wouldn't have programmed them to play elsewhere. He had made an effort to ensure the truth of the average pony's life was known to those of us in the wasteland.

"I just wish I knew what to do. I even considered going to the guards about it, hoping for a reward, but there's no proof and the city's coffers are running dry on building up all this industry these days. No, I have to decide myself. They must have been watching me, knew I was one they could exploit."

Sundial's voice was cracking, tinged with frustration, anger, guilt, and fear.

"I hate this... I just hate all this! I shouldn't have to make these decisions! Why me?"

Feeling tears drip from my own eyes for him, I could only relate in that I had asked that question of myself a thousand times in the last few days since the Pit. The most I could truly do was curl up around the PipBuck in my hidey hole and try to pretend it would *somehow* make a two-hundred-year dead pony feel better.

"I can't lose her... she's all I have these days."

Nodding, I agreed, not just for him.

"Is it really worth it? To work with evil to find freedom from pain?"

I don't know, Sundial.

"...I should go, don't want anypony else hearing this, so... well, bye for now."

"Bye..."

The PipBuck clicked and hummed for a second before fizzing through its half ruined speaker and slipping back into music from the DJ's station. Seething frustration began to build. Why did that war have to hurt him so? Sundial was a nice pony, choosing the lovely and happy ways, not wearing any cynicism or warlike attitude. Why did it have to drag him in, too? Oh please, Sundial, come through this okay...

But I *knew* the ending already. A skeleton abandoned in a refuse pit, alone and forgotten until I had found him.

That... that did it.

The old feelings were dredged up, as I felt myself curl up ever tighter and clutch the PipBuck to my chest. The past could hold good, but the all too familiar haunting feelings were returning from the sense of what was lost.

"Well, I'm gonna be signing off in a bit, wasteland. Even your good ol' DJ needs his shut-eye now and again. But for those of you like me, up late at night and worrying for others out there in the dark... here's a little something to match the quiet night air. Something to help calm those nerves. Goodnight, wasteland."

Sweetie Belle's soothing sweet voice seemed to whisper in my ears, gentle and caressing. A lullaby for all time to settle upset ponies and clear their minds. Still sobbing, I picked up my charcoal stick and cast the lattice of the past away to a new page. I could draw the past, I had learned. Time to make worth of it. The touch of my stick on the parchment stopped

my trembling enough as I put all the heart I could into this one drawing.

I didn't know what he looked like, but it didn't matter.

"Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head..."

Lines becoming curves, seeking to return a pony's memories to life. Just as the DJ and Sweetie Belle had helped stop me being lost to the horrid past, I would do the same for him.

"Hush now, quiet now, it's time to go to bed..."

Curves became shapes, restoring his presence in the physical sight of those he sought to deliver his tale to. He would be seen once more, if only to my eyes. A fate better than forgotten bones for the buck who had helped me from so long ago.

"Drifting, off to sleep, leave your exciting life behind you..."

Shapes became life, gentle twists of the charcoal and jerks of my head adding in everything I could. The shape and flow of his mane. The thick, bulky PipBuck that was now mine on his right hoof. But not alone, I had drawn the shape of another with him, my mind's eye of Skydancer, radiant and bright to be with him forever, if only in my artwork. She had a curvy mane, streaked with colour. Lying curled up together, her wing over his back and her head nestled into his shoulder.

"Drifting, off to sleep, let the joy of another land find you..."

Fighting my own tired eyes, I added the last details before finally dropping the charcoal stick and fighting a squeaky little yawn. There. Now they could be together no matter what happened in their lives. The same way they were together in the embrace of the Goddesses now, at peace after the horrors they had endured.

Glancing upwards at the cloud ceiling over Fillydelphia, my eyes blinked open only once as a small break in the thick red clouds drifted over; tiny and quickly fading.

But through it I saw a star shape. Little dotted memories, drifting far from home in another world, a long way from the Equestria they knew.

Even as the hole closed up quickly, I simply lay on my back and watched it, feeling my eyes slowly begin to close again. This time, my dreams were filled with nothing but the sweet thoughts of what it might be like, to have somepony I might care about in the same way they had care for each other until the bitter end.

"Roll-call! Everypony get your skinny slave flanks out here. On the double!"

I was already halfway down the fire escape by the time the shout came. Bellows to wake up had gone out a few minutes ago. Given just enough time to gather my things, I raced to join the muster. Being late for roll-call was, and always had been, a quick ticket to a hoof across the face or a whip across the back.

Waking up had not been pleasant. For once, I had slept soundly, but the ashy air and sickly tasting fumes had gathered throughout the night to lead me into a coughing fit upon waking. Foul black muck tinged with dark red had splattered on the ground, ejected from my throat. It had felt like it had been filled with glass shards. That probably wasn't a good sign. Hopefully Weathervane was still around.

Glimmerlight was already pulling her crimson initiate robes on, staggering with heavy eyes toward the stockroom door. She turned back for just a second as I strained to close the heavy rear door.

"Come on!"

"I'm coming! Sorry, sorry..." I looked up, seeing her robes. "Glimmer, why are you putting them on if you're getting the bandages changed this morning?"

She rolled her eyes. "So that nurse buck gets to watch me take them *off*, duh!"

With a giggle, she cantered on out. Dropping my saddlebag inside the stockroom, I hurried out after her to find everypony had gathered on the bottom floor of the plaza. Across the centre, around the fountain, lay the dozens of mattresses, or rolls of filthy blankets where the wounded still lay in pain. A few remaining doctors from Hearts and Hooves Hospital were wandering around, slowly checking bandages and ignoring the moans from those left without any painkillers. Most had shrapnel wounds, often multiple on one pony, from the Rangers' large and indiscriminate weapons. Others bore burns, or were hacking from smoke inhalation in the fires that no doubt had gutted the inside of the Stable. A few nurses also remained, including the blonde buck Glimmerlight seemed rather intent on meeting. She immediately cantered toward him, grinning over her shoulder at me. Most slaves made way for her. I could only imagine why.

Making a beeline to stay behind her, I found myself having to hop, skip and jump over a few 'misplaced' hooves thrown in my way to try and trip me; both raiders and normal slaves taking what chances they could to garner some mild amusement at my expense. One harshly flung leg from a mangy raider mare caught my injured right hoof, making me yelp and limp away. A series of snorts and high-pitched laughter chorused through their ranks, often mimicking my voice. I dearly wanted to buck backwards and catch them between their legs, but seeing all their 'friends' clustered around, I just put my head down and limped over to catch up with Glimmerlight.

Most of the recovering slaves I weaved around had dirty bandages, but few seemed to have gotten full medical attention. Weathervane's magic had only had so much stamina for the dozens upon dozens of casualties. Already, I could see many of the mattresses were covered in blankets where once had been a still living pony before. The night had not been kind.

Having seen me being tripped, Glimmerlight brought me round to stand on the opposite side of her, away from the others.

"Don't worry about it, just stick near me, Murky. We'll find a way to make it through without Brimstone..."

Immediately, despite nodding my head, the thought that we no longer had his protection was beginning to set in. What would happen the moment the raiders got in a mood to come for revenge? The guards around the healers were providing security right now. But once they left...

"Leader's here! Stand still, you wrecks!"

The shout came from above, one of the leather-clad slavers making use of the balcony platform above the door to announce. Below him, the newly repaired cage door squeaked open, revealing the large form of Ragini leading the way. I breathed a sigh of relief. Protégé was taking this roll-call.

My master himself strode in behind his ever-loyal griffon guard with a scroll and quill held within his telekinesis, followed by a small team of slavers carrying the day's oatmeal.

Apparently, not even Protégé's intent to do his best for the slaves under his command could locate better food than the ubiquitous slime in a bowl.

The actual roll-call was somewhat underwhelming. No called names and no shouting your 'number.' Protégé simply looked around us and ticked something on his scroll,

sometimes checking with an attendant slaver for confirmations on fatalities during the night. Somehow, given Red Eye's insistence to remember slaves' names, I figured it only made sense that his student was attempting to do the same for his own stock. Eventually, returning to near the door, he spoke, raising his voice just enough to be heard.

"Today's work schedule, listen closely! We've been pulled from scavenge duty."

There was an uproar of indignation from the raiders. It occurred to me that they were in the majority of survivors. Wasteland weathered and tough, they had shrugged off many of the injuries I had seen claim normal slaves' lives. Protégé raised his hoof, awaiting a moment of calm.

"We don't have the numbers left, so until new volunteers are in, we're back on standard work fares, as previously mentioned. Half of you will report in one hour to the scrapheaps outside Slit's factory for auto axe reclamation duty. I offer the choice that for those of you unable to use an auto axe, you may also move to the fuel refinery, two blocks over. The following ponies are to report to me for specific work allotment in my office within the next half hour."

Already, I was half-expecting my own name to be on that list somewhere. My real objective was simply to avoid wherever Barb and his lot ended up, and if possible, be in the same place as Glimmerlight. I cast a glance over to her, but she wasn't looking back. No, what was she looking at...

I followed her eyes and found it led rather unerringly to the nurses' flanks. Well, she wasn't wasting time getting into her promise made inside the Stable. Blushing, I looked away before anypony accused *me* of looking at him too.

"Thunder Racer! Kriss! Barb! Lemon Mint!"

As each name was called, I saw the individual ponies perk up. Barb and Kriss shared a glance and a strangely knowing grin.

"Rocksplitter! Murky Number Seven! Wool Stitch!"

Well, there it was. I saw Barb and his student leer at me, and immediately quivered, feeling a cold sweat. Oh no... Protégé, what are you doing?

Glimmerlight's eyes shot right back to me, a cold fear clearly visible on her face. I felt her wrap one hoof around my neck.

"That's it. You've all got half an hour to get some food in you and have Doctor Weathervane check you if you're still injured, he'll be here in ten minutes. I expect you all to work your best on these tasks; they are all important for the restoration of Fillydelphia and Equestria as a whole. For achieving our Master's dream of Unity. That is all."

The surrounding slave base murmured in displeasure. I could see why. Most of them had joined the salvage missions in a bid for freedom or less mundane work. But now they were being cast right back into it. 'Unfair' would have been the word, had slaves any rights at all.

Protégé ignored the protests, turning on his rear hooves to march out again. He hadn't even glanced at me, something I was a little glad for. Slaves that received special treatment from their masters became nothing but targets for night assaults to 'bring them down a notch'. But as he reached the cage door, I saw another figure push past him, a doctor. A foul, rotten reek drifted in his wake, as the tall, half bearded, ghoulish stomped his way back into the slave pen. Apparently, Protégé's estimate of ten minutes was to be cut down severely. Feeling my lungs sear on each breath, I dearly hoped those packed saddlebags of his contained RadAway.

A slaver cried out.

"Right, you lot! Chows in, get it now or lose it! Half an hour! Move it!"

Amidst the stampede of hungry slaves, I just stood still. Long ago I might have run as well, but arriving at the front of the queue only meant more ponies to hit me on my eventual beating to the back. By the time I had arrived at the rickety table used to hold the huge pot, my bowl received only a small drizzle of mostly leftover cold water. Slimy wads of thin oatmeal floated in the milky liquid. Sighing, I took the bowl in my mouth and left without complaint. Slaves were gulping what they could down, most of them long adjusted to the tasteless and thick gruel of a meal, day in and day out. Surrounded by his students, Barb lurked in a shadowy corner, mostly blending with the darkness around him. Trotting by, I received another knowing gaze from the raider's leader, following me with an eye while taking wads of his followers' own meals for himself.

"Oi! You! Pegasus!"

Almost spilling my bowl as the harsh shout seared through my sensitive ears, the slaver shoved me to make his presence known.

"You been seen by the doc?"

"N-no..."

"Get on that mattress then. Fuck knows why he wants to waste time with you, gonna be dead in a couple days anyway."

Whimpering at being reminded of that, I morosely took direction and dragged my bowl to the mattress near the fountain. Apparently, I was not fast enough, as the slave guard pushed me toward the mattresses, knocking me onto one of them. Obediently, my rump thudded down behind me on it to wait for a doctor. Sipping the rancid meal while waiting, I tried to distract myself from the taste by glancing around, searching for my 'together by life' sister.

Glimmerlight was nearer the shop cell we inhabited on another mattress, the blonde buck nurse already sitting beside her and checking the bandage around her forehead. Despite too much ambient noise to hear specific words, I could see she was happily chatting away to him. At least there was enough security around right now that I didn't mind being separate from her for a few moments... that, and I figured she was a little busy talking anyway. No need for a socially awkward little buck to get in her way.

Across the hallway, I saw a nurse alongside Bloodbank trying to hold down a thrashing slave after informing her that she was going to lose a leg below the knee. The mare had been crying in pain all night, languishing as infection had eaten away, with no potions or drugs strong enough to stifle it available for a mere slave, with or without Protégé's authorisation. Beside them, two healers were having an argument.

"Shady Sands is dead to us now, look, we *can* wake him up, sure—"

"So why not? We're healers!"

The older of the two, rubbed his forehead.

"For what reason? This is just going to cause him to be too slow and sick until some slaver kills him for failing! It's more a mercy to let him pass now in peace under the boss' anaesthetic spell."

I could already hear the younger of the two healers being defeated in his voice.

"You're going to just watch a pony die. I can't believe this..."

"It's less painful for him in the long run, Tulip."

Tuning them out, my eyes fell upon this 'Shady Sands.' He looked fine, but I of all ponies knew that the deadliest things lurked beneath the surface. I clutched my sore chest, almost

in relation to the quiet form of Shady. Had he just taken in too much smoke?

Perhaps the worst realisation was that this wasn't the first time I'd heard this same argument. Ponies in pens all across Fillydelphia had argued the point about their comrades dying in their sleep from the poisoned air and radiation within their bodies. Many had debated with themselves. Was one quick impact from a great height better than a lifetime of this? All these slaves with healing knowledge could do was try their best, but I could see that same question arising occasionally. Whether to save them would only lead to worse.

And I could see how much such a revolting question hurt those who felt their duty was to hurt. I had no end to respect for that breed of pony for choosing such a hard path.

But for all their efforts, it was nonetheless a rather grim sight on either side of me. Occasionally, I would see a slave laying there, too still to be alive. A mare in a jumpsuit, her clothing bearing a hastily stitched butterfly peace symbol, morosely draped a cloth over one such poor soul. Even those still awake were not through their horror yet; lack of medical supplies, particularly the valued healing potions, was giving rise to sharp screams, as invasive telekinesis attempted to pull shrapnel out or clamp wounds shut. Feeling my right hoof throb, part of me began to worry what I might have to go through when they examined it.

I wanted to run and hide in the back room, but the watchful eyes of a guard kept my rump firmly attached to the ground.

"What in the grand fucking hell are you doing to that stallion!? Get out my bloody way, you incompetent bumblefuck!"

The rasping tone soared above the others, attracting eyes and ears as Doctor Weathervane strode toward a mattress and almost threw a young nurse out of the way. Landing on his rump, the buck let his primitive medical tools fall from his magic and watched as the ghoul began work on the burn victim that lay screaming below them.

"I... I was trying to put the healing bandages—"

"Shit... I'm two hundred and seventy damned years old and you're saying you somehow have *worse* eyesight than me? Don't you see that there? The clothing has stuck to his skin and you're trying to bandage it down? Celestia save me from the shit-sundae you were trying to create with that. Ever hear of infection? Get out of my sight you *absolute fucking moron!*"

"I... but—"

His protests fell on deaf ears. In a flare of magic, Weathervane began his work on the burn victim, putting him to sleep with a spell and stripping the clothing from the torso. The wet sound of tearing fabric mixed with the sight of patched and blackened material being slid off looked like a second skin being drawn from the stallion to my eyes. The sickening smell of burnt flesh, known all too well to *anypony* in Fillydelphia, reeked through my nostrils and seemed to burn my throat.

Whether or not it was my imagination, the gag reflex led me to spasm and splutter out a thick cough. My sickness had only been staved off by two half-shots of RadAway but I could already feel it returning. Lying on my side upon the mattress only made me wince further as a popped spring prodded my left wing. I rolled to the right instead, where my hoof still ached as well. Sighing, I let my head sink. *Everything* was sore somehow. Perhaps if I—

"Yah!"

Squeaking in shock, I found my entire body moving of its own right to sit up properly. A magic field surrounded me as I saw the ghoulish figure of Weathervane stomp on over.

"Just what I need. I so much as magically touch you and you whine. Sweet fucking Celestia, I'm going to have a damned migraine by the end of this, aren't I? Now sit still,

you're still healing and I can't say I'm over the fucking moon that you won't get proper bedrest."

His horn waved over me, before he immediately scowled, dropping his telekinetic field.

"If I had a bit for every stupid pony that doesn't follow prescription I'd be richer than Red Eye by now. What the bugging hell do you think you're doing, Murk? I told you, one RadAway every single day! Your lungs are too susceptible to radiation; they'll be lighting up again by the end of today after that little stint in the pits I hear you got. What happened to the five sachets I gave you?"

The harsh tone bit deep, I felt myself wanting to shrink back and cry at the mere thought.

"I'm sorry... they got stolen. I only got enough to stop it a few hours a-ago..."

Weathervane simply groaned and facehoofed. "Well, I don't have any more with me. We're not here to treat radiation. As for the rest, you're healing, slowly. I can treat the parasprite bites now that they've closed with magic, but you are weak, Murk. Your gunshot and stab wounds are both closed over, but the areas are very sensitive. Any other trauma in those areas and you could be looking at permanent problems."

As he worked his healing spell, I glanced over behind the ghoul, spotting Glimmerlight pulling herself out of her robes in front of the nurse for a bandage change. It took some degree of effort to not blush and giggle at once as I saw that she was rather deliberately angling herself while bending down to slip it off her, standing side on to him to pose like some magazine cover mare. Sometimes I really could not believe that attitude of hers, even after only a few days of knowing her. The nurse was rather openly blushing and fighting to stop the grin on his face. He laughed politely, but I saw her tail 'accidentally' stroke the underside of his chin. Oh great Goddesses' grace, she was *good* at this...

Pulling my eyes away, I stared at my left hoof to check on the progress of the bites.

Weathervane's magic was indeed closing the small parasprite wounds that had stung incessantly since the Ministry of Image Hub. During the night, I had sometimes tossed and turned while trying to sleep on the sofa, feeling like they were eating me again.

Under his magical care, I was beginning to feel the lack of sleep as a warm and fuzzy tingling passed from area to area like a soft massage. But his forward speaking manner was landing hard. Pressing my front hooves to my chest, I just wished I could... could... well, do whatever it would take to cure my tainted lungs.

I didn't want to go away... not like this, in a slave pit.

Weathervane ceased his work for a second, glancing down at me. His voice was harsh, but professional.

"More tears? What's it now, kid?"

Spitting on my own ragged breaths, I looked up at him, the rest of me shrinking back onto the mattress. My voice felt unbearably weak.

"D-doctor... am I going to die?"

His beady eyes focused briefly on me before returning to his work. Through the harsh, rasping tone that emerged from his ruined throat, I could have sworn there was the sound of a very tired pony.

"Two hundred and seventy years, Murk. Night shifts, performances going wrong, industrial accidents, a great war, the balefire... now the wasteland. I've heard those words more times than I can remember. Shit... it's not easy to keep hearing them. You'd think I'd get used to it. But no, something in me just keeps. Fucking. Caring. She may have helped ruin my world with her place in creating the Ministries, but Fluttershy had ideals. We all

swore to them. To bring peace, harmony and comfort to all ponies. I quote, ‘No matter how bad this becomes.’ Well, this is still Equestria, and we’re still caring. Just sometimes I feel like I’m the only fucking one left...”

Blinking, I sat still and attentive. His eyes had left me, staring into space or around him at, I guessed, Fillydelphia in general rather than just this scene of pain and suffering.

“Even so... feels a long damn way from the home I knew, if you get me.”

I didn’t. ‘Home’ was an alien concept to me, muddled only by the occasional niggling feeling that it might end up being here in Fillydelphia. Doctor Weathervane grumbled and reached out with his magic again to apparently scan across my chest.

“Without more RadAway in the next eighteen hours, I’d not rate your chances too high. I can see you’ve taken some, but those pits have high ambient levels that have aggravated your bronchial tubes. You won’t feel it more than an itchy cough right now, but that’ll start growing in the next four hours into the symptoms you’ll recognise. This tainted shit... it turns quickly, hits a certain critical mass, and then you’ll feel it.”

Even Weathervane managed to contain his impatience as I fell to the mattress, covering my eyes with my hooves. This just wasn’t fair. I wanted out... not to just linger and die. My... my mother wouldn’t ever know...

After a few seconds, I heard Weathervane stomp his hoof lightly to get my attention.

“Hm... we’ve got none with us. That’s all locked away in Hearts and Hooves Hospital. But see if you can’t let Protégé allow you to swing by later tonight. Come into the basement, and I’ll see if I can’t dig some out of the stockrooms. You’re the only pegasus I know of in this region of the world... it’d be a crime to let you simply expire. There’s worse bastards out there and, Fluttershy forgive me for saying this, plenty of ponies who deserve life a lot less than a well meaning, if whiny, little pony.”

My heart lifted, he *would* help me! I almost wanted to hug the squishy old ghoul for offering. He was rude, abrasive and clearly somber regarding the world he had lost... but how could I not respect a pony who still followed the oath he had sworn, even through the apocalypse?

“Thank you! Tha—”

He shoved me back.

“Quiet down, you stupid arse! *You* know about my basement, but I’d rather most ponies still think it to be an irradiated area of nothing. Now sit still. I’ll keep helping you because it’s what I do, but if you keep up these insane escape attempts there won’t be a body left for me to heal.”

I felt my head sternly yanked up as he began to examine my new scar.

“Ergh... that simpleton had no fucking clue.”

“Who?”

“That shit-eating donkey molester calling himself a ‘doctor’ that treated this wound. I talk about oaths? Well he broke every single one in the entire damned book in what he did to you. I swear... if this were Old Equestria and he’d done this to somepony, even Fluttershy might have raised her voice. Believe me, it wasn’t fun whenever she did. Leaving a scar like this... fucking amateur.”

He stretched the skin with his hooves, using his magic to lay some bonding plasters over it and dab something cold into the gaps. Letting my head drop again, I just curled up on the mattress as Weathervane backed off. His healing had worked, the bites were gone, but the ache on my chest, shoulder, right hoof, and forehead remained. Clearly, it’d require

more than he could spare right now to solve them. Even my wings still stung from pulling feathers.

"That ought to heal it better. Maybe go below the coat in a few days, gone in a few weeks. Woulda stayed for months with that modern-art-mastershit of a treatment he used. Now, you're checked over, so try and get some rest, Murk. Oh... and to repeat one more thing?"

Looking up, I remained still and small upon the ground.

"No more escape attempts."

His raised hoof caught my attention before I could even open my mouth to protest.

"Bu—"

"No buts! No fucking buts! *Always* with the fucking 'buts!' You are too weak and too hurt right now to do anything more. Put your head down, stay out of trouble, and get on with the work in Fillydelphia. That's the best thing for you right now."

"No... please, I can't go back to that."

"Stick with those who'll help you. That mare from earlier, pink mane? Just you and her help one another, and you'll perhaps find some way to be more content. But escape isn't possible in Fillydelphia. Not from inside the Walls. I don't want you losing your life chasing some stupid dream, not one of the last living non-Enclave pegasi. Take it from me, patience and keeping your head down is the way. I lasted two centuries through harsher days than this. The first days after the balefire... no settlements, trade, or currency. Just brutal aggression, anger, and bitter loss turning Equestria into a living fucking hell. Chances come, history changes, life goes on. I'm not asking you to start agreeing and enjoy it, I'm not even asking you to not look for a way... just don't rush headlong in. Equestria doesn't need another young corpse."

The wave of hurt was coming crashing down. My forehead ached, the scar thumping and flaring in sharp pains as the 'advice' was given to me. But I nodded. Strangely, without even knowing what I was doing, I found myself feeling more sorry for him than I. He'd lived with the world he hated for generations already.

"Did... did you lose anypony, when it happened?"

His eyes flared, as though about to launch into another curse-filled tirade. But restraining himself, Weathervane merely nodded, speaking quieter than I had ever heard him do so.

"You know... in this arse-backwards fucking city, that's the first time I've even been asked that. Hmph. Come along tonight, Murk. We'll see about your lungs with some RadAway. Perhaps something else too, if I can remember the spell. Now, stick with that mare... stay safe, because you will not hear the fucking end of it if I have to put up with any more filly-like whining from you than I already do. Caduceus should be done changing her bandages now over there."

He nodded his head to 'there' behind him. Glancing over, I could only see an empty mattress. Noting my confused look, Weathervane turned and sighed.

"Oh, pissballs... where have they got to?"

Approaching the shop cell to collect my saddlebag, I couldn't help but ponder on just what kind of 'special' job Protégé needed both myself and two lethal raiders to report to his office for. I only had a few minutes before I needed to head up, but I was intent on going up early. No way was I going to wander the corridors with Barb when he made his move.

Pushing the stockroom door aside, I blinked to adjust to the gloom, turning to wander past the corner toward the larger part of the room itse—

“Heh... oh you cheeky mare, you...”

I stopped *dead*. Oh... oh dear...

Sounds, like that which I had heard from Sundial’s message with Skydancer, were drifting around the corner that separated the doorway and stockroom. Muffled giggling, mixed with the sound of a little movement under a blanket. Poking my head around the corner just fast enough to bite my saddlebag and pull it out from where I’d left it at the edge of the stockroom, I only saw a rather... actively moving blanket upon the sofa, before I whipped back around and pressed myself against the wall to slide out. A buck’s sudden intake of breath and soft tease was followed by another of her soft and low laughs.

“Whaaaat? Can’t a mare in this crappy city take what opportunity she can to have a little fun?”

Sometimes, hypersensitive hearing really was a liability. Feeling my face burn brighter than my lungs ever had, I couldn’t exactly tune out the little gasps and soft moans that drifted out of the blanket.

Truth be told, I *probably* should have known Glimmerlight well enough by this point to have expected she’d be able to find company. Perhaps I would just come back when she wasn’t ‘busy’ and see her later.

“Oooh! Well... you certainly *do* know your anatomy, Mister Healer...”

Much later.

Protégé’s office was in as much a state as it normally was. Strewn with books of all shapes and colours around that thick desk, if it weren’t for the cleanliness of it (comparatively, anyway), I might have thought it just another wrecked room of the wasteland. My master sat behind his desk, a quill fluttering to and fro, his eyes darting from the scroll before him to a large tome held on a bookstand.

“Master, you asked me—”

“Hold one second, Murk.”

Fighting back a squeaked apology for interrupting, I stepped back and averted my eyes from his writing. Instead, I took notice of one new addition to the room. On the far edge of his desk sat a memory orb container, lying open. Inside lay the three remaining spell orbs the slavers had confiscated from Glimmerlight. It didn’t surprise me she hadn’t been allowed to keep them, given their apparent rarity.

After a second or two, I felt my ears twitch and perk up, Protégé was muttering under his breath as he wrote. So low I imagined even he thought that my hearing couldn’t spot it. Lying down on all fours and closing my eyes to rest (you took any chance you could) I concentrated on listening, fighting the nagging feeling that I shouldn’t be eavesdropping on my master.

“—that everypony has some role they can play in the recovery of our world, regardless of their flaws or fears. Your faithful student, Protégé.”

I heard the scroll wrap up before I opened my eyes. Another letter to his teacher, clearly. Unfortunately, this indication of any weak ponies still having things they could do hardly reassured me about this ‘special’ job. Across my life, ‘special’ jobs tended to simply mean

more dangerous' or 'liable to be disgusting.' Back on the rock farm, I had always been the one chosen to muck out the brahmin or stand watch for raiders during thunderstorms, on account of nopony being around to stand by my side. Apparently, even having a few who would didn't make any difference in here.

How could things change so much but still feel so utterly the same? The ache in my tooth, on cue, made its presence known. Just another job for just another day. I wasn't any closer to escape than I had been sitting in my pig sty. The Master likely was right.

The imagery of my nightmare flicked in my mind once again. That mocking laughter still rung in the depths of my imagination.

"Thank you for waiting patiently, Murk."

Popping back to my surroundings from the daydream, I focused my eyes and lowered my head.

"I can only wait to serve, master..."

His head inclined to one side, leaning on a hoof. "You're sounding a little more autonomous today, is something wrong?"

"S-sorry... I... I'm..." There was no sense in lying to him. He'd spot it a mile away. "I'm just afraid this is all I'll ever be, a slave in Fillydelphia til the day it finally kills me."

Protégé nodded slowly, clearly picking his words with due care.

"So you're afraid of being a slave forever... and so you fall into being one even more? A curious mindset, but tragically pessimistic. We shall make more of you, Murk. I believe you have earned at least an explanation by now. Are you ready to go?"

"Huh?" I couldn't deny an interest in knowing just what it was he had in mind for me, but right now? Just out of nowhere?

"But... but master, what about my shift? What about the other ponies like Barb, coming up soon?"

Protégé was already trotting to his stand and pulling on the holster for his revolver, before moving past me to the door.

"This *is* your shift, Murk. The others will be seen to by Ragini; she has all the information to direct them to whoever it was that requires their services. But you have something else to do. Follow, Murk, we're going out."

Half cantering to catch up with my master in the corridor, we passed Ragini, standing guard in a small room near to his office. A knowing nod from Protégé sent her to await the others in his absence. Briefly, I wondered about her. She had protected me from The Master, then shot me, and finally spent time insulting me on every meeting... yet I barely knew anything about her. Any questions likely wouldn't have a chance, as I found Protégé slowing down to allow me to trot alongside him, rather than behind him, where I felt my place truly was as the slave.

We passed down the stairs, clearly headed for the main entrance. Slave guards stood more at attention as he passed, sinking back into lazed slumps in their posts once he was gone.

"Master, where are we going?"

"Not far, Murk. There is a view I would like you to see before I explain anything, in a building nearby. Suffice to say, a little context is very important."

Passing through the entrance, we were met by buffeting winds that stirred the factory fumes and sent whirling dervishes of black dust arcing down the roads. Passing by a group of carts pulled by thin slaves, I found Protégé leading me not on the main streets that would take someone to the factories or mills, but away to the west of the city. We passed through

quieter roads, travelling for around ten minutes, before approaching a small courtyard. High-rises towered up from the ground here, their top halves having collapsed off as though sheared by a massive axe. The tops had simply been blown away to collapse all over the dead park on the opposite side. Huge chunks had also torn part of the elevated monorail that passed between the high-rise buildings clean off, making a ramp up to it from the ground into the courtyard.

After a few more minutes, it became clear that the entrance to one of these buildings was Protégé's intent. What was left seemed like a jagged castle of thick concrete, supporting pillars, and bent iron rods. Burnt curtains flapped through shattered windows on some floors in the wind. I gulped.

"I... I don't think this is a good place..."

"Calm yourself, Murk. They supported the weight of two centuries of wear. Two small ponies won't cause them to collapse."

Shaking my head, I dropped slightly behind him.

"N-not that... ponies died here. This was their home."

Reaching the low and wide steps that would take us to the shattered glass of the front doors, Protégé stopped and looked up at the missing top floors. After a second, it almost seemed like he was trying to imagine it whole and rebuilt.

"Yes, it was. As was everything the unfortunate souls of old possessed in this city. We won't be going too high. Now... let's get going, we shouldn't take too long."

The interior was as desolate as the Stable. Spilled bags filled musty corridors, many of them blocked by rubble. The distant whine of auto axes and screams of slavers were heavily dulled in here, punctuated only by the roar of factory shift horns. Protégé trotted ahead, seeking another staircase after the main one had proven to have collapsed. Taking my small nervous steps, I occasionally had to canter forward to catch up.

"Master Red Eye's workforce hasn't gotten around to this tenement yet with so many factories left to reactivate. Truth be told, I've been tempted to get a few volunteers to scout it out soon."

"Isn't that what we're— *yargh!*"

I cried out, backing off as I glanced into a room and witnessed a small pile of bones facing away from a window. Through the broken glass, I could see the eerie glow of the crater facing this side. Pressing myself back against the opposite wall, I gently shuffled away from the apartment doorway. Having turned in concern, Protégé trotted across and glanced in himself before sighing.

"It's likely that won't be the only one. These flats, I believe, were still being lived in when the missile struck. Not all ponies could afford Stable tickets."

I nodded, shakily. Sundial had had the same problem. Almost to my surprise, I felt Protégé's hoof touch my shoulder.

"Are you alright? You can keep going?"

I didn't know if I was shivering from the bones or from his suddenly caring tone, the sense of care fought with my memory of him stopping me. I wanted to throw myself at his hooves and beg to be helped as much as I wanted to sucker punch his face for what he'd done to me.

"I... yes... t-the Stable was worse..."

"I know, Murk. They often are. Come on, trot beside me, we're almost there."

He moved away, taking a few slow steps. I took a breath, and got up.

"Almost where, master?"

"You'll see."

He brokered little questioning. Ducking below a sparking, gem-encrusted conduit that had fallen from the ceiling, I saw Protégé point wordlessly to a signed door at the back. Almost to my glee, I saw it had a little picture of stairs beside it. Some ponies *were* considerate for the illiterate!

Moving on upwards revealed only more dead corridors, filled with enough luggage to make an assumption that the ponies in here had received just enough warning to make one last dash for safety. Likely the haunting sirens had been the only warning these ponies got. Some of the floors looked out onto nothing, simply a ledge where a portion of the floors had been torn away when it collapsed. Whimpering, sticking close to Protégé, I tried not to look at my hooves as we picked our way around the still-clothed skeletons that lay beneath the luggage. They had fallen on the stairs themselves. As I rounded the next set, something over the wind caught my ears.

'... *bee... bee... bee... bee... bee...*'

Stopping dead, the sound of some sort of alarm began to pick up in my ears. I would have thought it to be Sundial, had we been any higher but no, this was muffled, and further away from above us.

"P-Protégé... what's that?"

He stopped, glancing around the immediate area.

"What's what, Murk?"

Of course, he couldn't hear like I could.

"Something up ahead of us. Like a beeping, an alarm..."

Shaking his head, my master continued trotting along, staying silent until he knew what it was. Sticking close behind him, it occurred to me that beneath that student barding I still didn't know what his cutie mark was. Probably just a book or something, maybe a padlock to stick with the theme as one of the ponies keeping me in here.

Continuing along the corridor, I could see the Mall through some of the blasted walls of wrecked rooms. From these few flights up, likely just short of Sundial's message limit, I could still see the main entranceway. No slaves were travelling, probably not yet the time for them to head out.

'... *bee... bee... bee... bee... bee...*'

Further along, Protégé stopped, more intently listening. To my shock, I saw him draw his revolver with a small magic burst.

"Master, what—"

"Got something on E.F.S."

He was looking, apparently, at the wall.

'... *bee... bee... bee... bee... bee...*'

Then I heard what he had seen. A small sound.

'... *kssh... kssh...*'

"Oh no, please no more. I've had enough of scary things from the past. I can hear something moving!"

Lowering myself to the ground, I just shivered. Protégé moved into the access hallways

for this floor, glancing around in a full circle to check the area. It was filled with numerous open doors to apartments.

“Don’t worry... it’s not hostile. Well, yet. But I don’t see any movement, it’s just standing still about twenty metres to our left. Come on.”

“O-ok...”

Creeping forward, I stuck nearby to him. One day in front of that revolver, the next, I was being protected behind it. It felt surreal, moreso in such a location as this. We stepped over an abandoned pram, and I saw that the corridor turned into a second row of apartments at the end of this one.

Rounding the corner, I saw Protégé glance down the hallway and jerk back.

Gradually, after glancing at me, Protégé re-aimed his revolver and advanced once again. Moments later, he lowered it with a relieved chuckle.

“Well, would you look at that.”

Nervously trotting out, I saw the source of at least one of the noises. Ahead of us, a strange multi-limbed machine was sweeping the floor, hovering about a foot from the ground. It wasn’t sweeping everywhere, just one small patch that had almost been rubbed clean to the concrete. Many of its limbs hung uselessly, while the magical energy keeping it afloat (similar to the sprite-bots, I presumed) seemed to flicker and make it stutter in the air every few seconds.

Seeing us advancing, an eye stalk whirled round to face us.

“Brrrrrk-ello, sirs! Brrrrk-brrrrrk-rry about the mess!”

The eye turned back to its work, leaving us to simply stare at this strange, forgotten robot.

“An old Clean-n’-Handy, hmm? I should see about getting your friend Glimmerlight to take a look at it. Might still be recoverable.”

“I... I’m sure she’d enjoy it... but... but the beeping?”

I could still hear it. Above the soft sound of the old robot sweeping one square foot of floor, that digital sounding beep was still going off around us.

“Well, I’d thought it was this old robot, but it’s on our way. No doubt we’ll see...”

“Brrrk— so sorry sirs! I’ll let you past!”

Gently pushing our way past the cleaning robot, Protégé began leading me toward a side of the building, the one opposite the Mall. His posture was becoming tense, far more than even mine. What was he worried about?

The hallways were more deserted here, hiding larger rooms that were oddly empty. Ponies being priced out of richer rooms? I wondered if these ones had been vacant.

Protégé moved up to one, his magic lifting a note from the door. Scanning it, he read a portion aloud.

“Sorry we didn’t have time to tell you, Surf. We’re moving out the city. Too many rumours, too many drills. I can’t take it anymore. Check with Radish down the hall for my new address.”

He put it gently on a shelf behind the door.

“I’d heard some ponies moved out the cities in the months before the megaspells.”

“They knew?”

Protégé shook his head. “Nopony really did. I guess some just got a hunch.”

Much like Protégé himself right now, I wondered. His voice was very low, almost a whisper. His eyes kept looking around warily. Most curiously of all, I saw him sniffing the air.

The beeping became louder, more directly audible as we moved down these higher end rooms. Soon it was clear, it was coming from within an apartment up ahead.

Protégé pushed past a fallen wall that led into a rather vertigo-inducing drop. A portion of the building had ripped apart in the collapse. Edging carefully, I tried not to look down... what kind of pathetic pegasus was I? Afraid of falling?

But my fears quickly relocated, the sound was coming from the next doorway. To my surprise, I saw Protégé finally seem to relax as he got close enough to hear it properly.

"I think I may know what it is."

Without waiting, he bucked open the jammed door, causing a great mass of dust and fragments of rubble to drop from the weak door frame. Watching him walking calmly inside, I couldn't find the same ease of mind that he showed. If it wasn't dangerous... that didn't mean it wouldn't... wouldn't be...

It was.

The moment I trotted in behind Protégé, it was revealed to be something as simple and depressing as it sounded. Before me in the apartment lay an open door to the bedroom, its alarm clock insistently making a two-hundred-year-old wake up call to the couple that were still on the bed, their blackened bones curled around one another in a final embrace.

They must have realised there was no way to get to the ground floor or basement in time, and had just lain and waited.

No... no the Stable hadn't desensitised me. Not at all...

Feeling my hooves go weak, I turned and backed out on shaky legs until I could fall against the side of the rotted couch. Coughing and sucking in air between sobs, I felt the hollow grip of tragedy. I loathed how it made me feel, but I couldn't deny it. Each shrill beep of the alarm clock serving only to send further stings of hate for this world into my mind. Eventually, it ceased; a small click as Protégé's hoof finally ended the little machine's wailing.

I heard him trot out behind me. It hurt, to be so upset and sick in the presence of my master, and as I felt him wander over beside me I expected to feel the curt order and insistent pull to keep going.

I didn't expect to feel his hoof rest over my shoulders to try and comfort me.

With all my life, I hated him. The pony who had turned me back at the last possible obstacle; the one who had put a bullet in me. But right now, he was the only one caring for me.

Before I even realised what I was doing, I had flung myself against him, taking refuge in the small measure of kindness he offered, crying my heart out into the shoulder of somepony I could not recognise as either a master or an ally.

We sat apart, afterwards. Protégé had quietly asserted that this room would do. For what reason, I didn't really know. I simply sat against a side cabinet, meek, and trying to not feel embarrassed about what I'd just done. My eyes still felt red and sore, hopefully hiding the minor blush as I tried to work out why I'd done that. Why I'd sought shelter in him as much as I would in Glimmerlight.

Protégé had remained unflappable, simply keeping that one hoof gently held on the back of my neck as I had let the sadness all out. Afterwards, he seemingly showed no real

reaction, almost a little withdrawn. Only now, he sat and stared from the window. I had to hide my eyes as he turned toward me.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Mhm...”

He smiled softly.

“Don’t be ashamed, Murk. You aren’t the only pony who feels the sadness of what has been lost in this world. By all rights... none of this should have happened. I think no less of you for showing it. If anything, it has proven a part of you that I had long suspected. You’ve got a heart that cares past yourself. In some ways, its related to us being here now.”

“You... you promised that you would begin to show me what it is you want with me...”

He slightly winced, as though not liking my wording of that particular point.

“To show you how I intend to help you, is the better way I think of it. Master Red Eye helps ponies, if they allow themselves to be helped. I want you to be the next one. You might do Equestria proud, aiding us. However, I cannot order this of you, I can only give you a choice to help Equestria... or to willingly say no. It’s being here, away from unfriendly ears, that tell you that I require your help with something. Something that, for all my authority, I cannot ask of you in my stead as a work leader under Master Red Eye.”

My mind reeled. *Protégé* had a job for me that needed done off the record? Something that he could not risk others hearing, to the point that he had separated me from everypony else and other duties simply to find space to ask it? I didn’t know how to reply, or what to think. The idea that a master was giving me a choice was unfathomable. I had chosen before, but only for myself or those who were also slaves.

“I... I... uh...”

“Come here, Murk.”

Moving toward where the window had once stood, *Protégé* beckoned me with a hoof. On cue, I lightly trotted over, glancing through.

The view from this side of the building gazed toward the Wall. Behind it, the hills to one side of the large valley Fillydelphia lay within rose up, the same ones the Stable had been buried beneath.

However, what drew my attention was something closer. The view was dominated by one building. Sheer-faced with dark marble, and riddled with balconies and turrets, it held a grandeur not often seen in Fillydelphia. Around it lay a thick wartime security wall topped with razorwire. Slaver guards could be seen permitting processions of limping slaves in through a mesh gate.

“Somepony else’s slave pen?”

Protégé merely nodded, before pointing out the giant brass symbol of a six-pointed star.

“That, Murk, is the Ministry of Arcane Science Hub in Fillydelphia. Or, what once was the hub, anyway... it has since fallen into a multi-purpose use. Both as worker’s accommodation on the lower floors, and specialist repair on the upper areas using the tools they have in there. What I need from you, is for you to steal a piece of technology for me.”

Staggering back, my mouth gaped open. Suddenly, the reason for such secrecy had become apparent.

“B-but—”

Protégé cut me off, his tone serious.

“I understand this is asking a lot of you, Murk. But this piece of technology would permit workers like yourself, under my care, to eat and drink with less fear of

contamination. It's called a Sparkle Sanitiser, developed near the end of the war by the Ministry Mare herself while experimenting with ways to counter balefire radiation. Eventually, other projects far larger, ones never committed to any record I know of, took her attention, and it was sent here to be finished. One prototype made it to completion before the missiles fell... and it lies in there."

Pointing with a hoof, he indicated the Ministry Hub itself. From up here, I could effectively see the layout of the entire courtyard surrounding the area. Mostly worn away, I could see piles of wreckage had been thrown in corners by the slaves. Even as I watched, one slave was being bucked repeatedly by a guard for dropping something. Whoever ran that slave pen was clearly not like Protégé.

Pulling a small folder from his saddlebag, Protégé dropped it before me. From within slid carefully drawn maps matched to the layout of, I guessed, the Ministry.

"I can provide blueprints, directions, and descriptions, Murk. But do not think of this as me seeing you only as my personal thief. No, I only ask because you will be bringing hoarded technology to the good of others, not just yourself. That... and I may be able to redirect some resources this technology would save me to try and help you survive, Murk. Weathervane told me about your sickness..."

My hooves crossed over my chest, almost embarrassed. That caring look in his eyes simply made me want to look away. The feeling of throwing my hooves around my *master* to cry and let it all out was still jarring and uncomfortable. You *didn't do that*.

"I won't hold it against you should the decision be to simply return home, Murk. This is your choice."

"Master... why are you doing this for me in particular? Why not Glimmer or... or some other pony? They want to be good, too..."

There was a small silence. I wondered if he hadn't expected that question, leading to this quiet thought. Eventually, he let the eyepiece drop into his hooves, turning it over a few times, staring deeply at it.

"I want you by my side, Murk. You and I are more alike than I think you know. When you really break it down, I think you want the same as I do. To live without the tragedy surrounding us. To find some place in this world that might be just... better. That is why I picked you to offer these opportunities to, in lieu of the freedom I cannot give you. Because I think you understand the feeling, and because I'd like to hope we could help one another through this. That we can make things, well, just a little better for ourselves."

He got up, wandering back toward the door.

"I'm not forcing you. The choice is yours. Now, good day and, if so, good fortune."

I could not quite believe what I'd just heard. Protégé had always stood as a sort of beacon of conviction toward Red Eye's work. Only now was I beginning to see the true emotion that lay beneath that unwavering obedience and loyalty he showed to his own master. It was nothing more than a desperate wish to escape the reality of the wasteland...

Sitting against the cabinet, watching him leave, I couldn't ever hope to dredge up an appropriate response. Only one thing came to mind. Protégé had helped me from the moment he had met me. Our confrontation in my escape attempt was a solid brick wall that prevented a true trust in him, but he hadn't turned away from trying to aid me in what ways he could. He had even comforted me in my moment of weakness earlier.

There was but one thing I could give that I knew I possessed.

"W-wait!" I shouted out after him, and saw him turn. "Please, I... I took this from the

Stable for... for you."

Digging into my saddlebag, I bit and drew out the hardback book.

Protégé came back in, raising an eyebrow at the sight.

"A book? Why, thank you, let's see."

Protégé's magic draw it across to his face, flicking open to look at the inside cover. I found myself biting my lip. I didn't even know what it was. His eyes drew back and forth for a few lines.

He smirked.

"Daring Do and the Quest for the Sapphire Stone. Well now, a tale of a broken and hurt pegasus, unable to fly, as she faces an almost impossible task..."

His eyes looked up with a knowing look. The book slid into his own saddlebag.

"Rather appropriate... no?"

Turning with a curt and grateful nod, I heard him trot away down the corridor as I listened to his hooves gradually fade away in the abandoned building, leaving me alone in the room to make my decision.

For the longest time, I simply sat and stared upon the Ministry of Arcane Science. Not at the slaves, or the horrid scrap constructions that repaired its marred walls that must have once gleamed, but at the symbol of the six-pointed star.

From last night, I had realised that the stars were the holders of memories. They symbolised the past. I had seen the shapes that made up a long forgotten world, told only in patchwork across the canvas of time.

Now before me lay the largest icon to support this. An entire Ministry whose work had been the preservation of memory. They had sought to help future generations, wasteland or not, to understand the past. They were, in some way, the true visionaries of helping to create the better world that Protégé so dreamed of.

That I dreamed of.

Pulling my saddlebag over, I slipped the maps inside, before strapping my PipBuck to the left hoof, out of the way of injury. Slipping my goggles on and adjusting my fleece, I took one last look at the Ministry from above, noting the only way in I could make out, across the old monorail track.

Stars were memories. *Aurora Star* had led this place. Sundial and Skydancer were with the stars in the past now.

It all came together in one great dream that this building had been a part of.

That someday the stars might aid in our escape from the wasteland itself.

Finding my way up onto the monorail was not especially difficult. On the way in I had seen the broken shaft that could act as a means with which to access the elevated platforms. Old trains lay dormant on the tracks while others had simply been blasted off and cannibalised by Red Eye's workforce. Presumably, the ones up here were too difficult to work on right now.

Picking my way through the buckled interiors for cover or hopping over thick singular tracks, I slowly crept toward the Ministry hub itself. The monorail passed close to the edge of that barbed wall, my hope was that there was something I could land on safely to jump off. Those piles of scrap had looked promising, stacked at an angle against the walls to offer

a somewhat rough ramp to break my fall.

Slavers wandered the courtyard surrounding the crenelated walls. Most were directing slaves to carry boxes on their backs, in carts, or with magic. Large piles had been set on pallets, ready for transportation, while newer outhouses and slaver accommodation had been built from black wood. They would all provide pretty good cover until I could blend in with the other slaves.

Approaching the wall, scooting along below the small jutted side of the monorail tracks, I poked my head up to get a glance beneath me.

Oh... oh that *was* high. Gulping hard, I cast my eyes across the intended landing area.

It seemed to stretch out for a long fall. The scrap pile, covered by sheet corrugated metal and a few thick slabs of steel, bottomed out with old cardboard boxes, only provided a small comfort against the drop. The metal could be slid on, sure... and wet cardboard would slow me down, right?

Glancing around, I knew I had to time this right. Slavers were looking rather attentive with so many slaves out and about. None would be watching up here, they weren't anticipating anypony trying to break *in*. It took an achingly long time for them to seem to all be glancing the other way.

Controlling my breathing, I leaned out. The sensation was uncomfortably familiar to a tower not too long ago. Sucking in breath, trying to force my aching lungs to operate properly, I let myself relax as best I could for a few seconds.

I really hoped they had some RadAway to steal in there. I could feel my throat clamping up under all the smog in the air out here.

Not giving myself any more time to think of further bad thoughts, I turned, braced my hooves against the monorail side, and hurled myself over toward the scrap. The wind of the fall rushed in my ears, and I tried to roll and land on my side instead of my *face*. A shock of motion kicked up my rump as I felt my tail catch the barbed wire and yank out a few strands. The motion upturned me, leading me to land right on my back upon the sloped surface. The impact was sudden and brutal, shocking my body.

Feeling the wind knocked clean out of me amongst a pained cough, I slid faster and faster across the sheet metal surfaces, and bumped over thick rivets or girders. With one last stinging smack on my rump from the edge of the large corrugated piece, I was thrown into the wet and soggy boxes that collapsed around me. The soil rocked my body on impact, making every limb of mine shake and feel numb for a few seconds. Seething with gritted teeth, I stifled a groan. That had been rougher than I'd expected, but hopefully quiet.

"Oi! Who dropped somethin'? I'll 'ave yer knackers if you broke another box!"

Not quietly enough.

Burrowing deeper, I covered myself in the boxes. I heard slaves scamper and avoid the stomping hooves of an overseer. I could hear him so clearly, his hooves had to be within ten feet.

"I... I think something dropped off the monorail! Like a... a piece of metal breaking off?"

The hooves stamped closer, making wet splashes in the turned earth. Through the small gap below my hiding spot, I could see his shadow. I could only silently plead, 'oh please don't look in the boxes... please, please...'

For twenty agonising seconds, I could hear a small stick being prodded into the scrap pile. Each time closer, then only a foot away.

“Eh! Come on, Fruit Punch. It’ll just be another piece a’ scrap. That monorail’s ready to go soon anyway.”

The stick retracted, but only after a few more seconds did I hear the slaver leave. Waiting for as long as I dared, I poked my head out through a hole in the boxes, seeing a dull grey earth pony trotting away toward the slaves. They seemed to be packing up, ready to carry their last shipment in. Slowly, I began pulling myself free and creeping away from the box pile, sticking low to the ground. I felt terribly vulnerable, relying on ‘Fruit Punch’ not turning around, rather than any real cover. The moment I was close enough, I ducked behind the thin metal wall of a slaver’s home to plan my next move.

The slaves were taking boxes from just in front of this house toward a huge double door in the back of the Ministry. It wasn’t the only one. I could see a series of large entrances opening to allow fully laden carts to exit toward the main gates, clearly some sort of old loading area. Under the noise cover, I slipped forward again, making a quick darting gallop to dive behind a pallet of square metal cases (oh, hello old friends...). But where now? If I could catch up to the full procession I could blend in with them like I had done at the Mill long ago (granted, that hadn’t *worked*, but still...), yet there were too many slavers and bits of open ground between us.

With my back pressed against the boxes, I heard the command shouted to fetch the next pallet. The slavers were making their way back. Poking my head out only led me to yank it back right away, they were coming this way!” This wasn’t a good plan, no, not at all!

“Grab a box each, lift ’em in, ya’ pansies. Fruit Punch and I could take three each, and you lot are stumbling and groaning over *one*?”

I overheard a slave mutter something quietly about them trying it while malnourished and sick. I could appreciate the thought. I’d never been able to lift these boxes even whilst empty. They were just far too large for me. For goodness sake, I could probably fit in—

Aha!

As swift as I thought possible while staying silent, I turned and bit the lock, swung it open and tried to prise up the lid with my hooves. Straining, I risked a little more noise to push harder. Already, one slave had reached the opposite side of the pallet to watch over them. Faster slaves were beginning to drag the other boxes off the front of the pile.

Almost tripping as it popped open, I set about swiftly yanking out the various wires and circuit boards in the box, and covering them with soil until I was happy it wasn’t too obvious. I glanced around, then hopped up and fell head first into the box. After wiggling my rear hooves in the air to give me enough momentum to get my back half up, I finally curled up into it completely.

The lid snapped shut above to leave me in complete darkness, eerily similar to that of the Stable, only with my full body curled and crushed into a tiny space. This time, I couldn’t even dare turn on my PipBuck light. I simply had to sit quietly, still, and try not to let the claustrophobic feelings sink in.

Even a few seconds in, it was proving difficult. The air was low in here, with only the smallest of gaps between lid and box providing just enough to survive on my weakened lungs, but I knew I couldn’t keep this up long. My throat was getting hot from the effort as I had to fight to breathe properly.

“And the last one! Grab that too!”

A lurch and loss of balance signalled the lifting of ‘my’ box, followed by the strain and cry of the poor slave who would have my weight to pull this one journey as well as the box

itself. With a dull thud and a shoot of pain through my spine at the impact, I felt myself dumped onto the cart before I was pulled slowly toward the Ministry itself.

In here, I had plenty of time to think. It was all I had to try and distract myself from the cramped conditions. Chief among them was, *why* was I doing this? Was it because I did want to help? I didn't think of myself as somepony who had big aims. Was it because I somehow found myself interested in the great stars of memories and had heard about the mare who ran this place?

Or was it simply because he had asked me?

Even now, I still wasn't sure if I was choosing... or simply obeying.

Yet I couldn't deny it. For whatever reason, something had drawn me to want to come in here.

I just wished I knew what it was.

The journey was, mercifully, not too long. Five or so minutes filled with the ringing wails of the slaves who took too long receiving canes or whips to their backs. I wished I knew how to activate voice recording on my PipBuck. The ponies outside the Walls needed to hear this. If they could be made to realise the true horror of Fillydelphia, perhaps something might be done about it? Trapped in this box, and despite living hear, I found hearing just the sounds of Filly a uniquely harrowing experience.

Before long, the trundling of the cart ceased, and I felt my box being lifted with a smooth grace, likely a strong telekinetic. Swinging across, the odd loss of gravity felt incredibly bizarre, before I was harshly dropped the last two feet. The impact sent a jarring pain through my entire body, making my lungs spasm and my throat explode into a harsh coughing fit. The noise wasn't an issue with so much noise outside, but I had no room to properly move. Each cough was like an inverse crush on my body in the small box. I felt a trace amount of blood splatter on my own stomach, before all balance and sense of direction fell out from under me. Sniffing, whimpering softly in pain, I clutched my chest and shivered, praying that I could get out of this box soon.

I heard one final clunk of a box being lowered, and a pony sighing in relief.

"That it all off? Good, get back to the main chamber, you lot. Master's gonna have a new job soon. Come on, stop limping back there!"

The sound of a few dozen ponies leaving began to filter through the box, backed up by the heavier trot of the slavers as they followed and herded their stock. I spent a few minutes just listening, but all I heard were a few distant shouts and screams. It was time to go.

Pushing myself upwards, I exerted myself to press the lid open. To my horror, it didn't move.

"Oh no... no, no, *not now*. Do not do this!"

Pressing harder, thumping the back of my neck upwards and pressing with my head, I strained and strived. It moved, but it felt heavier than I had ever remembered. Suddenly, the realisation began to filter through as to what that clunk from earlier was. Somepony had put another one on top.

Fear began to set in, I was trapped in a tiny box, alone, with nopony knowing I was here and a gradually failing air supply. Eyes watering, I frantically pushed, but to no avail. Hyperventilating, my lungs burned and my hooves shook madly. I pushed with every ounce

of strength that my sick little body could spare.

It was hopeless. I was trapped. Only fear of a worse fate kept me from screaming for help. Twisting, I turned on my PipBuck's light to gain any sort of vision, but all it did was show very clearly the pressing lack of space, when I saw just how my body was twisted and contorted to fit in here.

I panicked. I began thrashing in sheer terror, driven to a maddened state.

"I... I don't want to die in here! Somepony help me!"

Forget other fates, I needed *help*!

"HELP!" The shouting only echoed right back into my sore ears. "I... I don't want to suffocate, I—"

Spasming again, my screams only led me to cough and hack painfully. But amidst it, I felt my struggles rock the box from side to side. Sucking air as best I could, I tried to shift it again... and again. Building momentum, I realised the box above me was heavier than I was. If I could just make it rock from side to side...

It took every bit of small courage I could to calm myself and keep rocking, even as my mind begin to wander. The lack of air was getting to me, I knew it. I couldn't pass out. If I did, I might never wake up! I threw my body one way and then the other, feeling the thump as the boxes swayed and clumped down on their edges. Finally... beautifully, I felt it overbalance and keel over, ejecting me onto a concrete floor in a dark room. Breathing in the musty air was like a dream... I simply lay on my side for a full minute, filling my lungs as I pushed my chest out and in a good few times, and trying to stop my shivering. Slowly, I started stretching my dead legs to regain the feeling in them.

Eventually, my front legs fell back to cross over my chest.

I hated this illness. Why couldn't somepony fix it? I just felt so weak and helpless amongst other ponies who were stronger, faster, or tougher than myself. All I had were my dreams and the small measure of faith from the mare who had shown me that anypony, no matter how small, could take back their life.

I tried to remember everything about her as I pushed my hooves beneath me. I had to cling onto those memories, those little stars of hope like when she had risen to the skies above in the Pit.

"Right... right... let's go..."

Opening my eyes, I found that the room was a large chamber. I could see the multitude of large doors that carts had unloaded at, the ones I'd seen outside. This had to be the delivery warehouse. Piles of boxes, crates, and shelving units covered this side, while rows of carts were littered against the other. Three exits left this room, one big and gaping toward a brightly illuminated area, and the other two only dimly lit through small, single doors. Staggering across, I tried to hear down each of them, but only the large entrance held any noise at all, that of many ponies laughing and screaming in dual succession.

Maybe that one wasn't such a great route.

The other two, however, were silent. Picking one, I crept forward and tried to open it under the dim light, only to find it was locked.

Shrugging, I made my way to the other one, finding the door already open anyway. The flickering white gemlights on the walls gave enough ambient light so see fairly well, so I turned off my PipBuck light, and I trotted carefully inside.

It led to a changing room, dominated with three rows of lockers cutting down the centre of the room. Small wooden benches were dotted here and there, mostly snapped and made

of peeling paint by now. Glancing around to make sure nopony else was there, I pulled out Protégé's maps.

It didn't take long to locate the huge warehouse on one floor. Protégé had drawn a small purple circle on a higher floor, and pointed to it with a few arrows. That was likely where the Sparkle Spoofitiser was. It looked like if I were to go through the back of this locker room and across the top of a big main room on the gantries, I would find the research areas. From there it was a simple run through into what looked like a lab.

Okay, simple. Stay to the shadows and creep. I could do that, right? It was easy to remember the directions compared to the Stable. I could trot this place no problem after a quick look at the maps.

Right away it began to go wrong. Perking up, I felt my ears twitch as the sound of two ponies laughing came to light nearby. A doorway in the same room as me, somewhere hidden behind the lockers, burst open.

Stuffing the maps back in, I rushed across to hide at the end of one of the locker rows, glancing down the line at the door, hoping they'd just walk past. It was dark, I could just go down the other side of the lockers.

They didn't. Staggering about, almost drunken looking, I saw a stallion and a mare holding one another up fall leaning on the lockers. The mare, a unicorn, still had a glass bottle held in her magic that they were both taking swigs from. I whipped my head back to hide.

"Hey... hey... wanna use the showers? Could... hic... clean ya, if y'know what ah mean..."

The mare snorted before I heard the sound of a hoof impacting with a head.

"Hah! Yer a good drinker but... screw you..."

"S'what I was hopin' for!"

A second, harder, sound rung out, but the pair only laughed more. Clearly, this was some sort of running joke to the two slavers. I heard a gurgle of one of them taking another swig from the bottle, before it dropped on the floor.

"Aww..."

"Hey hey... you don' do that... hic... y'throw em! Much more satisfying! Watch..."

The sound of somepony grabbing and grunting with effort was followed only by my spotting the blur of the bottle. It flew past my head and smashed on the wall, showering me with thick fragments of glass. I yelped in shock, before clamping a hoof over my mouth.

"...whut was that?"

"Yer mo— ARGH, FUCK!"

The hardest hit yet denoted a return to thinking for the stallion. The mare, however, took a more serious tone.

"I heard somepony! Hey! Hey come out... we can have, snrk... a drink, or somethin'!"

Dearly hoping their far from sober state would keep them distracted, I tried to gently trot away down the other side of the lockers. If I could just reach the door...

Already, I heard them staggering down the opposite side, not more than a couple of feet away. I almost leapt right off my hooves as I heard the mare scream.

"PEEKABOO!"

Hearing her shout at the spot I'd departed seconds before, I realised she had reached the end! Only feet behind me! I needed to *move*. I sped up into to a quiet canter, eyes locked on the open door.

"I'll... I'll go look this side, see if it was somepony in the corridor fuckin' with us..."

I stopped dead. The mare was where I had just been and would no doubt look up here soon, but the stallion was now going back the way he had came. He'd see me if I ran out. There was one place to go.

Scrambling, tucking my hindlegs into the handles, I clambered up onto the top of the dusty lockers themselves. Crawling along the top, I cast a glance back toward the door as, true to my guess, I saw the slaver wander up to it and glance out into the corridor.

"Nopony here..."

"And nopony down here eithe.," replied the mare, her voice coming from the same row I'd just climbed out of. "Think we're hearin' them ghosts they say are in here? Ooooo!"

The stallion blew a raspberry. "Pfft... that was just once in the main office. Said he saw a fuckin' purple pony appear right before 'em. Nopony listens to Theory Shaker, anyway. Hence the name. Nah I think we're... we're just too fuckin' drunk, Flank."

"Dun call me that... me brother's the one with the shitty name. Ah'm... ah'm Firm Blade now, got it? Now git over here... let's go see if they got any more to drink in the warehouse."

The stallion, didn't waste any time in staggering away. Hunched atop the lockers, I concentrated on not letting myself cough from all the dust, swallowing it down and whimpering as quietly as I could. Spluttering into my hoof without opening my mouth, I felt my eyes go hazy and my head throb from the deadened coughs.

I finally opened my eyes after it was done, seeing silver glints in my vision, my balance momentarily whirling. This was getting worse. I needed to get this done quickly before I was too sick to continue. Protégé likely didn't know how fast my illness could turn bad.

Poking my head over the edge of the lockers, I had to snap back. The slavers were still at the doorway I'd come in, talking about which crate might have their booze. It was a miracle they hadn't heard my suppressed coughing. I'd have to do this quietly.

On an unrelated point... I now had a headache.

Watching the slavers, the moment they moved away, I dived down, rolled on the floor and cantered toward the door.

Outside, I found the corridor to be much better constructed than most, somewhat on the level of the Ministry of Image yesterday. It only made sense, I guessed. But here, multiple rows of coloured stripes ran along the walls. Some turned down one corridor while others kept going past. Symbols were embossed at various intervals. Were they... directions to things? One, the purple one, held the six pointed star, while a red one bore the symbol of a small flame and a pony running away from it.

But my attention was taken by the yellow one, bearing the butterfly symbol of healing. It pointed down the opposite way to my objective, but there was no *way* I was overlooking this opportunity. Already, my vision was swimming as the ambient radiation built and made my chest feel hot. Already I felt the urge to cough, my throat felt like it was being tickled, but was dry and sore to swallow through.

The corridors seemed oddly deserted. Weren't there dozens of slavers and almost a hundred slaves in here? Where were they? Not that I was complaining, the more I trotted, the more I realised I was wandering side to side. The end of the corridor felt like it curved, but I knew it hadn't. The headache got worse, and I fell against the wall from another harsh coughing fit. Perhaps I could blend in as a drunk?

Squinting to get my vision to reassert from the blurring lights, I saw my destination up

ahead. An open glass room bearing the symbol of Fluttershy. Collapsing through its half open door, I began scouring drawers and cabinets feverishly; feeling my breath taking on a metallic tinge. The medical room was little more than a single raised bed surrounded by cabinets and glass-lined cupboards. A couple of thin metal trays on wheels had been tipped over, spilling scalpels and empty syringes everywhere.

Oh Goddesses, please, there has to be *some*. I threw aside small tubs of pills and bandages in my search, anything I didn't immediately need or know got thrown on the floor in my frantic search from cupboard to cupboard. Nothing. I searched the floor for any spilled sachets. Nothing. The drawers. Nothing. The bed, the bins, and the cabinets above. Nothing, nothing, nothing!

Collapsing against the bed, sucking air through clenched teeth, I felt my chest ache and swell in pain. In a discomforting sensation, I could feel the gurgle of blood deep down, or what I guessed it was. Like something was stuck in my throat that I couldn't get out. Was... was this wing of the Ministry irradiated? It shouldn't have advanced this fast!

Striving forward, I tugged at cabinets and climbed up onto the work surfaces to search the higher ones. It felt like somepony had lifted everything valuable from here already. All that was left was worthless junk! That wasn't fair! Everything tumbled out, from clipboards, to even a recorder. My hoof hit it as I stood on my hind legs to see into the top shelves.

Click...

"...oh... my, is it working? Oh! Sorry! Did I just ruin the beginning? I'm so sorry, whoever's hearing this..."

Aha! My hooves found one cabinet locked shut. Through it, hidden to one side I could see an orange haze through the tilted glass. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I pulled, the lock wouldn't give.

"Don't worry, Miss Fluttershy, I'm sure they won't mind. Now, your train leaves in one hour. I suspect they'll wait for a Ministry Mare, but we should get going. You really don't have to set up each one of these yourself. The staff who'll operate it are very capable..."

"Sorry, Cherry, but I just can't bear to think I haven't helped out somehow. I don't really like expecting somepony else to do the job I want. I'll leave after I get this medicine cabinet all locked in."

"Argh! Come on! Com—" I was cut off from coughing so hard that I fell upon the worktop, and then I cried aloud in pain as I fell into the sink, my side bashing off the metal tap on the way down. Wheezing, I looked around. There had to be something to prise the lock off with. They'd left me a message, but I'd rather they left me the *key*!

"Of course, Miss Fluttershy. Now, the recording you wanted?"

"Oh yes! My, I had almost forgotten, to whoever's listening, I'm so sorry—"

I heard Cherry cough into her hoof. I responded with a more savage cough of my own, before standing up on my hind legs to peer into the glass again. Now is when I wished I had Brimstone around.

I missed him, what I'd give for him to just throw me out of the way and... and headbutt this stupid glass or something!

"Right, well, I'm recording this for whoever comes along from the Ministry of Wartime Technology. Applejack very kindly sent me a gift, a bodyguard. But I'm so very sorry, I can't take him with me. He's just too... um... loud... and um... he likes the idea of war a little much... so sorry. I mean it's nice and all. He just makes me so nervous. I'm

leaving this for the engineer who's coming to set up the light. Could you return him to the Wartime Hub, pretty please? I'm sure they'd like to have him back... and tell Applejack I'm sorry."

The beaker smashed off the cabinet, as did the metal tray. Snorting (or at least, what passed for a snort from me) I grabbed a scalpel in my mouth and climbed back up.

"Miss Fluttershy, we really need to make tracks."

"There, now any of the little ponies who come to learn in the student wing won't get any nasty medicine they shouldn't have."

Growling as I twisted and jammed the scalpel in the lock from between my teeth, I rattled it around. Yeah... little ponies. Here's one little pony who *really* needed it, pretty please!

"That's wonderful, Miss Fluttershy" The voice held a small tinge of deadpan exasperation. "Now let's get you to your train. I'll call a trotters cab for us."

Nothing else for it... this would hurt. A lot. I pulled back my hoof, ready to swing, and smash it. But more cuts were better than my lungs acting up. I almost fell as my head swam and my hooves suddenly felt like wet noodles. My attack on the cabinet became impossible, as I instead curled up and coughed again, and again. I felt the taste of blood in my mouth, and spat it out. I couldn't wait, no matter how much this cut my hoof, I needed to try.

Swinging forward, I took a breath, consigned myself to needing the bandages afterwards... and smashed my left hoof as hard as I could into the glass.

And rebounded suddenly and sharply enough to catapult me completely off the worktop.

Landing on the bed, it rolled backwards and crashed into a tray, coming off its wheels to clatter onto the floor, dumping me against the far cabinet. Moaning as the landing jarred my already sore torso from the convulsions, I looked up to see the glass defiantly intact.

It was no good.

Holding my head in my hooves, I struggled to think of some other way. Some manner in which I might get the one thing that would let me live another few hours.

"Thank you, Cherry."

The sound of hooves trotting about played through the recorder. I heard the aid wandering away. Fluttershy, however, seemed to stop and make a few scuffling noises.

"Oh, um, before I end this? Please, could you tell the scientists the key to the cabinet is under the welcome mat until they get a proper box? Thank you ever so much."

Click.

I stared at the recorder a few seconds... before launching myself to the long faded mat. Pulling it up, I expected nothing but heartbreak.

And yet, there it was... waiting to be discovered by anypony willing to actually *listen* to the past.

"T-thank you... Flutters-s-shy... argh!"

Rolling over as another convulsion hit, I could feel my whole body spasm. I was shivering. The fever was starting to settle in. Driving myself forward step after step, I pulled my sore body up to the cabinet door, climbing it like some hideously tiring mountain, key in mouth. I grabbed the sachet and nearly bit the top off in a rush to get that foul orange liquid down my throat, and fall back to let it work, thankful and relieved. Even now, in some way, she was still caring for ponies.

Weathervane wasn't as alone as he thought.

Allowing myself a few minutes to recover while the RadAway soothed my throat, I soon retraced my steps to continue on my route. My lungs felt like they were able to expand properly after the medication, and my head felt a lot clearer now. That wasn't the closest run I'd had, but somewhere in here, I had run into radiation without knowing it to set it off that badly. Moving on seemed like the best idea.

Warily passing by the locker room door, hearing the two drunkards still shouting from within the cargo room, I advanced onwards, following the map. Very quickly, I envied the unicorn ability to hold something like a map up while trotting. Me? I had to stop and hide every corner or two to check I was headed in the right direction. Offices and rooms full of filing cabinets lined the route, possibly for the workers who dealt with import and export through the cargo areas? It certainly wasn't showing anything of the splendour I expected from a Ministry Hub.

A hubbub of noise began to filter in through my ears. I was clearly drawing near to somewhere with a lot of ponies all talking and shouting. Music was playing, too. Some sort of slaver lounge? But there were too many voices, dozens upon dozens.

Following my map, I cantered up some stairs, again wondering just why this portion was so deserted. I could see blankets and saddlebags left in these rooms, clearly accommodation for slavers or overseers... but nopony was home at all. Another flight led me to a set of workshops. Benches with clamps across each side either lined the walls or were nailed to the floor in the middle. There was nothing even vaguely magical here other than the lights. And not one pon—

Suddenly, I heard hooves.

I dove below one of the benches, pulling a few toolkits in front of me. Seconds later, a galloping pony went by at a thundering pace, heading to the stairs I had just come up. Slave or slaver, I did not know, but only once they had passed did I pull myself out and continue. My heart was beating fast, despite how quiet this area was. Background noise not considered, I was still deep in a forbidden place. I could *never* forget that.

If I were caught, if they discovered what I was, I likely wouldn't even get taken as a new slave. I'd seen trespassers brutally mocked, humiliated, and exhibited to other slaves in the past. Often much to the amusement of the *slaves themselves*. Not for the first time, did the sheer circle of brutality in Fillydelphia not cease to amaze me.

The workshops held five or six doors to the right, all of them seemed to lead into a large room, the place all the noise was coming from. Tentatively, I snuck forward to push one open, before hopping back as my hooves almost walked clean off the edge of a sudden drop.

A *big* drop.

Creeping forward, tentatively poking my head out, I saw a colossal room, three floors deep back to the ground floor. Ornate murals furnished every wall down to the bottom, where I saw a large open space in front of a wooden stage. Covering the back wall was a simple curtain of half moth-eaten fabric. Lighting rigs hung above it, while I could see various remains of chandeliers over the open space. Peeking my head around, I could see side rooms on the bottom floor, each containing small tables. Dotted here and there at various levels, I saw other balconies or open corridors that allowed onlookers to gaze into this central hub and watch whatever was taking place. In its heyday, this must have been beautiful.

But now, slavers had stripped out every seat before the stage, while the stage was lined with chickenwire mesh, shaped into large cages for slaves. Lines of foul banners and cloth were hung from balcony to balcony. Some bore Red Eye's mark, others ones I didn't recognise. The side rooms had been hollowed out into farther containment for their workforce, sealing them in with wooden barriers. Opposite the stage, the slavers had set up a few tables where some of them now sat and bustled around, drinking heavily and laughing as they either played cards or whooped at the stage. I could see a scrawny, underfed, and crying mare being forced into a humiliating routine, as the slavers thumped their tables and screamed for more. Other slaves were lethargically dragging their hooves around to see to the needs of their masters between their work shifts. In the side rooms, I could see the vast majority of the bony slaves, trying to get what rest they could or glaring hopelessly at the slavers.

There were a great many slaves simply left on the floor of the room, huddled in groups where they couldn't fit in the side rooms, as though the slave den was overpopulated. The majority of slavers not sat at the small tables were sitting against the walls or in side rooms, watching their stocks, their whips hanging ready. Many ponies came and went from side rooms, likely to their own accommodations. In all the entire room seemed to bustle with activity, like some sort of combination between a common area and a den.

But worst... the gantries on this level were gone. Inches ahead of my hooves, I could see where they had been torn away, leaving my route inaccessible.

I'd have to go down into that and try to blend in as I passed by. I didn't want to. I *really* didn't want to.

But it was the only way into the rest of the building, and much as it still confused me, I couldn't deny the motivation I finally felt inside me to make it in there.

I just wished I knew exactly why that drive had gotten so strong for this task of all things.

"If I tell you to go and fetch my fucking saddlebag, then you fetch my fucking saddlebag. Whether it's your shift or not!"

The slave was slapped heavily across the face by the burly earth pony, and rushed back out of the entrance on three legs, clutching their bloodied nose. In full view, I meekly trotted past them. This was, unfortunately, the best way. There was no chance to sneak unseen. I simply had to play the slave and stagger on through. At least I *had* gotten plenty of practice across my life.

To that end, the moment I passed into the massive stage room, I fell in alongside a group of weary slaves returning from a shift. I had hidden my PipBuck and goggles in my saddlebag to avoid drawing attention. Itching and sighing, the group around me made their slow path toward a spot on the floor where they collapsed. Unwilling to appear differently, I dropped with them onto my side upon the laminated wood. Truth be told, it wasn't entirely all acting that I was exhausted. Thirst was clawing at my throat. RadAway always left me in need of something more refreshing.

Above us, the poor mare was being jeered to, in their words, 'turn around and wiggle some more.' I could see the roughly forced-on makeup stained from her eyes. I saw the half-dozen or so slavers watching drunkenly whoop and stomp their hooves. The slave beside me was softly crying herself, clearly worrying for her own safety. Had she been told she was

next, I wondered? If she hadn't been so deprived of cleanliness and food, she might have been quite attractive. Fillydelphia ruined all kinds of ponies, I knew.

If I could just slowly move from group to group, I could make my way to the far doors that I knew led to the research areas. I began crawling as though hurt and tired, reaching for a fellow slave in the next cluster. A few other slaves were moving too. I only had to stay average and forgettable—

A whip cracked upon the ground. As one, all of us moving froze at the sound and turned to see the wiry unicorn stallion snarling.

"Get in your groups and stop moving, all of you! You think this is a social gathering? Unless yer told, don't move!"

Squeaking in terror, I saw his eyes focus on me, I hopped quickly into the next group along and cowered there, trying to pretend I'd always been from this one. The slaves roughly pushed me to the outskirts of the cluster, complaining and seeking more space for themselves. Eventually, I simply lay on the ground and shivered, hoping that nopony would really pay me any heed as just a small bundle on the floor. Already, the sheer noise and chatter of the slavers and the moaning of abused slaves was hurting my ears. A mare shrieked and begged when a couple of slavers tugged her off toward a curtained side room. Another buck wailed as he was whipped for bumping into a slaver. Behind the mare on the stage, I could see similarly dressed ponies, both stallions and mares, cowering in the chicken wire cages.

This entire place was a misery. I could see why Protégé hated it. A room that seemed to personify the day to day suffering of slaves. No extravagant tortures or cunning deceptions. Just deprivation and control. The reality of life for so many ponies caught in this horrific trade. I often thought that was the worst thing. Seeing ponies of so many types reduced to the same state. Happy ones, strong ones, angry ones, scared ones, yet after some time, witnessing them slowly transformed into beaten and submissive slaves never ceased to make me feel uniquely uncomfortable. It was the one process of slavery I'd never known myself.

I had seen the thousands of them across my life, free ponies that had fallen out of control of their own lives after one haunting day of capture. With them, I simply had to be a part of it.

For now. I reminded myself. For now...

Occasionally, I would spot a few slavers less interested in the brutal side of their work, preferring to simply rest on the outskirts of the room between shifts. It wasn't unusual, some slavers were just taking it for the work, after all. If I could maybe go by them instead, maybe they might be less prone to severe enforcement?

Waiting for a procession of slaves to limp past, I gently slipped in among them, trotting with my head down. Up ahead, I could see the thick door that led into the research areas swing open and close as slavers barged in. At least it was unlocked... now I only had to—

I was interrupted as I heard something that made the entire room come to a halt. The rhythmic stomp and hiss of machinery approached... as something awe inspiring emerged into the light from one of the larger doors behind me.

My mouth gaped as I saw what had to be the master of this area. I actually rubbed my eyes in disbelief, as I fought the urge to shriek on the spot. This... this was no pony!

It stood on hind legs? A thick, dark brown haired, and muscular body drew up above them to a bovine head bearing two sharpened horns. At first I thought the behemoth was wearing armour, but very quickly, to my horror, I saw it was *implanted*. Robotic-looking

imbedded machines in its chest whirled away. Both arms bore brutally large tri-fingered claws, each claw looking over six inches thick *widthways*. It gave the entire beast a stooped gait from the immense weight of those things hanging on metallic arms.

Gazing into those rotating red blinking eyes, I felt unbridled terror within my breast. This beast was already monstrous, but those implants made it worthy of the description 'death machine' in my eyes. Below it walked an old donkey, limping on a stiff hind leg. Then I realised, the huge thing was *following* the arthritic slaver. Was... that some sort of insane half-robot bodyguard?

Any thought further was killed immediately as I heard somepony else enter to my right. The bionic monster and the oddly authoritative donkey were bad enough to have to worry about, but that one voice overrode every thought I had on the spot.

"Get out of my way, you worms! Move! Shift's coming in and you're lazing about. Not over there, you wretch! Come here!"

His voice.

The din died out, and by merely entering the room, he rose above it all. My head slowly turning to see the particular figure that I dreaded. From the same way I'd entered, across the hall, strode The Master. A thick crack broke through the air, as I saw a bony slave being lashed by his heavy whip. Again and again that whip descended, simply for getting in the way. The buck cried out in agony before being thrown away entirely.

"Know your place! Get inside, you lot. Think Grindstone's wants to just wait!?"

Around me, every slave present seemed to shift backward... and I joined them. He... why was here here now? Hide, I needed to hide! I wanted to scream in pain as I felt my head sear and throb around the scar. I simply fell amongst a group of complaining slaves who seemed too tired to properly shove me away.

Behind him trooped a line of blackened and burned slaves carting crates and storage boxes. Most of them had dried blood caking their torsos, flanks, and faces. They had been put through absolute hell. As soon as many were inside, they seemed to pass out on the spot. I couldn't even tell which were mares and which were stallions under it all; these ponies simply looked like they were on the edge of life and ability.

Crushing myself amongst a group of slaves, I didn't dare try to move for the nearby door now. He was too sharp. He would *know*. If he already didn't... Celestia, Luna, please lift me away from his wretched embrace...

"Chainlink Shackles, if my old eyes don't deceive me. You're bringing me gifts, so I see. Your excursion went well? I see your personal stocks have grown as of late..."

The donkey's voice was very low, rich, and surprisingly smooth. The Master snorted, idly kicking a slave beneath him until he stood up again.

"You know the rules, Grindstone. You get what you catch. That breakout stunt you had your informant arrange proved a lovely little way to get some of that upstart's little ponies into *my* hooves. In return, the remnants from the Stable for your... heh, collection. But most of these slaves are just appropriated from other slavers who know me Grindstone. The ones who don't dare say no. Given a little time, I'll have a full stock of my own to play with once more."

The Master glanced at the small donkey before him, then at the giant beast marching along behind its charge.

"A minotaur from Red Eye's technicians? Heh... you must have done something to please..."

Grindstone was already wandering amongst the crates, ignoring the chitchat. He lifted horribly burned pieces of terminals and wires out before dropping them and nodding.

"Yes, this is good... Aurora Star's scientists went in there. Did you locate the information I asked for?"

"Hmph... nothing after the fire. If anything's there, it'll be on the terminals."

"Very well. *Slaves!* Take these to the storage room, *now!* Half of you get it!"

His own band of slavers got to kicking and prodding the tired workforce on the floor into activity. I felt myself being pushed toward him, and fought back to try and move *away* from him. I had to! He would recognise me instantly. If he saw me out here, I'd be his forever!

Spurred by sheer fear, all too similar to when I had run from the FunFarm, I more actively threw myself against the slaves and galloped toward the next group. The moments in which his gaze was averted, I made my moves, trying to simply gallop as fast as I could to any cluster of ponies while all the slavers were busy with the changeover. A couple more slow slides into each group and I was at the door. The slavers seemed distracted enough that one pony slipping out amongst the mass should go unnoticed—

"YOU!"

Every hoof ceased moving, locking me in place. Facing away, I felt my breathing rapidly accelerate into short and sharp gasps. Sweat and tears dripped off of my face in equal measure. My head stung.

I didn't want to turn... but I had to. My Master was calling. Every old instinct seemed to re-emerge in his presence more than anypony. Slowly, my hooves twisted and I turned to face him.

My heart felt a spike of hope as I saw that it wasn't me he was looking at.

But it broke the moment I saw who it *was*.

Lying to the side, nursing a series of barely-healed buckshot wounds on her side, covered in filth already with her brilliantly coloured mane stained from smoke, I saw Sunny Days.

The Master strode over and pulled her up, despite her a cry of pain, before immediately slapping her across the mouth with one of those massive, bony hooves of his. The fear in her eyes was unmistakable. Strong as she may be, The Master's treatment clearly had deeply harrowed her already. She couldn't keep eye contact with him, despite her earlier defiance.

"You rest when I tell you! Not when you want! You *earn* sleep, not choose it!"

Falling from my own hooves to hide, my jaw simply hung open. I watched as she was hurled toward the door, thrown away from me and back into the mass of unlucky ponies whom had fallen into his will. She curled back, pulling herself away, and I saw The Master greedily lick his lips and chuckle at the sight. The donkey, Grindstone, simply stood and watched the show.

"Sometimes, Shackles, you even scare an old vet like me."

"Good." The Master snorted. "It's my place in life to own them."

"Ever the born slaver you are. Well, you'll have enough to your 'whims' soon enough. Come, follow. A room in private would be better to discuss certain matters of importance."

Backpedalling, I almost screamed in intense terror. *They were coming this way!* Toward the door I was hiding beside! Turning, pushing myself to the floor, I crawled among slaves, disturbing those trying to sleep and inviting a few lightly bucked hooves into my side for the effort. I had to get there before them. I *had* to!

"Hm, Shackles, I see you don't have a, heh, pet with you. You always did used to have one..."

Looking back briefly, I saw The Master raising a hoof, pulling up the empty collar attached via a chain to his armoured barding. The smile became a fully fledged grin of sheer sadistic will.

“Oh, believe me, my good Grindstone, I have somepony in mind.”

Shivering, I fought the urge to wail and just gallop. The nightmare was here, the chains waiting to clamp home the moment he spotted me. It didn't take a genius to figure out who he wanted as his *personal* slave. The swinging collar was almost hypnotic, before he dropped it again. A slaver lashed out as I hopped to another group. I had to bear the whip and stifle the cry of pain as I felt it open a welt on my neck. Shaking my hooves in apology, I heard him snort and leave. But the delay had cost me dearly. They were less than twenty feet behind me through the crowds.

A quick glance saw The Master stopping to reach out and grab a young mare with a hoof. Clearly, he knew her from someplace beforehand, as I heard him taunting her on whether she was ‘behaving.’ Grindstone and The Master clearly had a long history. Right now, however, the unfortunate target of his attention gave me another window to push forward to the last slave group ahead of the doorway. There were no guards, presumably it being an entrance that slaves knew better than to go through, it only led deeper after all. Reaching forward with a hoof to push through, I looked once again over the back of my body to see The Master looking up. Squeaking in terror, I was forced to drop to the side of the door again. I was so close!

A few slaves around me were staring at me strangely as I ducked back from the door. The horrible thought of even one recognising me and shouting out was enough to make me avoid any and all glances. I had to wait for the moment he even looked away again...

His head turned to something behind him.

Now!

Grunting with the effort it took to power my wasted little legs into sudden motion, I slipped through the door in a single shove, kicking it closed with a back hoof as fast as I could. Line of sight broken, I clambered up and galloped for all I was worth down the straight corridor. Rusted shut doors lined the walls, but I knew this led to some sort of research room, hopefully with a place to hide until they passed by.

Reaching a corner, I dove behind it just as The Master and Grindstone (with minotaur in tag) pressed into the corridor.

“You should know, I'm moving forward with plans to increase my stock soon. You'll have an ally nearer by amongst the slave masters, Grindstone. My own informant is taking care of preparations as we speak.”

“You think you'll be promoted from overseer? I know your eventual ambitions, Shackles.”

The Master stopped moving, his voice taking a darker tone.

“It isn't ambition to want back what you once owned. Any master of slaves should know that. I owned more than what you consider ‘ambition’, Grindstone.”

Grindstone, unlike most, didn't seem particularly cowed. More just cautious in his words.

“If throwing them in a burning Stable and locking the door till they're done is how you treat your stock... woe betide your new pet when you get him.”

“Oh... don't you worry. Nopony will be able to. That's the point. He's not like the others. Once I've got my chains around him, he'll be begging me to control his life.”

Crouched behind the corner up ahead, it took me a monumental effort to stop myself from clamping up so hard that I'd just remain paralysed in fear. The double doors up ahead

to the research floors were hanging open as I scrambled through and shut them behind me. Even a few seconds had proven the difference in the past, no reason to think it wouldn't happen again. Briefly, I considered shoving something against them, but that would only alert the couple. Instead, I turned to view the research floor.

It was a very wide and low room, bearing no windows. The walls and ceiling seemed carved and reinforced by elaborately carved obsidian, while the contents on the floor were punctuated by steel tables, terminals, and lots of measuring equipment both standard and arcane. One entire wall was covered in musty books, while I saw machines large enough to sit ponies in all against the back wall. Much of it I recognised from the Stable, so much so that a familiar sense began creeping over me as I trotted quickly away from the door. Part of me almost wished I had another recorder to play and hear about what they had been doing here.

One difference though, was I saw the helmets on those machines this time had holes for unicorns, along with a small cage that went around the horn itself.

I was not, however, alone. Almost startling me into shouting, I heard a long, drawn out snore. Only after glancing to the left and right did I spot the one snoozing guard near a set of stairs on the far left of the wide lab. He had literally fallen forward on a desk, drooling across a faded folder in his sleep. Breathing out slowly, I kept myself facing away from him behind the workbenches and desks scattered around in thick clusters for, presumably, differing projects.

Each piece of equipment I passed had a small note stuck to it, as well, perhaps to tell somepony what they were? The slavers were clearly catagorising things in here. It seemed strange this was so empty of activity. Likely Grindstone simply didn't like ponies hanging around in an area filled with irreplaceable magical equipment, and lacking the scientists to understand it all. Was that why he wanted the information from the Stable? The contrast between this silently preserved area stood out from the bustle of the main slave floor so much that it almost felt like a different building.

Like a different world.

How might the scientists have toiled here, trying to better their understanding of preserving memory in these familiar machines? Everything they sought was to avoid the present day nightmare from which I had just arrived. Absentmindedly, I found myself dropping a few of the more valuable-looking items such as spark batteries and fancy wired things into my saddlebag. Protégé had just wanted me to steal the soffimizer. I wasn't sure this was what he had in mind, but it didn't stop me anyway. Glimmer would appreciate it.

While scouring the tabletops, I found a recorder. Well, in the Stable they had recorded their daily lives, and I knew that if I had to remember all the sciency stuff, my little head would probably swell. I threw it in my saddlebag, too, unwilling to make noise by playing it in this dark and silent manufacturing place with a sleeping guard present. Instead, I cantered onwards. I could see the door that would lead me to the storeroom at the far side, if my memory served me right. Lined with brass on the doorframe, it certainly *looked* important. Checking behind me again, I grasped its cold metal handle.

And... it was locked. As was every other door to either side that exited the lab into the more specific research rooms. The most I could do was look through windows at areas with curiously glowing orbs sitting in the darkness.

The Master and the minotaur's hooves were becoming very easy to discern, even at this distance through a door. I only had a few seconds to think, but everything in here was so

practically designed or impossibly over ornate in its design. There were no random storage containers or cupboards to simply hop inside, only open backed desks and work trays amongst the machines. I began pacing on the spot, twisting to the right and left as my eyes scanned around. There were *some* spots, but it all held too much risk if they even went vaguely near it. The dim purple and blue gemlights didn't exactly help matters to blend in with somepony as neutrally coloured as me, either.

Glancing to the side, one more set of stairs led upwards in an almost grand fashion. It was the route that the sleeping slaver was (rather badly) guarding. Covered by a sheet of thin fabric that had been crudely nailed up, it seemed to be the only way for me. The purple line on the walls that I only now realised I had been following this entire time led upwards from both sides of the room to there, the symbol of the six pointed star hinting about where it led.

I had no time to think or decide if this might end up just being *worse*. There were no other ways out of here. Silently, keeping my hooves light on the floor, I eased my way past the guard and slipped under the barrier to climb the stairs. Behind me, the lab door was thrown open with a sharp clang as it hit the wall on the other side. I was already long past his field of view, but by some oddity of life, the slaver did *not* wake up from the noise.

Only after a few seconds did I realise I that felt sorry for him and what he was about to receive. Gently, I pulled myself past the doorway at the top of the stairs, pushing the heavy oak with both front hooves to move it. Ducking inside, I softly clicked it closed and waited on the spot with my head pressed against the door, not even daring to move, or even look at what room I'd entered.

The bellowing and harsh words from The Master at the guard were only matched by the roars and snarls of Grindstone's immense bodyguard. The guard was thoroughly grilled, possibly even beaten, judging by some hard sounds. Every hate-filled word directed at the slaver made me quiver as The Master took care of discipline duties for Grindstone. Even slavers weren't safe from him.

What kind of pony was he to have this much sway from such a low rank?

And why did he have to be fixated on me? I couldn't properly escape him forever in this city...

Shivering behind the door, even as I heard them leave the sniffing guard behind, I could only maintain quietly wishing to myself. I didn't want to be a slave. I didn't want to be in this city—in this *world*. It was just too brutal, too uncaring and harsh. The thought of a peaceful world of bright colour and smiling faces was like a tease, given I knew it *had* once existed.

I *really* wanted to go there...

Finally turning, wiping my eyes, I looked upon the room I had entered. I was stuck here for now after all, might as well see what was in it until I knew The Master and Grindstone were far enough away.

With even a second or two of observing this room, I knew that if the Ministry was the body and the workrooms its heart, this was its soul.

Stretching high above me, a vertical office panned out to a colossal window that looked over what had once been the old park the high-rises had collapsed on. High library shelves lined the walls, seeming to angle inwards as they went up to the point that I felt somewhat meek in the presence of such unreadable words bearing down upon me. I trotted in atop a soft purple carpet, turning in circles to see there were even fragile looking walkways on the

upper levels of those shelves. Was that a *bed* up there?

Down on my level shelves of defunct or dim memory orbs in holders were mixed in with tomes, each with small notes tapes onto them. On the floor before me lay that same symbol of the star, dyed into the fabric in a giant piece of wonderful art that I simply had to wander around, rather than over, for fear of offending it.

Slowly wandering forward, I couldn't help but feel small in the presence of what had to be the entire history of Equestria. Across the ceiling was a mural depicting the great Goddesses themselves in half-arcs around one another. Framed pictures between racks of books depicted a grand castle upon a cliff, the six Ministry Mares, and a set of jewels with a crown in the middle. This entire room was like a nexus for all memory. The Goddesses who remembered it, the Mares who defined the past, and the orbs and stars to preserve it. But sitting at the back, near the window, were two more immediate things to draw my attention. A desk, and a large machine in the corner.

The desk was light, thin, and smooth with a terminal sitting inactive at it. Strewn across the tabletop were scrawled notes and diagrams of complex machinery. One looked like the monstrosity that lay to my right.

Thick, clunky, and clearly haphazardly built from a thousand little parts, even I could tell it wasn't mass produced, owing to the ties and thick tape that bound much of it together. No, this was hoof made, piece by piece. In a strange way, it seemed to remind me of the machine I'd seen in the Stable, or the ones downstairs, given it was linked to a rather familiar-looking comfortable cushion chair with a headpiece hung over the back. Upon the seat was a small recorder. Around the bottom of the entire thing lay a whole host of memory orbs of both light green and shimmering cream. They were oddly bright compared to the dusty ones all over the shelves.

This had to be the office of Aurora Star. I really wished Glimmerlight were with me. She would know what to make sense of from here, not to mention freak out at it all. Memory was *her* thing. But all the same, I couldn't deny my *own* curiosity here. Glancing toward the door, I reached out and plucked the recorder to insert into my PipBuck. Half muffling the speaker before hitting buttons, I finally found the one to play it. After a second, I instead slumped down into the machine's chair.

It was actually quite comfortable.

Click.

"This is Aurora Star. Operating instructions for the Memory Projection and Extractor unit will follow."

Her voice was surprisingly young, somewhat nasally, and with a habit of sniffing between sentences. I felt myself gasp at the mere idea. This was the mare I'd heard so many mention, if only in passing. Another piece of the puzzle...

"It's really quite simple. I did design it as such. Well, apart from setting which memories to extract. Leave that to the unicorns trained in the memory spells. Place the headset upon the brow of the user, whether for projection or extraction. Then, pull the red lever all the way down for projection or the blue lever halfway up for extraction. Just make sure you do it right. There's nothing worse than doing it wrong... then forgetting that you did it wrong because you did it wrong and forgot what you did wrong."

As a note, my headache was not exactly improving.

"Dull orbs are to be copied onto, lit ones are to project from, again make sure of that. Please, every time you are done, place the light blue one back in. It's the original test orb

with one of my own memories. I prefer them not to go missing to the press. Featherweight is rather good at tracking this sort of stuff down. Thanks."

Click.

That had been a lot shorter than I'd hoped, given I was stuck in here. I didn't dare move out until those two masters were long gone.

And so began a period of waiting. I sat and watched out the window at slaves moving around below me, or stared wistfully at the Wall in the distance. I flicked open a few books, looking for the ones with pictures in them. But even illustrations proved difficult to understand. Mostly they were graphs and arcane sigils. I tried listening to see if the guard started snoring again... nothing. I sat in her well-greased chair that could spin in circles. (Wheel!) But eventually I could not keep my eyes from drifting back to that memory projection machine.

I wanted out of this horrible world. I wanted a better Equestria.

I also knew how to operate it, and the light blue memory was still embedded in a little holder, one of Aurora Star's.

A little shining star of memories from a better world, just waiting for me to see the *real* Equestria.

After my drawings and thoughts recently, after Protégé's talks, after the Stable, and the Ministry of Image... I couldn't *not* do it. Yes, it was foolish, orbs made you unaware, but I needed it. One little escape. A brief trip to someplace that wouldn't hurt me. Pulling off the headset from the chair, I lowered it atop my brow and pulled the red lever before wandering over to sit at the desk... because why not? It was comfier than the machine's one. And could spin.

As I heard the low throb and tingle of spark magic inside the machine, I had a distinctly unsettling feeling in my stomach. What if I woke up to see The Master or a guard? They were right out there! This was a horrible idea, but handed the opportunity to leave my world behind for a few minutes or so, I just couldn't turn it down. No pony would come in here, I was sure of it, and this might be the only chance I'd ever get to see this.

My perception of the world swam. I heard the machine gurgle and spark with magical energy, and then everything faded away...

I was Aurora Star.

She was trotting through the Ministry in the early hours of morning, judging by the still slumped faces of those around her in the brightly lit corridors. She had a spring in her step, a saddlebag over her back by the feeling of it bouncing off my, um... *her* sides. Upon my brow, a sensation of light pressure told of a thin set of glasses. They were way more comfortable than my goggles. I could swear it was easier to tell details.

"Good morning, Miss Star!" A pony waved as she passed. I felt my hoof lift to wave back, revealing Aurora's main coat to be a lavish ornate blue.

"Good morning, Wheatsheaf!"

The unicorn named Wheatsheaf trotted on past with a smile upon his face. It had been so casual and polite. Ponies seemed friendly by nature. I could get used to this sort of place!

"Miss Star! Miss Star!"

A young buck, likely an apprentice, ran up to me... or her, well, me-her.

There was a term I never wanted to use again. I really hoped that being a mare in a few memory orbs wasn't going to affect me in real life. Barb already called me a filly.

I felt Aurora raise her head proudly and reach forward to shake his hoof.

"Sparkler, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing, Ma'am! I... I just thought you might like to know that you have a visitor. Um... a pretty important one. She's in your office. Also, your morning coffee should be waiting. I... uh... figured I'd pick you one up while I was out anyway. My treat."

I felt my eyebrows rise in interest, before she (urgh, he, she, me, I, whatever, I'd leave orbs to smart unicorns...) nodded a thanks.

"Oh, thank you, Sparkler! How very kind of you. Now, I have a feeling I know who it is..."

Bowing their heads in goodbye, she wandered past him toward the office. Passing an mezzanine, she glanced down at the sound of numerous ponies cheering together as one. It was the central room I'd just crept through, the one now filled with slaves! The stage was polished and shining, and I could see filled tables and rows all around it. The chandeliers cast radiant golden light that reflected and twinkled off the patterns emblazoned in the walls. That same obsidian colouring on the pillars, while dreary and depressing in my time, was so well maintained that it almost acted like a mirror to ponies close to it.

Seeing this room as it was, I realised I'd been right. It was indeed beautiful.

A pegasus had presented something on stage. I couldn't *hope* to understand the diagram projected onto the screen behind her, but I felt Aurora smile warmly as the young mare was treated with respect and admiration by those trotting up to shake her hoof.

Finally trotting around and through another locked (in my version anyway) door, she came to the research lab, bustling with activity as ponies cast spells that flashed and glowed behind screens, or poured over books that looked just as dusty then as they were now. With a magical throw of her horn, the heavy door to her own room was gently pressed open, and she approached exactly where I was now.

I wanted to shield my eyes as the light struck them. The office *shone*. Daylight, *actual daylight* blazed through the windows, reflecting off the glass like enormous lens flares, tinged with every colour of a rainbow. Only now did it hit me that I had never seen the past as it should have been. Even Glimmerlight's memory had still been the wasteland, but now...

Equestria... was beautiful.

The colours, the way all the little details in the grain that time had long scoured away now showed on the wood of the desk. The small gems that had once been in the eyes of Celestia and Luna upon the mural were no longer stolen. The sounds of gentle wind and polite discussion from the labs behind Aurora. The comforting feeling her wandering across a soft floor of thick carpet.

That was before I even saw past the figure sitting at the desk to witness the outside world. I wanted to take control, steer Aurora Star toward the window to gaze upon the vista that I only saw hints of behind the lavender pony that she was so intent on. Aurora sniffed briefly, and cleared her throat.

"Miss Twilight Sparkle, an honour to know you visit us so unexpectedly." Aurora's voice managed to rid itself of most of that nasal tone as she bowed her head slightly in greeting.

The older unicorn looked up, wearing tired eyes upon a weary, but strong, face. I had seen her on the banners in the Mall! This was a Ministry Mare!

Twilight waved a hoof, smiling gently.

"Sorry for taking your office, Aurora. I guess I just don't think too well without some books around me. I won't be here long, really, I just wanted to talk to you about a little something."

I felt Aurora shake her head, revealing to me that she had a rather long mane by the way I felt a ponytail jiggle from side to side on my neck.

"No, no! Please, Ma'am, it is alright. I'm just the same, really! Something about the stacks is just naturally relaxing."

Was she nervous? I could feel sweat running down my face, and not just from the more natural heat that drifted throughout the room from the windows. Twilight stood up and beckoned Aurora over to the machine I had just used.

"I wanted to talk to you about your projection machine. Now, I know it's been your own little pursuit for the past year, but I'm afraid it's no longer necessary to provide funding for mass production."

I felt Aurora step back in shock, moving over to protectively place a hoof upon the machine.

"But... but Ma'am! This is my biggest project! To allow non-unicorns to see and store memories! I thought the Ministries were all on board!"

Twilight shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Aurora. But we've had a breakthrough in Canterlot. Something called a recollector that works with a separate concept called the black opal. Essentially, it does the same thing your machine does by letting anypony access or withdraw memories, but it does so in a much more portable form. I'm so sorry... but in these days we need to prioritise the ones that will have a greater overall effect in the war."

She did sound genuinely upset to have to break this news, moving over to lay a hoof on Aurora's shoulder.

"You've been an incredible leader of the Fillydelphia hub, Aurora. You will continue to be. The papers you wrote, the ones about using memories to educate ponies? That could be a wonderful tool to let all sorts of ponies learn about things they normally wouldn't. After all, we both know how few ponies actually know about Starswirl the Bearded, right?"

The older mare's smile was met by a little chuckle from Aurora Star, clearly a little in-joke between the two of them. But I could hear the laugh was masking a stutter in her throat, and I could feel her shoulders slump as Twilight led her to the window overlooking the park. I would have felt elated had it not felt disrespectful to Aurora having one of her projects canned after, presumably, a long period of work and effort.

All the same, Fillydelphia was not the city I recognised...

The park was... was green! Gently flowing trees surrounded an oval and bright blue pond at its middle, where little winged creatures flocked madly to the edges to be fed by ponies. The high-rise building was intact beside it, annoyingly blocking the view to the Mall. Laundry hung from windows, and I could even spot some ponies talking to one another across balconies. Sunlight made the world appear to glow with vivid colour, from the varied shades on the trees, to the bright red roads that groups of ponies raced one another down in the park. Small stands selling food crowded around benches close to the Ministry, while I could see mountains of brilliant white snow rising up from dense forest beyond the intact city.

I couldn't believe this sight, to see the streets clear and home to so many ponies and the skies filled with pegasi that twirled to and fro. Never... never in my wildest imaginations

could it have looked so amazing.

Aurora, tracked a small group of friends who ran with kites across the gentle hills of the park, before turning to look at the Ministry Mare. Twilight had been watching the same ponies too.

“Ma’am... do... do you mind if I ask you something a little personal? I’m sorry, just, it’s hard to speak to the staff about this, and you’ve been such a wonderful mentor to me.”

“Of course, Aurora. Believe me, I know what it’s like to need one.”

The reply had been so casual, that I almost suspected Aurora would be taken aback. Instead, she sighed and leaned on the windowsill.

“Do you ever think that it’s wrong to be making all this technology to go into a *war* effort? I didn’t imagine this when I was small, and wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to help everyone, not just *everypony*.”

Twilight listened, looking Aurora in the eye. Gently, she reached out again, patting Aurora’s back.

“So did I at your age. And believe me, I wish we could. Just, the world is changing and all we can do is hope we invent the right things to stop that change from going too far, and to try and turn this all back to the way it was. I’m never sure how Applejack and Rainbow Dash manage it, developing or doing the things they do. Some days I fear I may have to start doing something similar if things get bad enough. But don’t worry for the future, Aurora. You might be young, but you’re a pony of the past. Saying that, at least in my eyes, ceased to become a euphemism for ‘outdated’ a long time ago. Just look at where we’ve come from, remember the world you saw when you were a foal, and just do all you can to preserve and maintain that through this, alright?”

“Yes, Ma’am...”

“Please, Aurora. We’re friends. It’s Twilight.”

Twilight offered a rather adorable little smile, even for her more advanced age. My own mouth’s corners twisted upward, too.

“Yes, Twilight. Thank you. I... I won’t disappoint you. But, I do have something!”

“Oh yes,” Twilight chuckled as she spoke. “I think I know what. All the other Ministry leaders have been mentioning you’ve been getting in touch with them. Very canny business thinking to get word out. Come on, show me!”

Aurora was clearly blushing at her superior knowing ahead of time, but she turned to pull a lavender orb toward her, the same colour as Twilight. In fact, I could swear the darker purple sparkles within it seemed to match her mane colour, too. It was slightly bigger than a normal memory orb and glowed when Twilight herself plucked it from the air with her own telekinesis demonstrating an ease and precision not even Protégé had. Against the direct sunlight, the orb seemed to absorb some of the light in its strange glass-like surface.

Looking at her own reflection, Twilight gasped.

“It’s got my magical signature...”

Aurora awkwardly rubbed her hooves together.

“Oh, uh, yes, Ma... Twilight. Sorry, I forgot you’d be able to tell that right away. Most unicorns can’t. They have to be created using a memory orb from the pony intending to use it, which is why I asked for one from each of you last year. It’s not a very efficient process, but it’s a proof of concept. This orb will actually display a pony as an image to whoever activates the recorded memory on it. It lets you basically make a message that includes you and your expression, too. To play them back, you just place them on the holder they come

with, so anypony can view it. We don't have a proper name yet, but the apprentices use 'projection orbs', so it kind of stuck."

The Ministry Mare toyed around with the orb. Turning it over, casting various spells that seemed to examine it, even while she gaped in quiet excitement.

"Aurora, this... this is wonderful! I wish we had things like this back when I was just a student sending messages every week."

I could feel Aurora's cheeks burning. Her front hooves bashfully crossed over.

"Well, it's yours. The messages can be so personal with this sort of thing, but they are one use only so... if you want to record something, make sure it's important. I can't create them easily. Also, um... you have to leave this one with me afterwards, I promise I won't look, but I need to have a model with me to help in creating more. I'll mail it back to you the moment I've worked out how, though. I promise I won't look at the contents. It's your message from the heart to the ponies of the future..."

Twilight seemed transfixed, only nodding vaguely in response while pulling the orb close.

"I... I think I know precisely what to say in it. Audio recorders just don't feel right to me, and memory orbs... well, it feels strange to talk to a mirror. But this... yes, there are a few things I wanted to say. I'll have it back to you before the end of the day."

"Thank you..."

They hugged briefly, with me rather enjoying the small measure of physical comfort, even for just a memory. Twilight gave her polite goodbyes and departed, leaving Aurora to look over the vista of Fillydelphia once again from her chair. The kites were flying in the park, being pulled around by six young, laughing mares; while even the factories in the distance seemed cleaner and part of the scenery. A wonderfully serene image of the world before it all.

Gradually, I felt the corners of my perception darkening; the memory was ending. I didn't want it to! This world was happy! I wanted to go to the park! To trot the streets! To run with them and their kites! I wanted to see the *sun*! I didn't want to leave Equestria!

Despite all pleading, everything began to slide away.

I wanted to stay so badly...

Slowly, that world faded, falling apart through the haze of the orb's memory ending, to reveal the desecrated corpse of a city that had been risen from its death by Red Eye. Colours withdrew to thick black and scalding red. The park was once again buried beneath a mountain of dark rubble, the kites fading into nothing. Factory smoke became like volcano ash, belching forth into the sky that was hidden by the clouds once again, blocking the sun and leaving us in a dark world.

The return to reality was as harsh as I might have imagined.

Sitting in Aurora's chair, I simply hung limply for a while, not even crying. I just stared. I wanted to go back, wanted every dream to be filled with that place. Slowly, I gradually pulled the headset off and let it drop by my side. Turning my head, I saw the purple orb still sitting there beside its holder.

I couldn't live in that world. But I uphold Twilight's wish of the message being seen by those in the future. Slipping off the chair, I picked it up in my hooves, seeing the magic within surge and twist in arcane shapes. This was no normal memory orb. The radiance

from it recoloured my own coat when held near me, while the sheen on it had gathered no dust at all. Gently, as though part of a ceremony, I carefully placed it upon the holder.

A sharp, but soft, magical crack snapped through the air as it made contact. Sparkles whizzed free from the orb, orbiting it at high speed. Hastily stepping back, I could only gaze with an open mouth at the stars flowing faster and faster in all directions around the central orb; its light only growing. At its height, the sparkles flew outwards, and the entire orb gleamed. Colours danced in the air around it, beginning to form and flow together. I saw lines...

Lines became curves...

Curves became shapes...

Shapes...

The Ministry Mare, Twilight Sparkle, came to *life* before my eyes. Standing in front of the desk, she faced toward me. Her body was somewhat translucent, twinkling from little star-shapes, who's straight lines helped make up the shape of this legendary pony. She was taller than me, properly fed and healthy, if tired-looking. In her eyes hung a weariness that had been either missing or hidden from Aurora.

"I don't know who you are, where you found this, or how long has passed since I recorded it. Aurora Star has promised that they do not break easily... so this could be as far as I might imagine into the future. So please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Twilight Sparkle. I am one of the six Ministry Mares under Princess Luna of Equestria. A land of peace, optimism and hope. Or at least... it used to be..."

She glanced to the side, away from 'my' perspective, had I been directly before her. I began to worry about the volume and the guard, but if he hadn't been attracted by the first snap of magic, then I doubted he'd hear this. I shifted forward, standing right in front of the Twilight illusion.

After a few seconds, her eyes blinked, and she came into motion. Her mouth opening, and the voice that followed ever so slightly hollow and echoed.

"We have entered into a war. A horrible war against the zebras that is consuming our entire civilization. I am not here to tell of the reasons or the morality, because I don't want to attempt to rationalise or justify what should not be happening. We, of the Ministries, are sworn to find a way to preserve and protect Equestria, to end the war however we might, in order to help bring peace again. But I take to this orb, not to tell of how we are succeeding, but of how I fear we may have already failed."

A part of me went out to the poor mare; I could see the hurt on her face as she spoke the last line.

"A Ministry Mare should never say these things. We are to 'remain steadfast' and 'promote victory' without thought of failure. But I cannot permit this time to pass without *some* record of my true thoughts and feelings. I am a pony first, a leader second. This... sorry..."

Twilight looked away, raising a hoof to her eyes. This was hard for her. Where it seemed only natural to me to talk about the world, I had to remember that this was a mare who had grown up with a peaceful realm to love and enjoy.

"I... I come to this orb to get this out. I *need* to. Equestria is not what it once was. We're not only losing countless lives against the zebras, we're losing who we are. When did we become about aggressive victory? I have seen great darkness and chaos overcome with friendship. Savage greed and hateful intent beaten by love. But now victory and defeat

comes only at the end of a weapon. This... this isn't the Equestria I grew up with..."

My heart broke. She was... she was crying. My hooves felt itchy on the ground, unable to do anything but simply listen. Twilight looked back toward me (or slightly above me, anyway) with tearful eyes. There was nothing... nothing but me and her in the room. The broken past speaking to the ruined future.

"When I was a student in Ponyville, all I had were my friends and the love of my world. We could leave our doors unlocked, trust one another to help out, and gladly offer up our time to aid a pony in need. We played, learned, and loved in the light of a brilliant sun, sleeping soundly and safely beneath the beautiful moon. The worst I had to worry about day to day was getting a report done on time... such innocent days. That world is gone. So far that I... I'm not even sure this is Equestria anymore, that I'm trying to save."

Breathing sharply, she seemed to scuff her hooves on the ground, looking away again until she could compose herself. I dearly wished I could hug her, but my hooves, I knew, would only pass through. Her voice grew and grew, pain and hurt expanding with every sentence.

"Today, on... hgn... sorry. Today, on the train, I heard a group of young colts swearing and insulting others. I passed ponies drunk and screaming; war veterans staggering and horribly maimed; and others suffering from the stress of war. We own weapons in our homes that can kill in seconds, while our own Ministries are spying on each other! One of my *best friends* is a drug addict! What *happened* to my world? I... oh, Celestia, I'm sorry..."

She had slumped, falling to all her knees and hiding her face. I saw little sparks of magic simulate even the tears dropping to shimmer and disappear on the ground. I was shivering myself, real tears forming in my eyes for her. I had lived in this world my entire life. She had to watch the one she loved become the hell I knew.

"In history, other civilizations were born in the fires of war, in pain and in turmoil. We were born through understanding, love, and friendship. We strayed from the path we had set for ourselves not by hate or choice, but through the ignorance of our own innocence. We were foals playing with the tools of our parents. Parents who had not taught us the responsibility we needed to know why we should never play with them at all."

Another sad pause. Twilight looked up again, twinkling eyes staring right at mine.

"I'm so far from the Equestria I knew. I just want to wake up tomorrow and be in my bed in the library. To nag Spike for oversleeping and see my friends outside in the sun. To visit Sugarcube Corner for a snack or... or to go meet Fluttershy for lunch. Why can't we just go back to what we once had? If this doesn't end well, I'm so sorry to whoever is listening to this. With things escalating and megaspells coming into being, I don't even know what's going to happen. The thought that someday all the good might have been squeezed out of Equestria scares me, that there might not be any good ponies left. Just corrupted away from the magic of friendship. All I know is I have to stop all this or, if I can't do that, find a way to *repair* my world, and hope somepony might be willing to do it."

"We're trying..." I barely breathed the words.

She had stood again, pacing in place. But right away, Twilight stopped, looking directly ahead.

"I know whoever you are, this must feel like you're the unluckiest pony in the world right now, should this war pan out the way I fear it could. Ponies aren't meant to live in horror and pain. Please, don't forget where we came from. That's what matters, because there is always a way back. I'm going to find it. All I can say is we're so sorry..."

She stretched her hoof forward, before looking confused why she did. Raising my own, I pressed it toward hers until the light sparkled around the end of my own leg from touching the ambient magic. Her sparkling, lavender, clean hoof of the beautiful past passing into the bandage bound, blood stained hoof of my future.

“Stay true to the elements that made us what we were. Never surrender to the hate, I know your world may not be perfect, but Equestria is only what we can create ourselves. Make friends, take time to make amends, do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world. This message is to let you see through me the thoughts and fears of everypony now. We’re all dreaming of the same peace, even if we don’t know it. Good luck...”

With that, the little stars shimmered and whirled as the entire image collapsed into a shining mass that flooded into the orb, leaving me alone in the dark. Alone in a silent new world, a million miles and hundreds of years from the true Equestria she had known.

Somehow, I felt both more convicted to escape than ever, and yet farther from freedom than I had known my entire life.

I had sat staring at the orb some time, listening as I heard the guard grumbling to himself downstairs about being tired.

Twilight’s memory had hit me hard. They were hoping in the past that their world wouldn’t fall into the abyss they saw coming. Their hopes had been almost entirely dashed. Now it was up to ponies like Littlepip and all those others the DJ talked about on the radio. All separate across every area of Equestria, all striving for the same thing. I really wished I could be like them, travelling the wastes and trying to make things better.

But I wasn’t.

Eventually, I slipped the orb into my bag. It was surprisingly light for its larger size, but my bag was beginning to get a little full. Pulling the straps across, I placed it back atop my torso and snuck back over to the doorway. The past had opened its wonders to my eyes, literally this time, but I could not linger any more. I needed to get out, get that sardonitor, and get back to Protégé and Glimmerlight where I could draw and just make sense of all this. I had to push my wishes for another world away, lest they drive me to depression at the thought of what had been lost.

Pressing my ear against the door revealed the guard trotting around, likely to keep himself awake. That was good. I could use the gap to get out the door. Gently pressing it aside, I cast one last look back at the office.

The guard was at the far side of the lab, far enough away that I managed to creep down, slip behind the workbenches, and stay low to the ground. Listening to his direction, I crept around the tables, hopping from one to one only as the guard wandered past my position. Although he was a good fifteen feet away in the wide room, there was no sense in taking chances now.

“Fuckin’ Shackles... thought we were rid of him...” The guard was muttering to himself. Had The Master worked as an overseer here too? It did make sense to think about.

Waiting at the next corner until the guard wandered back towards his chair, I poked my head out to check on where he was looking, pulling back immediately once I saw his neck twitch to look toward the door. Shivering from even that simple close call, I waited till I heard trotting again before moving on. Approaching the door, I lightly tested it with a hoof

first, finding it swinging easily. Good, that wouldn't be a problem to jump through.

Wow. I really *could* do this whole sneaking thing.

Well, sort of. I still was only going *in*. Traditionally, it was while getting *out* of places that I tended to slip up. Watching the guard's hooves beneath the benches and desks, I slipped through the doors the moment I saw him turn away.

Beyond was a thin corridor that split into a two sided junction at the end. Trotting forward, I found that each direction curved away around a smooth corner. Doors lined the outside wall while the wall on the inside curve had various windows. Creeping up to one, I saw that the curves must have met at the other side. This was a single large test chamber surrounded by one circular corridor. It was well lit and contained a very valuable-looking piece of machinery at the centre, like a large bowl connected to the ceiling with pipes and wires, and some sort of model of a pedestal below it. It was very shiny, and *very* complex. As such, I ignored it. With only one way in and no hiding places, even some shiny things had to get overlooked from my rather grab happy mindset in a place where I felt the slavers deserved nothing. No, my objective was the room on the far side, in project storage. Trotting around, I saw that it held no door. Within was exactly the place I had wanted. I came across the a large storage chamber used for old machines and prototypes.

Piled scrap lay on either side of the entryway, while a rack of shelves around a table set against the wall bore a whole ton of weird and wacky designs. Most were rusted or cracked. In the far corner, I saw a few old robots lying dead against the wall. They were big and boxy with large screens where I might have imagined their chests were. It all tapered down past two weapon mounts and two arms to end in a single wheel at the bottom. No wonder they were junked, how could *that* ever work?

But the storage chamber was *dominated* by a colossal machine. What was worse, I recognised some elements of it. Pods, just like the zebra-pony-ghoul cult had been using to zombify ponies, they were arranged out here as well! They were laid out in a spaced ring around a central tower of humming magic and blinking lights.

And there was somepony inside one.

Checking behind me, I trotted forward into the oddly sparse room. I could see out of the corner of my eye a table that held the shape of the sananaitser, but this felt more important. A young buck, an earth pony with a soft red mane light grey coat and perhaps only a few years older than I, was... sleeping? He was clothed in some sort of war-era uniform, just lying with a slightly open mouth, while breathing gently. The pod had closed around him, bathing him in a bright white light. His pod hummed louder than the others, while I could see a cluster of memory orbs atop the machine that pulsed and glowed.

A control panel flickered between two pods. I cast a gaze at it, seeing one pod on the diagram lit in a flickering yellow while the others were an almost invisible blue against the background. Text continually scrolled, paused, then repeated the same shapes again. My eyes kept flicking back to the buck serenely lying there. Was this a slave forced in? A slaver volunteer?

No, this was *way* beyond my capability. 'Just get the sanitisoor and go', I told myself.

Turning, I grabbed a strap hooked around the single box marked with a six pointed star in my mouth and lifted it from the table. Now just to—

The sound of moving scrap came from behind me. Something was powering up... something *big*. Oh no...

Dreading to turn, I found myself rushed by one of the machines. It had powered on, and

I now had two weapon limbs and two clawed arms firing toward me from that boxy torso while the screen flickered on to show an angered pony in gilded armour. Above it, those two flashing lights on the top of the carapace flared in red circles. The wheel spat and span as it tried to gain purchase to stand and *why wasn't I running for my life yet!?*

Good advice! I turned and galloped for the door.

“YOU WILL HALT AND STAND, COWARDLY THIEF!”

A whirring was my only warning before I screamed and felt claws clamp around my torso. It could extend its arms!? Struggling, dropping the salinattofer, I saw that one of those long tubular arms had shot out to grab and lift me up. The voice was loud, booming and shook through all the corridors and halls around me. My headache thudded on every syllable of the robot's voice.

“I wasn't stealing!”

“A LIE MOST FOUL! YOU WILL KINDLY ACCEPT BEING HURLED ACROSS THE ROOM IN PUNISHMENT!”

“...what?”

It wasn't kidding. The sheer confusion was all that gave me reason to not panic before gravity inverted for me and I slammed against one of the shelving units. *Now* I panicked, already howling in pain as my right hoof slapped against the wall and my battered torso flared in pain down both sides. Scrambling on three hooves away from the machine, I waved my one good hoof toward it, begging profusely.

“D-don't! I'll give it back, I'm sorry!”

“TO REMOVE WAR PROPERTY IS OF THE HIGHEST TREASON! YOU SHALL SUFFER THE REMOVAL OF YOUR HEAD! FOLLOWED SHORTLY BY A BRIEF PRISON SENTENCE!”

“NO!”

“OH YES!”

Standing atop its one wheel, the colossal machine aimed its short-barrelled gatling cannon toward my face, along with the quad-barrelled energy cannon on the other side. Both arms clacked their claws together menacingly as it began to wheel forward. Retreating further, I found myself cornered.

“I'm sorry! I'M SORRY! Please, just don't kill me! Don't!”

There was no way out. I saw the gatling cannon spin up as one arm raised to crush down. Terror bled through every fibre of my being, I simply screamed and hid my eyes. My throat catching, I simply couldn't even scream louder. It just devolved into the longest and most pathetic whimpering squeak I had ever made in my entire life. I heard the weapon cease moving.

“Wait!”

Standing back up fully, the robot held itself still, the face changing to that of a puzzled unicorn. I heard a warbling of something being rewound, before I heard all sorts of moans, groans and shouts. Eventually, I heard my own squeak played back (Was I really that whiny sounding?) and then shortly, an eerily similar one.

“There is only one squeak I know of so pathetic! SALUTATIONS AND GREAT JOY TO MY WARMONGERING HEART! MISS FLUTTERSHY! IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN!”

Before I could even respond... I felt myself being picked up again and flung over one hard metal shoulder and then the other. The screen had changed to a delighted foal.

"I... um... huh?"

"AS I PROMISED, I HAVE AWAITED YOUR RETURN WITH BAITED BREATH AND SAFETIES ALL OFF! IS IT TIME FOR US TO GO TO WAR, MISS FLUTTERSHY? I DO SO LOOK FORWARD TO GIVING THE STRIPED MENACE A SOUND GOOD THRASHING!"

It... thought I was a Ministry Mare?

Wait... it thought I was a *mare*? Oh come on...

"But... but I'm no—"

I mentally bucked myself, as I realised I was currently being held by a giant robot with at least four methods to kill me, who's only reason not to was mistaking me for a two hundred year dead mare because I squeaked when scared. This was *not* the time to correct him!

"Um... no, I was just coming to collect something! You're doing... uh, a very good job though. A very... um, loud job."

"THIS IS MY PRODUCT LINE'S FACTORY SETTINGS FOR THE BATTLEFIELD, MISS FLUTTERSHY. TO OFFER A FIRM TONE TO LET THEM KNOW WE ARE NOT SIMPLY HERE FOR CRUMPETS AND TEA!"

"We... we aren't on a battlefield..."

The screen changed back to the puzzled unicorn again. It looked around as though only just realising.

"Oh. Is... this a more sufficient volume for thine ears, Miss Fluttershy? Please forgive me, I simply wished to express my unbridled joy at your return after all this time! I was most upset when told I could not accompany you as your bodyguard, but I have instead taken the time to guard the room you asked me to."

Rubbing my ears, this *was* slightly better. but every word was like a clip across my skull. This was one weird machine, guarding one room for two hundred years? Somehow, despite it trying to kill me, I couldn't help but find that such an unbearably lonely thought. Had Fluttershy ordered it to guard a pointless room just to get away from him and these warlike tendencies?

"Hey! What the fuck is all the noise in here, you stupid machine?"

The guard from the labs had galloped in, baton hanging ready around his neck to grab in his mouth. Entering the door, he found me much closer... and simply stared for a second before scowling and advancing.

"And *you!* What the hell do you think you're doing in here, stealing?"

"I... I..."

"We got a good punishment in these here den for thieves. Can't proper sneak if you're missing a hoof now, can you? *C'mere!*"

I yelped as the larger pony dived forward, grabbing and pulling me to the ground. The baton swung, cracking off my skull with enough force to knock me back into the ground and hit it again. The double impact reverberated in my skull, painful and making my still healing forehead welt and throb in abject agony. I didn't even know if I screamed or not, but I felt him pulling my hoof out, reaching into his bag for... oh Goddesses! A knife!

The memory of a knife stabbing into my shoulder was all too fresh, too horrible to think about. The penetrating cold metal rending my flesh...

"COME HERE, YOU WRETCHED RAPSCALION! YOU WILL UN-HOOF MISS FLUTTERSHY IMMEDIATELY!"

Suddenly, the weight of the slaver disappeared, forcing open an eye, I saw him being

lifted, snarling and swinging his baton at the robot's arm, to no avail.

"Let go of me you old scrap pile! He isn't—"

"SILENCE! THE PENALTY FOR ASSAULTING A MINISTRY MARE IS A TEMPORARY BAN FROM OXYGEN FOR ONE YEAR!"

The robot shut him up rather forcibly. I saw the claws clamp closed hard enough to crush his neck. Only a disgusting gurgle emerged from his mouth, while the eyes went wide. The robot's screen displayed an angered armoured guard, the lights flaring red.

"BUT BECAUSE IT WAS MISS FLUTTERSHY, I SHALL ADD AN ENERGY SPANKING TOO!"

With a twist and a whine of pistons, the slaver was sent flying into the wall. Whirring, the quad-energy cannon powered up and blasted him into nothing but dust with a lingering pained gurgle being the only remainder...

I stared at the pile of ash, finding it drifting all through the still air. Some of it landed on me! Scrambling, even past pain, I fought to clean myself of him! I was covered in *pony*! Further into the facility, I heard the shouts of dozens of slavers. Gunfire wasn't going to go unnoticed. Hearing commands shouted, I broke myself from the horror, turning to the robot.

"What did you have to shoot him like that for!?"

"My sincere apologies, Miss Fluttershy. If I'd known you'd have preferred the rockets... weeeell I still could if you really want me to."

It's shoulder popped open, revealing a dozen miniature warheads, I sat back, waving my front hooves madly.

"No, no! No missiles! Please, I need to get out of here, um... zebra infiltrators are disguised in here, and might try to kill me!"

"Then I shall protect you! THAT IS MY GRAND MISSION!"

Wincing, I cowered below him until my ears stopped ringing. Already, I could hear hooves running all over the nearby rooms and floors. We didn't have much time. The Master was still in the building, I just *knew* it. He'd be coming. Coming to take me back again.

"T-thank you, I think. But please, I don't want to kill ponies... I mean, zebras."

"This long and you don't change one bit, Ma'am. Enough to make a warmongering robot like me blow a circuit in confusion. What *isn't* there to love about the grand art of war?"

"Right, right. Um, what is your desig... designa... name?"

"Mister Peace."

...go figure. Hopping up on it's one wheel, the multi-limbed machine raised the quad-cannon to scratch its head.

"Forgive me, Miss Fluttershy, but did I not make such an impression on your before to remember my illustrious name? I did think we got on charmingly. But I am most capable of continuing to defend this machine should you require me to stay behind once again..."

Well, perhaps he could be just what I needed to save my life and get out of here! We needed to go now, but perhaps it was the immensely armed killing machine that regarded itself my sworn protector... I simply had to ask. Turning to the massive device with the buck in it, I pointed with a hoof before scooping up the Sparkle Satingaling.

"Mister Peace, what *is* this machine?"

He (it?) turned back to the pods with the memory orbs at the centre. He seemed to stare at the buck inside.

"This is something that Miss Star was putting together. I'm a warbot, not a scientist, so I couldn't tell you exactly what it does. All I know is that buck has been in there as long as I have stood guard and that the new mule in the Ministry keeps saying that it doesn't work anymore. Truthfully, Miss Fluttershy, if you had any questions about war machines or the best way to extract a zebra's diaphragm I could help, but this is rather out of my specialist area, I'm afraid."

He had been in there since before the war? Pressing close to the glass, I watched his blank sleep. Just dreaming. My own body lit from the white light flushed across his thin body, I couldn't help but wonder who was really more trapped between him and I.

"Miss Fluttershy, if we are to get you out, we should go. Hostile intent signals are approaching. Or should I go and cheerfully say hello?"

He hefted the gatling cannon while I turned back and threw on my saddlebag.

"Alright." Yes, it was time to go and get back to Protégé. There were too many secrets and mysteries in the depths of this Ministry's past. "But, you need to be quieter, please..."

"Oh... but I *like* being loud, Miss Fluttershy! It strikes terror into the hearts of the most impolite enemy. But if I must..."

So much better on my ears. But the slump of his bulky shoulders and the disappointed earth pony on his screen almost made me feel guilty. Galloping across, I listened from the doorway. Hooves were thumping all over the research labs, likely organising a team to rush in and check.

"Do you know a way back to the big cargo place in here, Mister Peace?"

"Oh of course, Ma'am. This way!"

He rolled past me, weapons pointed, heading for a side door away from the circular corridor. This whole 'Ma'am' thing was beginning to irk me. Honestly, I was a *buck!* I'd even accept colt at this point! I liked mares and everything! What did I have to do to get a bit of masculine approval in my life?

There was a sudden ripping crack of wood. I leapt a good foot from the floor, shrieking at a filly-like high pitch. Mister Peace stood before me with the door entirely separated from the frame. The perplexed unicorn on the screen looked at it the ruined door in his hand.

"Hmm, I should see the engineers about this. I believe it needs some oil."

Galloping past him, I ran into the corridor beyond, hearing Mister Peace rolling after me. This was leading us through many documentation offices. Even I could tell that, *no* pony would ever work with that many filing cabinets and stay sane in anything else. Mister Peace directed me, shouting directions as we dropped flight after flight. Eventually, the activity lessened out as we passed into a more deserted area of the hub. I hoped it wasn't due to more radiation...

We slowed, no sense in galloping about madly when I could sneak. Mister Peace was fairly quiet when he wasn't talking, just a low hum and the soft trundle of his singular wheel. Despite the attitude, he certainly did obey instruction. But away from the immediate rush (well... I hoped) I stopped to get my breath and hold my aching shoulder and chest. The robot remained protective, watching corridors above me.

"Mister Peace, what's the last thing you remember about me?"

"Some time ago, Ma'am. To be precise, five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred —"

"Just... just what it is, I mean..."

"Oh, well, I was seeing you and your friend away from the Ministry after visiting Miss

Star's office, of course. Why, is there something in particular?"

Really, I hadn't known why I asked, but the poor robot being abandoned just struck a nerve, I hoped she'd at least said goodbye.

"Alert! Hostile targets detected within Flutter-Guard Range!"

I heard them too, a group of hooves coming from roughly the same direction we had. In the long corridors around thick murky internal windows to research rooms, the sound echoed everywhere. I struggled to my hooves.

"Here, Miss Fluttershy, you are injured! Allow me!"

One of those giant arms swept down, arcing around me and lifting my entire weight as though it were nothing but a foal's toy. He carried me underarm. If I hadn't been happy to get off my sore little hooves... I might have found it demeaning. But he trundled on much faster than I could gallop, zipping around corners so fast I squealed, thinking I was going to slam into them.

As we passed a cross junction of corridors (how many corridors were in this damn hub!?) a shot pinged off of his casing, zipping by my face. Stopping, he spun and placed me down behind the corner. I heard the gatling cannon whirr and roar down the corridor. Shouts to get into cover came from the far end.

"It seems they have spotted us. **Good!**"

I simply hid by the corner. Slavers fired around the corners as I felt Mister Peace grab me again and quickly pull me across the junction behind him, out of the line of fire as bullets whipped off his thick armour. The gatling cannon belched fire again, making every bit of incoming fire from the end of the hallway cease.

"Cowering fools! A real stallion should stand and take the bullet in his teeth! Have at you!"

Popping open his shoulder, I couldn't shout in time to ask him to stop before he unleashed a rocket. The back blast exploded from the rear of his casing as the deadly projectile streaked away, erupting in a harsh fireball around the slavers' position. I heard screams, calls that somepony was on fire, and the sound of dropping debris. The concussive wave made my head spin, throwing my balance as it hit my poor, suffering eardrums.

"I... I..."

"Come on, Ma'am! Let's get you out of here!"

Picking me up, he roared onward, sometimes stopping to unload fire down a corridor. Slavers were beginning to close on our position, attracted by the gunfire. Mister Peace was powerful, but he was a very easy-to-track presence by the sound. Through labs and weird machine-filled research chambers we soared. Even stairs he simply hopped down. One particularly large flight he just kept gunning for.

"Um, Mister Peace?"

"Hold on, Miss Fluttershy! **TALLY HO!**"

He ramped directly off them, clearing the *entire* stairway, accompanied by my shrieking the entire way. Reaching the bottom beside a doorway, he placed me on the ground, where I struggled to regain the ability to move my hooves, simply shivering and staring blankly in shock.

The machine tore a bar from the door, before punching it open... and clean off the frame for that matter.

Apparently I couldn't make allies who treated doors well.

Enormously satisfied with his work, Mister Peace trundled through. Somewhat

unsteadily, I staggered after him, adrenaline thumping painfully through my body.

We were back in the storage loading area! This had been the locked door from earlier. It was not empty. As we entered, I saw groups of slavers returning through one of the open dock doors. A good dozen in total. Awed, they simply stood for a few seconds staring at us. They were heavily armed with battle saddles, shotguns, long rifles, and heavy pistols. They advanced, spreading out and drawing weapons.

“Stop right there, robot!”

“This the one they say is running about?”

“Yup! Crazy machine gone haywire. Didn’t say he had a slave with him though, he must have rewired it to try and escape!”

I heard safeties click off. They weren’t going to let us go. I felt Mister Peace’s arm push me toward a large wooden box.

“Miss Fluttershy, kindly hide behind that crate there. Mister Peace has a little war to fight. Oh, most glorious of days...”

I didn’t need told twice, ducking behind it, I poked my head out to see the slavers regarding him warily.

“You got AP, mate?”

“Think so. Hit it anyway!”

The sound made me fall to the ground, clutching my ears to the sides of my head, crying aloud as the echoes of gunfire battered my senses. Booms, cracks, and chattering belts were followed by a storm of exploding wood and ricochets off crates and the ground. Mister Peace was rocked back on his wheel by the barrage, almost turned around by the impact of one of the shotguns on his shoulder. The robot’s screen flickered from the friendly pony to the angry guard.

“You stand in the path of Miss Fluttershy! PREPARE TO BE MOVED ASIDE! IN MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS!”

With no effort against the incoming fire, he whirled around, the gatling cannon and quad-barrel unloading with devastating effect. Three of the slavers were blown into ash or pulped upon his fire barrage. The others dove for cover. A long rifle shot chipped off his screen, leading the machine to unleash a rocket that drove through a crate to explode directly onto the shooter. Powering forward on his wheel, Mister Peace careened into one large storage box and hurled it toward another two slavers. Crying out, they dived away from the immense projectile.

“ZEBRA LOVING IS THE VERY DEFINITION OF FAILURE, YOU WHELPS!”

His wrists popped open, revealing a whole bank of extra barrels. They fired rapid streams of red magic energy that ripped one slaver limb from limb.

“EMBRACE FLUTTERSHY AS AN APOLOGY OR YOU WILL BE ERADICATED!”

One slaver had actually run up behind him, pushing a shotgun’s barrel into a more vulnerable looking point. Before he could even fire, one of those tubular arms seized and twisted his head so hard it separated completely. I felt my stomach turn. The half dozen or so slavers that hadn’t fled or been killed grouped together into a firing squad on the loading bay’s cargo step. Their weapons opened up again, blasting a volley into Mister Peace so hard I saw the robot stagger and raise an arm to protect his screen. For a horrible second, he fell backward and only just caught himself. The fire kept coming, leaving black marks on his carapace or denting his structure. I felt guilty somehow. This machine was fighting for me,

killing other ponies in 'my' name, and putting itself in harm's way, all over a mistaken squeak.

But it was saving me. The threat of The Master bringing me back from in here was too great. I simply hid and watched as the machine was blasted and torn. Eventually, the firing ceased and I heard multiple weapons click empty. Mister Peace stood rock still, before simply standing up. The slavers looked about in a panic before one of them finally saw me.

"There! The slave must be controlling it, kill him!"

I hid as I saw one slaver begin reloading and aiming.

"COMMENCING TACTICAL ASSESSMENT: ANTI-FLUTTERSHY THOUGHTS DETECTED WITHIN HER VICINITY."

The gatling spun up. The quad-cannons began humming. Both shoulders rolled back to reveal racks of missiles. His wrists popped open to reveal those mini-lasers again. The slavers began glancing at one another in worry. Three threw down their guns.

"BETTER WIPED THAN STRIPED, YOU IGNORANT LOOTS!"

The barrage was so loud, so violent, so utterly decimating that I didn't even see or hear much.

My ears gave out. I closed my eyes and turned away as he simply continued to fire.

Only after the horrific thumping and rocking of the entire floor had ended did I dare open my eyes. I could see the giant silhouette of Mister Peace glaring down at me from the smoke; his screen bearing the happiest looking pony I had ever seen.

"Salutations, Miss Fluttershy! How good it feels to operate under my prime directive! But there are many more on approach. The battle has dissuaded them to find heavier weaponry. We must get you away now."

I stood up, and found the entire right hand side of the loading bay in tatters. Concrete pillars were shattered to the rebar beneath, wagons had been torn asunder, and there was no sign of the slavers. In the distance, through the constant ringing in my ears, I could hear desperate cries and orders, too muffled to understand. I could hear the mutterings of slaves outside too, having been abandoned with their carts when the slavers were called to tool up and go robot hunting.

There was a way out, yes... but it wasn't through force. Shaking, still breathing far too fast to be healthy, I turned back to Mister Peace.

"Y-yes... yes I need to get out of here, b-but, I'm sorry. I don't think you can come."

I had known since he started following. He wouldn't be able to accompany me. Such a machine just wouldn't work. He'd be shot down by the slavers outside, and then me with him. Seeing the screen change to a rather blank-looking pony was enough to wrench my heart. I tried telling myself that this was a machine! But no matter what I thought, he had protected me. Only a few ponies ever had.

"I understand, Miss Fluttershy. Your role is not mine."

"I'm so sorry..."

I didn't even know what to say. How did a machine feel? It was just obeying orders. Sniffing, I just averted my eyes.

"Thank you. I know sh—I know *I'm* proud of what you've done. Is there any way you can stay safe?"

Mister Peace's screen flickered a few times, switching from pony to pony before settling on a unicorn with a bright idea. Trundling over, he pulled open a side hatch to one of the storage rooms attached to the loading bay.

Inside lay a whole heap of machines, ones almost identical to Mister Peace. Immediately, he began removing his bloodstained arms, unlatching their dented armour plates to replace them with new models. The old ones he tossed into the middle of the floor, along with various chassis segments from the container. I could see his plan, those coming would think he had been destroyed by the team, while he hid beneath the scrap.

"Now for you, Miss Fluttershy. I can detect many ponies, non-hostile, just outside with carts. Allow me to load one for you that you may blend in. Suffice to say, pony society confuses me greatly these days. Things were so much simpler when we just shot at stripes."

"I'm sorry, you weren't meant to be left alone."

Pulling a cart over, he dumped some scrap in it before offering the harness to me. I morosely wandered forward, letting him strap me in.

"Miss Fluttershy, you are my reason for being. Knowing that you are safe is all I require to be sated, no matter how far you are from me. To see you again **warms my battle-loving heart!** If it so works best for you that I once again must wait... so be it. But know, I will always be loyal to you! If in need near here, simply call for me, and I shall **SALLY FORTH!**"

Wincing, I tried to stop my eyes from watering. Testing the weight on the cart, I found it loaded with light metals. This felt wrong, to just simply go and leave this robot with his misconception. That his charge had been killed two hundred years ago.

If I had learned one thing from all this, it was that the past and present were still connected in ways I couldn't imagine. From every skeleton telling a horrible story to the remnants and memories that littered this wasteland... Equestria had not been forgotten. We simply had to believe in it, and to look for it.

We were a long way from it, but it wasn't impossible. Twilight Sparkle clearly thought so, Aurora Star wanted to... Littlepip, I was sure, believed in it. Protégé, in his own way, perhaps, too.

"You must go, Ma'am. The enemy nears, and I must annoyingly deactivate. I would not wish to waste myself when not protecting your peaceable self! Till next we meet, Miss Fluttershy!"

"T-thank you, Mister Peace..."

Mister Peace circled on the spot, saluting sharply to see me off. He remained still in respect and vigilance until I had departed. Only after I moved out of the loading bay did I hear him move away and dig himself into the piles of boxes.

Outside, I joined the mass of slaves without much effort. They were all too distracted and worried to care about one more pony joining them. Shuffling into them, shivering and squeaking in pain as tired muscles strained and pulled, I awaited for order to ring out with our instruction.

"Get these slaves moving! That mad robot's in the cargo dock. D'you want to lose the workforce?"

"Right, right! Move it slaves! Out to the factory, now!"

We began moving, trundling forward. Casting my eyes up, wiping my matted and patchwork mane from my eyes, I saw our route take us out underneath the six pointed star. Yes, I really had found what I had wanted in there. The truth that there was a better world.

Now all I had to do was hope someone would someday bring it back.

And so, I wheeled on, leaving the past behind me. The memories, the pictures, the voices, and the survivors. Under the six-pointed star they once again rested, awaiting the attention of those they desired to hear.

He was waiting for me nearer to the Mall. Slipping out from the factory hadn't been difficult in the mass of slaves. I heard him nearby, that damn eyepiece telling him exactly when and where I had returned, and where he could intercept me. I heard Protégé's terse trotting long before before he emerged from the smog across the street.

He smiled. I didn't feel like returning it.

"I must admit, Murk. I'm impressed, if a little surprised. I don't want to imagine what caused an entire wing of anti-machine equipped griffon mercenaries to take off for the Ministry of Arcane Science. Judging by the noise, you stirred something up in there."

For this task at least, I had no master to report to. This had been my choice to see the past. I dumped the Sparkle Sanitiser at his hooves.

"Yeah, the past..." Wandering past him, I wanted nothing more than to steal a drink from the fountain and pass out on the sofa in Glimmer's cell. But I felt him lightly stop me with a hoof.

"You did as I asked. I won't go back on my offer, Murk. I believe Weathervane is waiting to see you. He said you'd know where. Glimmerlight headed over earlier with him to wait for you."

Blinking, I turned, somewhat shocked.

"You sent her on ahead? How did you know I'd succeed?"

That all-knowing grin emerged on Protégé's face as he picked up the sanitiser-thingy in his magic, and slipped it into his own bag.

"A little trust goes a long way, Murk. Thank you for proving my thoughts correct. Did you learn something from all this?"

Scuffing my hoof against the tarmac, I avoided his eyes, before nodding.

"Not what you wanted... I think... but yes. I did."

"Good. You saw something for yourself, Murk. That's all I can ever ask of you. Look at the world and see what you believe for it, like I believe in Master Red Eye's vision to bring that world back. That Ministry holds many records and secrets. More ponies would do well to remember them."

I thought back, the Stable had protected me while telling its story. Fluttershy had helped me to survive my illness like she had promised Equestria she would. Mister Peace was still guarding that which he felt was important. Protégé had seen things like this and took faith in their existence to justify his actions.

"Master, do you really think things can go back to how they were before? With ponies like... like the slavers in there? Like..."

I wanted to say The Master, but I couldn't even dare say a word about him. The Master was planning something, but while Sunny and the mare were under his threat, I couldn't say a word. Protégé turned, pointing a hoof back toward the FunFarm.

"You have not seen the foals, Murk. I see them every few days, sometimes to help teach them history or philosophy. They are being brought up right, to be cultured and intelligent.

They offer one another gifts on birthdays and share their belongings. Things ponies from two hundred years ago might have done.”

Turning back to me, his eyepiece glowed dully, making me squint in the light.

“Yes, Murk. I do believe it is possible. Perhaps someday I shall take you to meet them. You have proven yourself a valuable pony to me, one I hope might stand by my side for the two years to come as we continue to rebuild this world. Now, your friend and doctor are waiting. Good day, Murk.”

With that, he simply nodded his head, leaving me standing alone for a few seconds in thought before I turned and silently galloped off.

‘By his side’, I wondered.

Just why was such a thing so important to him?

Weathervane’s basement had a sachet of RadAway hidden just beside the outdoor entrance. Having trotted up, I drank it as I cantered in. Protégé had been right in one way at least. There was something to learn about freedom in that place. But it wasn’t about choice, it was about what freedom from hardship truly was. Even after I got out of here, freedom would be what I made of my *own* life.

That at least, was something I could start with in here. For now, that simply meant staying by those I cared for and trusted. Freedom was a long way from here, but I didn’t have to walk that path alone. Protégé had offered his aid with it, and there was no reason to turn him down. Ponies may have different ideals, different beliefs and opinions, but helping one another out was always something that mattered. Even if you disagreed.

If there was one lesson, I figured it was that.

My train of thought was somewhat broken by frenzied screams and loud slamming ahead of me. The thick gate containing Doctor Flowerpot rocked and bucked on its welded hinges. Raspy roars erupted from within, making me trot back in fear.

“Quiet down, you crazy fucknut!”

As expected, Doctor Weathervane got out to the door long before I could even approach his room. His front hoof slammed and slapped against the wood, making the feral ghouls howl.

“I said *silence*, you South Fillydelphian thundercunt! SHUT UP!”

Enough curses to make me feel decidedly less innocent and much slamming on the door later, the maddened ghoul behind it seemed to draw away. Only then did Weathervane turn and beckon me in.

“Took your sweet fucking time. Judging by the reports, you woke something up for sure. Now get in here, got something for you.”

Entering behind him, I saw Glimmerlight awaiting at the far end of the medical lab. Galloping forward the moment her eyes laid sight on me, she swept me up, hugging me tightly.

“Oh good, you’re alright. Protégé told me not to worry, but really, in this city...”

“I know, I’m just glad to be back. That wasn’t fun.”

Letting me down, I found Weathervane standing and staring, tapping his hoof impatiently before nodding to the stretcher.

“Hop up and get your fleece off. I’ve got three RadAways I can spare, but we’ll get this

done first.”

With a small glance at Glimmer, I found her smiling... what was that about? Almost afraid, I struggled and pulled to get onto the high bed before tugging off my fleece, my wings stinging and aching from lost feathers and bad bones. Weathervane trotted around me, horn glowing a dank yellow as he observed me.

“Hmm, little bit more radiation than I’d like. You must have wandered into a patch, but that RadAway will do the job. Now hold still...”

Sitting still as ordered, I felt my wings began to tingle. What was he *doing*? The magical glow increased, reflecting off the steel sinks and every basin and beaker in the entire room. Shivering, I felt a pressure grow on either side of my body, then suddenly pop with a sharp pain. Yelping aloud, I fell to my side as Weathervane’s magic ceased.

“What did you do? That *hurt*!”

“Oh, quit your whining. Take a look.”

Turning my head, I near enough dropped right off the bed in shock.

My... my feathers! All the ones that had been damaged or lost over the years were back! Glimmerlight grinned madly from the side where she sat from behind one very proud looking Weathervane. He swelled up, for once actually smiling.

“Feather-fix spell. Been far too fucking long since I did it. Just took me a while to remember it. Now sit still. I’ve got a little more work to do to strengthen them. I think I can help you with your wings, Murk.”

I took a sharp breath, could he make me—

“However, you don’t go hoping to be able to fly properly. Let me get rid of any false hope now. But, with enough work, picky and fucking tedious as wings are, I could be able to repair the damage and perhaps get them moving again. I wouldn’t be a very good pegasus doctor if I didn’t damn well try to fix this. No, I’d just be some incompetent arse.”

“T-thank you! Thank you so much! I... I...”

I didn’t even know how to put it in words. I just kept looking at my wings, with all their feathers restored. Maybe they could move again! Maybe I could once again feel the wind flow through them. Even if I couldn’t fly, that would... it’d be something! I felt Weathervane’s hooves pressing me down again to begin his work to strengthen them, making my wings feel warm. Glimmerlight sat down and leaned over the bed to nuzzle me, simply glad to see me happier.

“You know I’ve heard what pegasi can do with wings that move other than flying. Who knows? Could be a whole new world for you and that journal.” She winked. I simply blushed.

“What’s up with the journal?” Weathervane was distracted, but clearly still perceptive. I saw Glimmer laugh. Oh no, please no. Don’t say a word, not a word!

“Oh, you could just say Murky here takes interest in having a *lot* of detail in his hobbies, doesn’t he?” Her grin widened, as I felt embarrassed enough that I just dug my head into my hooves.

Giggling, she ruffled my mane, and trotted off to sit by Weathervane’s desk and spin in his chair. (See? It was fun!) Coughing, trying to cool my warm cheeks, I pointed at my bag by the door.

“Oh, Glimmer, look in my saddlebag, I, um... got some orbs and... stuff...”

Squeaking in joy, I saw her drag the full bag across and dive face first into it. Orbs floated out around her invading head, before she eventually emerged with a mass of papers in her

mouth. The sight drew a laugh from me, especially when she wiggled her eyebrows in a silly motion. It was enough to keep my mind off the stinging going on around my wings.

Weathervane didn't comment on Glimmer, but rather nodded his head with a grunt to catch my attention. His eyes were briefly focused across the lab to a silver sphere sitting on a small tripod.

"Never did remember to say thanks for fetching that for me. Spell orb that powerful shouldn't ever end up in Red Eye's hands. I just trust you won't say a thing about down here, alright?"

"Yes, sir..." Not like I had a choice. Weathervane had saved me too many times to risk making an enemy of him. Besides, he swore at me often enough for whining... who knew what he'd say if he *hated* me?

"Useless to me really. Takes four unicorns to operate the bloody thing, but prevention is better than watching Red Eye tear apart that research to heal those that would hurt others. Madam Star really had been proud of it. Shit... pity the poor mare never got to do much with all that research before those fucking megaspells hit..."

There went those links again. I wasn't sure whether to say anything or not in relation to it. Thankfully, Glimmerlight quickly gasping and stifling her own cry of surprise drew all attention away from me. Looking over, I saw her glancing at a leaflet of paper.

"Murky, oh Murky, this could be something here."

"Could be what? Some new technology?"

"No!" She swiveled on the padded chair, her magic propelling it round, and looked directly at us. "More than that. If the rest of these orbs maybe contain little bits of information that I *hope* they do... this may be a way out."

I almost leapt from the table, prompting Weathervane to roughly force me back down again. Glimmer idly spun the chair as she spoke.

"It's a message from an apprentice to Aurora Star. It's simply saying that their application to purchase an abandoned metro station for underground testing has been denied because the walls needed to be upgraded to stop, quoting here, 'the idea of some zebra being able to mine their way through the metro tunnel walls right into the Ministry itself.' This message is dated some time before the megaspells were unleashed, but... who knows? What if they never got around to it?"

Weathervane snorted.

"Forgive me if I withhold my boundless fucking enthusiasm. You don't think Red Eye's reinforced all that shit? The metro stations were blocked off years ago to prevent slaves escaping... and to keep those tunnels sealed. For good reason."

Glimmer pouted on the chair, huffing and tapping the paper.

"Not even Red Eye can reinforce the walls of an entire metro system!"

"Doesn't matter. Unless you know precisely *where* to dig for the weak points, then you don't have a hope in hell."

Glimmerlight paused, looking at the rest of the papers before speaking again, her eyes not coming away as she floated the orbs up.

"Maybe you're right, but if Aurora was as organised as she sounds—"

"She was."

"—then maybe the rest of this stuff might tell us where? The Ministry had to have been concerned. Look, I'm gonna take a look anyway, even knowing which metro station they were interested in could give us a clue. This could be it, Murky..."

Spinning, she glanced at me on each revolution.

"A way out! Just like I said, we *know* it's possible now after getting so close. This could be nothing, but it's worth checking out, even if there's a few problems in the way for us to figure o— whoa!"

The chair spun out under her, dumping Glimmerlight onto her rump against the desk. Weathervane's belongings rattled onto it, a gasp from the ghoul preceeding a photoframe falling, until Glimmer's magic quickly caught it. Biting her lip, she shrugged, rubbing her flank with a hoof and wincing.

"Uh... sorry?"

Weathervane narrowed his eyes and grumbled something even I couldn't hear.

"Hmph... kids..."

The ghoulish doctor made a tug on one feather to test the strength, drawing a small yelp from me. But I scarcely noticed it. We had a chance! Twice now I had failed... but with a little more digging, there might still be a method, if Glimmerlight's theory meant anything. I trusted her with my life. She would do the right thing, I knew it!

We could do this.

Right now, however, Glimmerlight was still staring at the photo frame.

"Hey, Weathervane?"

"Hmph?"

"Is this... you?"

He looked up from my left wing, eyes narrowing as he struggled to see. I didn't imagine his vision was doing very well after all this time. Eventually, the squint on his face lessened and his cheeks rather visibly sunk. Sighing, he nodded.

"Yes, that's me, and my son."

There was a rather sudden emptiness in the air. Glimmerlight glanced back to it with a more serious look, as the obvious implication was felt by everypony present. I glanced across at the photo, and saw the bearded doctor, rather old already with a stern face, standing proudly beside a little blonde and orange buck over Fillydelphia's skyline. Weathervane sighed.

"Most ghouls like me lost somepony in the balefire. We all had to come to terms with shit like that. I'm one of the lucky ones. He didn't die in the flames, no. He died peacefully, I got him a Stable ticket."

No.

"You might say, knowing he wasn't caught in it is what kept me going this long. I save ponies. I'm a healer. He was one I truly managed to spare all this..."

I didn't want to believe this was going to be what it was. But somehow I just knew.

Glimmerlight looked at the picture more closely before setting it back up. Her face was uncharacteristically morose and sad.

"What was his name?" Her voice was quiet, respectful. Weathervane just sighed again.

"Sundial. My little Sundial. Knowing he was safe it's... well I guess it's what allowed me to not go feral long ago..."

I dropped my head into my hooves. I heard Glimmerlight quietly gasp and move toward me. She knew I had his messages, but she didn't know I'd found his corpse. Found it outside... far from any Stable.

"Murky?"

Her hoof lay on my back. She picked up immediately that I wasn't mentioning this.

“Murky, I just... sorry, Doctor. It’s been a long day, and I think he’s just—”

I didn’t hear any more of her convincing him, covering for me. Nothing... nothing could bring me to say it to the old doctor. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t ever do it.

Spying the photo out of the corner of my eye, of that happy time for others I cared about personally... I finally knew how Twilight had felt.

And seeing the slow sink of Weathervane’s shoulders as he corrected the frame’s position only make that feeling all too stark...

“Hey there, it’s Sundial! Well, who else would it be? I figured I’d better record a second thing after that... well, that thing earlier. Something happier. I need to stay positive. That’s what Ministry Mare Applejack told me when she dropped by recently.”

“So... uh... I guess I should do something I haven’t properly done yet. I wanted to say thank you, so history will know. Thank you... to my old pa. My dad. He paid for this thing to help me survive, and I don’t think I’ve really shown the right gratitude for it yet. He wasn’t ever like that... but it’s all that’s kept me going amongst all this.”

“Ponies care for one another. My dad saved me, and I want to save Sky. All from one to the next. I hope whoever listens to this will still be doing the same. Anyway, I should go and get things ready. I’ve been told that I need to go to a meeting at the factory about this new armour. Maybe a promotion? Wish me luck!

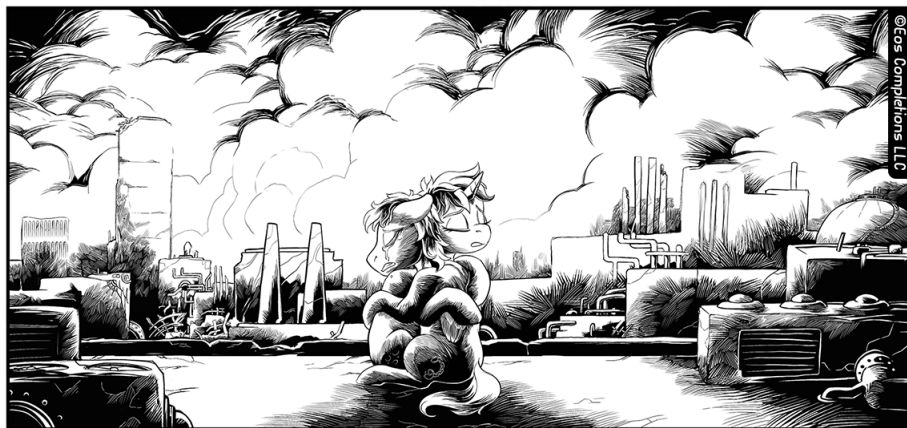
Oh and... Dad? If you ever hear this... you’re the greatest. I know we don’t always show it too much and that we’ve lived apart but... you brought me up good, Pa. I wouldn’t be who I am with the mare I love without your guidance to show me the way. Hopefully, someday I can do the same for somepony else as they learn to go out into the world for themselves too...

So, uh... bye for now!”

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Shadow Canter (Rank 2!) – Thievery and infiltration are fancier words that you might begin to use to describe your role in life these days. No longer just a basic beginner, those who want to keep their valuables safe might just begin to sweat a little if you’re in the area. You gain a further +10 to sneak and may move 10% faster while sneaking.

The Morality of Escape



"You don't leave town, you end up under it. You got me? 'Tis better to be alone, than of bad company."

"How far would you go to be free?"

After the Pit, I might have said 'any distance I could.' But then, I'm a pretty naïve pony like that at times. It's all too easy to say you'll 'do anything' without ever really thinking about the situations or problems such a mentality might cause.

Back on the rock farm, I had almost starved to death. My master hadn't fed me for days in punishment. I don't think he realised how little time it would take for me to die, so I had broken the rules and tried to steal some back. It was the first time I'd ever done something 'bad' that the Goddesses frowned upon. At the time, I had prayed and justified that I needed it to survive just a little longer until my master remembered to leave some food for me or for the other slaves to stop taking mine. How easy it is, to just come up with reasons why you do something; to justify it and pretend it was all for the right cause. That one had been easy, of course, life or death.

Things weren't so simple now.

In the wake of seeing Sunny Days taken by the very pony that had been hunting *me*, I wasn't too sure anymore that I had as clear cut a reason as I thought I did.

More than anything in the world I wanted my freedom, but some paths just kept raising grey morals in my face. Helping Red Eye and being a good little worker would, with luck, eventually permit me to be free if I could work with those I trusted and overcome the impossible task, rather than the impossible escape. But wouldn't that be betraying the very inspiration from Littlepip that set my mind free in the first place? Could I really look her or anypony else that had inspired me in the eye and say 'I got out!' after aiding their enemy?

It was easy to look at that Wall and believe it being morally right to simply escape over it without involving anypony else than myself and Glimmer. To find a way past that iconic

barrier and find my, or our, way home to the wastes. But the approach to that was not easy. We had only come close to succeeding because of sheer luck. Being already outside and aided by a large force of Steel Rangers was not something we could count on to happen again. No. Now we had to look internally and find a new way to escape from within the belly of Fillydelphia itself. That is where problems began to show up. Despite Glimmer's theories and ideas, we couldn't do it alone.

Plans, resources, allies, and courage were simple to list, but finding them is hard when almost every single pony in Fillydelphia is a potential betrayer behind the mask of friendship, lost to despair or just plain twisted. Who might we have to work with or endure the presence of to find our freedom? Would we be forced to aid those who would only use their freedom to hurt ponies? If we let gangs or raiders out to help ourselves, we would be doing the wasteland a crime and hurting the few good efforts Fillydelphia had made to imprison them.

But the more I sat and stared at that Wall, feeling my life ticking away on the radioactive deadline of my disease, the more I began to realise that to find the light at the end of the tunnel we might have to walk in shadows to be able to reach the end at all.

Even if we had to step into the harsh 'in between's' of... of...

It's... it's not easy, okay? When everypony feels like your enemy, or at best some sort of unknowing grey area, you don't have a choice sometimes! I wish it were easier for me. Glimmerlight is somepony I really trust and love being around, but she can't bring about a flawless escape for us both on her own! We needed help! As soon as the medical security left us to the mercy of the raiders in our sleep we'd... we'd be...

I wouldn't do 'anything', but what I would do goes a lot further than I'd ever thought. It's all like some huge game that everypony is playing; we all want the same thing in the end, but everypony is playing by their own sets of rules. You can choose who to play with, but they all have their own horrible consequences if you end up on the wrong team.

The worst part, though, was realising that some of those decisions you may have already made, without even realising there was a choice in the first place...

Pistons heaved, belts spun, and presses hissed all around me. One great machine of Fillydelphia's industry, interconnected and reliant to each part's own operation. Amongst the great forge crawled and strived the little living cogs of slaves on all levels. Some clattered on shaky walkways that stretched across the top of the work floor to permit access to machinery that could no longer function on its own. Others dodged sparks and splashes of molten metal upon the scarred concrete floor.

Days ago, I had seen such similar things within Wicked Slit's factory, but hers was only one of many that Red Eye had reactivated and set to work. Within here, in the old Ironshod Firearms manufactory we were to build ammunition that would supply the vast army of Fillydelphia that stretched all the way to the Everfree Forest. If rumours were to be believed, some elements had even gone all the way to Hoofington as well. Judging from the belts and crates of bullets, apple grenades, and replacement parts rolling off the assembly lines, I could believe it.

Within this mess of hot metal and fiery air I was set to my new role. Protégé had offered the rather obvious choice between here or helping sort the radioactive materials from junk

drawn out of the crater by salvage teams. That one bore less immediate danger, but any sort of radiation was something for me to avoid. Thus, here I was, left to be tied to a giant crucible of molten brass alongside another dozen ponies. We were tasked to pull and tip the pot into the moulding chambers for the long flat sheets that would be stamped and cut for bullet casings.

“Pull teams, stand ready!”

The stallions and mares either side of me groaned, pulling themselves to their hooves and trying to stretch out sore necks. Doing the same, I felt the muscles along my back and neck strain and ache from the irregular periods of high stress and sudden unexpected rest.

“Pull! Pull!”

Over the noise of the presses, the others couldn’t hear the command too well. Noticing I could pick up the sound through the ambience, the overseer had put me on the pulling team to act as a signaller to the rest. Hobbling forward, I pushed my head downward before feeling the others spot me and join the effort. With a dull and deep creak, the massive crucible began to tilt on its suspended wires and poured white hot metal into the machine below. Sparks and splashes flew upward, scattering slaves on the walkways to dodge the lethal liquid while a thick steam blew out that scorched and stung my body, along with the others. Very quickly, I had become glad of my goggles protecting my eyes from the hissing vapour.

It had been hard, trotting from Hearts and Hooves Hospital to once again enter all this. I hadn’t said a thing to Doctor Weathervane about Sundial. Glimmerlight had thankfully stayed silent, correctly assuming that something else was amiss. I had filled her in back at the Mall, rather tearfully. Part of me wished I had told the truth, but Weathervane was quickly becoming my only true lifeline. If the real death of his son had become known to him...

I couldn’t risk saying anything. Not even to say that I had Sundial’s PipBuck. It gave me a hollow and wretched feeling to know I was hiding his son’s last messages from him, but I doubted it would be doing him any good to reveal it all so suddenly after two hundred years.

“Ease off! Back up!”

Releasing the tension, I tried not to let the weight drag me backwards when we carefully trotted in reverse to make the crucible upright again. Squealing hisses of shaped metal erupted from the sheet press, dizzying me further in the thick and hot air of the ammunition forge. Feeling the immense weight of the pot pulling all backwards, my hooves began to skitter and slide on the smooth surface, held forward only by the efforts of those around me with *proper* strength. The moment it was back to the normal position, I fell to the ground, breathing hard from the effort.

Sundial was Weathervane’s son. The same sentence just kept rolling around in my head, forcing any other questions I had aside, like why The Master was planning to acquire many new slaves of his own or what things Grindstone had really been searching for in Aurora Star’s work. I had left all the memory orbs and odd little trinkets with Glimmerlight, trusting in her to observe them with a greater clarity than I ever could in the search for anything that might offer an escape route. She’d had little time, the call for our slave den to go out to work had come within the hour of our return. I wasn’t sure where she was, likely in the arcane technology labs being forced to help repair more advanced items and tools.

Little weaklings like me didn’t get anything so fancy. No, it was simply a return to the

back breaking labour I had always known.

‘Not for long,’ I promised myself. I was unsure, afraid and lacking in true faith, but that fiery spirit to be rid of this place still burned as brightly as the forge around me.

But taking what relief I could in the musty air, feeling the poisonous tang in my throat, I began to wonder just how long I could survive in this place even without my illness claiming me. The air itself was filled with all sorts of problems. Infections, choking, and other diseases of similar symptoms to mine were all too common amongst slaves. Even for myself, in my haste to worry about a taint related ebo... whatsit, I had even overlooked the various shivers and aches related to an ongoing fever and the itch from a minor eye infection. Likely, I assumed, Weathervane had considered them too low priority to waste his valued magic healing on. I couldn’t hold it against him. Even the mere thought that my wings had their feathers back made me want to give him a big squishy hug if I’d ever thought he’d appreciate it. Despite his belief that they wouldn’t fly, to be able to move them again, to be able to balance properly and stretch those aching things out, that would be enough.

I *really* hoped he could do what he promised.

Pushing my goggles up, I saw activity ahead of me on the work floor. There was a little commotion amongst the slavers. I couldn’t make it out, but the overseer, a scrawny earth pony with an oddly lanky neck, was waving a hoof in frustration and berating two slavers before him. Waving them away, he thumped a hoof off his forehead in frustration and turned to wave it towards us. Towards me.

Oh, why did it *always* have to be me? Hopefully it wasn’t anything too bad.

Unclipping myself from the crucible, I hobbled on over upon my still bandaged right front hoof. The injury hadn’t seemed to be healing well, simply staying as a stinging mess of blood and seeping yellow marks through the fabric. The overseer glared down at me, before leaning down rather too close to shout in my ear.

“Some idiot’s broken the only spark battery charger we’ve got in here! I need you to run an errand to the quartermaster’s storage hall to get another! You’ll remember what you’ve to ask for?”

“Yes, master!”

“Good, now get going! If one of those batteries on the stamper runs dry we’ll be sitting pretty with nothing to do until we get one!”

Nodding, I briefly abased myself (it never hurt to be careful with slavers) and scampered off toward the exit. Truth be told, I was feeling rather lucky. An errand outside the factory was almost like a break. Dodging around rows of slaves lifting metal scrap into the smelting pots and waiting for a large cart of ammunition crates to pass by, I eventually reached the colossal doors and found the cooler air rush over me.

Well, cool by comparison. Even Fillydelphia’s warm musk was nothing compared to the searing heat of a forge.

Cantering out onto the main roads, I set toward the storage halls. I’d visited them multiple times in my stay within Fillydelphia, often finding myself being sent as it was one of the few things I was apparently good for with my lack of stamina or strength. I was simply the loyal little slave who you knew would come back from a message run.

The problem began to emerge in my mind though, this was *exactly* what I’d spent my time doing. I was simply going back to the grind again, working myself silly while waiting for Protégé’s stock to build its numbers once again. A part of me was furious, telling me that

this errand gave me ample opportunity to do what I'd done before, collect information and items to help build toward an escape. That I could be collecting things...

The truth was, we had no plan. There was no simple way over the walls. We had spent last night doing something to try and think of ideas to pass the time should the papers reveal nothing. What had she called it? Mindthundering? Whatever it was called, (thoughtlightning?) it hadn't ended well. I'd wondered if we could perhaps use her talents to build some sort of grapple gun and sneak onto the battlements before firing it at the buildings outside and zip-lining down. Of course, that was shot down quickly. (Likewise rather literally, had we tried it) There was no real way onto the wall's battlements without being noticed. It had taken every effort I had mustered and a near suicidal mindset to even get next to the wall. Getting inside it and then zipping over it without being spotted? Not a chance. Not to mention that we would end up in the same place as last time. Only this time we didn't have Brimstone...

After another ten minutes of thought, Glimmerlight had began wondering if she could somehow get in bed with Red Eye and 'convince' him. The night's plans had somewhat broken down after that point. I rather hoped she was joking.

She had went back into one of those memory orbs again afterwards. I had sat alone and prayed to the great Goddesses that we might find *anything* to give us a vague hint at using the metro lines to escape. The words kept ringing in my mind. 'We had a way!' The metro's lines seemed like a high potential avenue for escape, one we could use over time if we could figure out any method related to it. If so, we could build towards it!

Please... please, let her have something for me when I got back. I *needed* something to grab hold of and power towards, something to give my life *meaning*. Not just this daily grind.

The journey to the stores wasn't particularly far, but my hope for a long queue broke down upon seeing only a few ponies passing in and out carrying saddlebags of specifically required supplies. Located along one of the old junctions amidst Fillydelphia's main industry district, it had taken over what used to be an old chariot landing strip directly used by the nearby factories. The storage itself was simply a group of large cargo containers stacked together with corrugated metal ramps leading to the higher ones. A loose canvas roof flapped in the dull wind above it all to shield from Fillydelphia's irregular rainfall. Trotting up, I cast my eyes around to try and spot the quartermaster himself, and found him near the entrance with little effort. The rather rotund black earth pony swivelled from his thick rolls of checklists to spot me moving up and snorted.

"Thought they'd killed you off days ago, runt. Didn't Shackles get hold of ya?" His tone was not as insulting as it was simply disinterested.

"Yes, s-sir." He was bigger than me, thus I offered what politeness I could, I knew this stallion preferred 'sir', having recently come out of service from Red Eye's army in the same role. I could see his one front hoof held in a permanent limp off the ground from a horrible wound half way up it that would make him limp. It was the reason he could no longer travel the distances required for active frontline service.

"Well that's me lost a bet then. I figured you'd last less than a day under him after seeing you traipsed through those streets. What do you want anyways?"

"A spark b-battery charger, sir. For the Ironshod—"

"Yes, yes, another one for the old Ironshod Firearms building. Why am I so surprised? Container six, you'll find them at the back."

There was a brief moment of silence, with me simply biting my lip and trying to find the words to say it.

"Sir, I... I don't know how to read six..."

His two front hooves slapped down on his desk, followed closely by his head in sheer frustration. Clearly, he simply did not care for this. Spinning, I felt him shove me with a hoof hard, knocking me toward the containers and following.

"*Fine!* This way, runt." Continually giving me a helping front kick or nudge every time his long limping stride caught up with me, I was herded around the massive red and blue containers to find one with both doors wide open and a smaller canvas cover sheltering it.

"You don't need to damn well read when you can just count up! Now get in, get your damn charger and get the hell out!"

Before I could even move, his teeth gnashed down, gripped my fleece, picked me up and hurled me inside the container. Crashing over a series of boxes, I curled up on the floor in my only form of defence, hearing him snort and move away. Shivering, waiting till he left, I unsteadily got up, holding my shoulder and chest until the dull aching of those wounds passed. Yes, this really was just like old times in Fillydelphia, the same ones I had half heartedly wished for while terrified inside the Stable.

Glancing around, the chargers weren't particularly difficult to find. A moderately heavy hub that a few small batteries could slot into and stamped with the image of both the six-pointed star and an apple. Tucking it into my saddlebag (putting me somewhat off balance to one side with the weight) I aimed to simply get out the container, leave the storage facility and get on my way.

That said...

I cast my eyes around for anything worth taking. It was habitual. Amongst the junk. I did find a small piece of metal polished to a mirror finish. It lay within the shell of a broken, rather complex device, under a heap of loose wires. Carefully looking into it, I glanced at my own face to make sure that my somewhat threadbare mane still covered the scar. I'd spent some time trying to make sure it stayed there. I didn't want anypony to see it and link us together. *I* didn't want to see it.

Hesitantly picking it up, I kept glancing to ensure I wasn't spotted. I had a little idea for the shard. Besides, it was pretty.

Checking my infected eye within it, seeing the red hazing around the edges, it almost took me a second before I saw the pink face staring at me from behind in the mirror, and froze. Slowly, hesitantly, I turned to see Pinkie Pie standing *right there*.

"Hello!"

My scream echoed around the walled container at least a dozen times. Falling backward into the rest of the chargers, I sent them scattering in all directions. The pink pony's head jerked from side to side, a buoyant smile on her face. Those eyes stared into my soul. Without warning, she began sparking from her joints before the entire thing shuddered and creaked upon movement.

A robot? No, just some machine that could detect movement. A creaky and rusting hoof rose to wave at me from the old pile it had been dumped in, likely from the FunFarm.

"How ya bzzzzztch-doin'? Enj-j-joy the riiiide?"

I really wanted-no-*needed* a bag to breath in.

Trotting back outside fairly quickly, I made my way away from the crazed pony construct as fast as I could, fighting to get my panicked breathing under control.

Rather creepily, the head followed me the entire way, one hoof jerked around, turning in ways no organic pony ever could, until it tried to point to the side.

"The way out is-tzzzzch-just downstairs-just downstairs-just downstairs!"

The faulty servo motors tried to bring it back down, but just shot it vertically instead like a mangled corpse. The entire hydraulic system it say on came loose, and it dropped to the floor, connected only by a glowing wire. High pitched snorts of laughed, interrupted by static, followed.

Freaky. Biting my lip and shivering, I headed for the entranceway to depart before my current overseer got a little impatient. I really didn't like robots. It was either tickets, cleaning, or war, or... something. The way they were just slaves to one purpose or simple didn't sit well with me.

But Mister Peace had felt like more. Maybe he was a more advanced one, but he'd had such a personality. I still felt sad for the poor machine, long abandoned from his charge and not truly knowing what he was doing anymore.

No more wondering, I had to push on. No matter how exhausted you were on getting back, if anything had happened that meant they needed it sooner, the tradition was to blame the messenger in Fillydelphia. The thought of galloping only made my muscles quiver in protest and my injured hoof throb as a reminder. My energy had been sapped by the day, giving me the same limping daze as most slaves eventually gained in this city, but I might just have to push a little to avoid another punishment. I wasn't sure if I could take one and not snap under the crippling unfairness of slavery through dreaming eyes right now.

"What do you *mean* you don't have any more standard size gear washers!?"

The shrieking mare's voice made me perk up as I rounded the corner of the last container. Oh no, I knew that tone. No *other* slave overseer had the same banshee like frustration and pent up anger...

"What I mean is just what I say, Slit, ain't got none. They're weak and not as common as their name entails to—"

The unicorn slammed both her front hooves on the quartermaster's desk, grinding her teeth. I could see that curving knife jittering perpetually in the air behind her. Her entire body seemed to be quivering in abject rage.

"Then *who* last took them? Was it Rusty again? That little bitch always takes too many! Have you any *idea* what lacking them is doing to my production rates? Screw you, I'm going to look myself, if I need to cut something to get the right size, I'm doing it!"

She swivelled off the desk, growling at the rather nonplussed quartermaster and turned right toward me, eyes widening.

"You..."

What anger she had on her face dissolved, as though replaced with sudden confusion at seeing me here. Then it twisted, building and building into a look of absolute *fury* I had only very rarely seen in the rather wound up mare's eyes. Her broken horn sparked and flared.

What was her *problem*? What on Equestria did she have against me now!? I wasn't in her workforce to cause problems anymore, what was making her...

"Oh, you little..."

Her eyes were not quite locked on mine, rather a few inches above them. Reaching up with a hoof, I found it tapping against the shape of my goggles.

Oh.

Her goggles.

“You little runt! I fucking knew it was you!”

“I... I...” I honestly didn’t even have a single thing to say that would even vaguely help me here.

So I simply turned and galloped, screaming out loud as the chase commenced. Or rather, ended the moment it began.

Her magic grabbed me. Normally unicorns had trouble controlling an entire pony outside of pulling them quickly away. But with my weight and Slit’s obvious anger driving her, I felt my entire hind section being dragged toward her across the floor, even while my front hooves dug in and tried to gallop away. I was flipped over onto my back, her front hooves landing on my chest and pushing me onto the floor, leaning over me. The weight upon my wound brought a gasping rush of cold pain from me through a sharp gasp beyond all ability to scream.

“You have any idea how long it took to find goggles that *fitted* me, Murk?! Oh you’re going to pay for this one! No more little excuses to weasel your way out! Oh yes, you’re going to be my little toy for a while for taking *my* fucking goggles...”

Off to the side, I heard the quartermaster snort in laughter and turn back to his paperwork, intently oblivious. I was much too terrified to get any idea of the joke.

Casting naught but an annoyed glance to the side, her eyes returned to me. Sweet Goddesses, she was so angry I could see one of her eyes actually turning *bloodshot* with the strain.

“M-Ma’am... I... I got them f—”

“Don’t lie, Murk! You think I haven’t had to endure your wasted little flanks around my factory long enough to tell when you’re lying, you little shit-worm?”

Her knife floated up, dropping to ping against the ground beside my face and leaning sideways to press the blade against my muzzle. I stopped breathing as I felt the pressure. She was breathing hard, bared teeth showing between sentences, the sides of her mouth twitching upwards in maddened glee at finding the criminal in her eyes. I felt her lower body sit over my own, pressing me to the ground. The personal imagery it created from the outside would have been intensely embarrassing, if either she cared or I hadn’t been in abject terror and danger.

“If there’s one thing I cannot stand, it’s little thieves thinking they can take **my things!** I, oh Murk, I don’t even know what to do to you first. You see how angry I am for this? **You see!?**”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“Shackles got you, but now I’m going to get you, too. You know what they say, an eye for an eye.”

The knife flitted up and descended, stopping nothing more than an inch from my eyeball. Caught in terror, seeing that madly grinning face out of focus behind the knife tip, I simply held still.

“You sorry, Murk? You admit taking it?”

“I... I...”

The knife descended, filling my vision as her magic adjusted and pulled my eyelids open.

“Please... I...I didn—”

It kept coming, pressing down, I felt the horrible sensation of touch.

“I TOOK IT!”

Stopping, the blade remained where it was, before slowly drawing back, being replaced with that shivering expression of Slit's.

"Good, now we're going to go back to my factory... little runt. You're going to get strung up as a punchbag for this! My little stress reliever!"

I couldn't go back to being hers. It'd be literal torture, with Shackles only coming to take me back at the end of it. I couldn't. I'd never see Glimmerlight.

I was not the same pony she had held a sway over a few days ago. I wasn't going back! Not *ever*!

The moment I felt her lift her hind weight off my lower body, I lashed out, bucking her square between the legs. She clearly hadn't anticipated me to be capable of anything but blind obedience, as I once had been, when fear would have struck me down. But feeling a solid impact under my little hoof, her face contorted into the most angry expression of pain I'd ever seen, not that I hung around long enough to compare.

Instead, I just simply turned, pulled myself out from under her and galloped for all my life.

"Oh... eeeegggghh! Fuck! You... are... **dead**!"

The furious wail sounded behind me, and I heard her launch into chase, biting down her own pain in a rather shockingly quick time. Magically enhanced voice booming and echoing off the thick containers that I dodged between, she galloped with a frenzied determination.

Turning down the masses of small gaps between containers to try and break line of sight, I found that having a sadistically inclined Wicked Slit chasing me was a just *perfect* incentive to ignore the complaints of my body against galloping as fast as I could! Behind me, I heard her magic sparkling or fizzing, giving me just enough time to dive to the left between two huge red containers and fight my way across stacked boxes before she could grab me.

Kicking the boxes down behind me to block her, I ran directly toward the back fence of the storage facility and began galloping down its length, looking for any sort of gap to squeeze under. Stopping on the spot and glancing left and right, breathing too fast for my weak lungs to really keep up and sweating profusely, I spotted one small gap just where the edge of the pegasus landing strip's concrete met the dead dirt and earth by its side. Good enough!

"You get back here, Murk! I am going to destroy you, you little stealing groin-kicking runt!"

Her hooves were erratic. She must have not realised which way I had run at the end of the two containers where I'd knocked over boxes! Pressing down to the gap, I tried to squeeze under it. Too small!

"Oh, I know you're here somewhere! I'm going to find you! Come out you little shit!"

I began pulling at the loose dirt with my front hooves, yelping as my injured right one flared and spiked in pain. Hugging it back, I dug with one hoof, scrapping dirt and rocks out from under the wire fence surrounding the containers. Just a bit more! Hooves were awful at digging!

"**There you are!**" The shriek and immediate clatter of hooves made me look up to see her galloping toward me, knife held straight in the air.

Shrieking in a voice that if anything was *higher* than hers, I threw myself into the enlarged gap, tugging and pulling myself through and galloping away. Her magic clawed at me, I could feel the force and pull of it before hurling myself down the embankment of the

runway to escape her. Rolling and falling to the bottom, a quick glance back up gave reason to know I wasn't free yet. Knife slicing through the air, I saw it part the rusted wire fence with no effort. How sharp *was* that thing?

I took off again after rolling to my hooves, aiming for the bays where chariots were once clearly kept for loading. A clatter of fence and muffled screaming as she tumbled down the sharp embankment later, and I could hear her hooves thundering after me. Moving from the dirt back onto concrete again, I reached the bays and ran inside between a pair of giant chariots for bulk carrying, hoping to find something to hide in. Toolboxes... too small! A cupboard... locked!

I wanted to hurl the goggles away, throw them at her and pray she would just take them or throw myself crying at her hooves and beg, but I was way too far past that point now. She only wanted to kill me.

"Going to mail you back to Shackles in pieces for bucking me!"

No, she was in the middle of one of her simple murderous rages now. There was no negotiation. I'd once seen Slit almost skin a mare for *accidentally* striking her with a dropped tool. My rather deliberate hoof-to-groin was unlikely to result in much better.

Bucking open a very rotten door, I hopped inside an old repair room for individual components in the chariot designs. There had to be something to hide in here! I could hear her coming!

There was nothing. The room was well lit and filled with nothing but open benches and lockers with broken doors. I tried pulling at the floor panel, but a thick padlock with half a snapped screwdriver stuck in it barred any way through. Where else? Where else!? My head throbbed, my fever was beginning to pitch up and sap all the ability to think clearly. Every limb shivered on the spot, a dread cold flowing over me.

The back door was loose and half broken, allowing me to hop up and pull myself through. I'd need to hide somewhere else. Splinters dug into my underbelly while I wiggled and leaned forward to fall through the broken gap. Landing amidst the thick mud on the other side, I slipped and staggered forward, feeling my stamina waning.

"Stay right there!"

Her face stared right through the broken door at me, before turning and bucking it once, twice, three times. I could see the rusty hinges breaking and snapping off. More staggering than running, sucking for breath, I pulled myself down the side of the factory itself. Stopping to lean just within a dark alley and get my breath, I prayed that while she was turning to buck the door, she hadn't seen me. I heard the wood splinter and break behind me, Slit freeing herself.

I turned to look ahead of me just as a hoof clamped across my mouth and around my neck.

Struggling, I was pulled deeper inside the shadows where a voice whispered a 'Ssshh...' into my ear. A male voice. Quivering in their firm grip, I watched as Wicked Slit raced by the end of the alleyway, screaming and hollering my name in decreasing volume as she continued to chase me down on a path I was no longer on.

The hoof relaxed, allowing me to drop to the ground and collapse, utterly out of breath and feeling each overworked muscle ache terribly.

"Thank... thank you..." Words barely gasped from my mouth, and I turned to face my saviour.

"You're welcome, filly." spoke Barb, sharp eyes and bright grin glinting from the shadows

that seemed to mix with that dark blue long mane. “Wasn’t particularly hard to miss you, all that screaming you were doing.”

Backing off, cold fear shooting down my spine, I turned to run again, finding the way out blocked by two of his Shades melting out from the shadows of the alleyway.

“W-what do you want from me? Y-you attacked us! We were just—”

“Defending yourself?” His interruption shut me up, while nodding to the Shades. Magic grabbed me, tugging me away from the alleyway with little resistance. “Filly, I’m a raider, *everyone* defends themselves from me. Toss him in that ditch, we’ll conduct business there before somepony comes through the alley.”

The magic strengthened. Despite my struggles I felt a rush of force hurl me over the lip of the ditch into a muddy crater. The ruins of a pegasus sky chariot that had tumbled from the sky lay among it. A good six feet down into the wide hole, nopony from the outside would see in. Another two of Barb’s raiders followed him out, maddened eyes glaring at me like some kind of toy. Quaking on the ground, I cast my eyes to each one, trying to keep track of all the stealthy raiders while they surrounded me.

“I like to think, for a ‘bloodthirsty crazed raider’ I’m pretty patient, filly. More than the old traitor ever was. I know when to wait and hang back, or when to keep quiet and move on... I don’t look a potential gift in the mouth when I see it. You—well, perhaps once I might have wanted to offer you shelter and teachings, coulda’ brought you in as one of us. Nopony would beat on you then. Not if you were one of my warband.”

He moved in circles around me, silently trotting with those eyes fixed on mine as I kept track of him, twisting on the ground to never let him fall out of my vision.

“Please, I just want to be left alone, Glimmer and I...”

One of the Shades snarled, a unicorn of dark coat and mane bearing a missing eye. “That bitch killed my sister in that Stable! When Barb says I get to, I’m going to string her up and hurt her like she’s never been—”

He shut up on the spot as Barb raised a hoof. Eventually, he turned back to me.

“Well, as you can see, the only thing stopping you and your, heh, ‘sister,’ from simply dying in your sleep is me. Now you know I’m an informant for big Shackles, but I also know you’ve got the ear of the little student yourself. That makes you suddenly important to me, filly. Now you may not want to join us, and frankly after the things you’ve done and who you hang around with, I don’t *want* you to. But I know what you still want...”

Passing by me, he whispered inches from my ear.

“...something I can provide. A way out.”

My ears perked up, turning to stare back at Barb. The warband leader grinned, his eyebrows lowering.

“You don’t think I could have escaped from the Stable? Filly, I killed a Steel Ranger with a *knife*! Don’t think any two bit slaver is going to haul me in. I could have gone to ground in the city with my group here and simply left when night fell. It’s no real problem, and certainly beats having slavers chasing you all the time.”

“Y-you could have? Then why come back?”

“Simple! Power, filly! Power! Shackles and I got a good deal running here, I help him out with the things only us Shades can do, he provides me with caps and weapons only Red Eye could put together for when we eventually just slip out on the next Stable job. Not like a bunch of tough bastards like us can’t survive Filly for a few more weeks, right? I think long game, filly.”

Sitting still, I could hear some slavers nearby wandering through the alleyway. Thick treads told of big ones too. I heard the rattle of metal on metal. Weapons? I had to delay Barb, try to keep him talking till we were in their hearing range.

“What could I b-be to you?”

He simply laughed.

“Nothing! At least, not for why I’m here now. Shackles knows you’ve got a few little bits of information in your head that he thinks you might blabber on about if you and Protégé get any closer than you already are. Master’s seen the way he looks at you, filly. Like you’re some sort of protected slave. And you know what us slaves think of favourites...”

He stepped closer, his voice turning quieter.

“Now, follow what I say and perhaps there might still be a use I can find for you. I can appreciate a little pony who doesn’t rely on anything but guile and stealth to get what he wants. I’ve got a little job for you soon, something that might earn you a favour from us, filly. Something that might help you in your little quest, hmm? You like that?”

My breathing low, I didn’t dare react to him, just staring with terrified eyes. I didn’t believe a single word of it. He had tried to kill us, tried to have me tortured and watched as his followers once tried to pull off my wings.

Barb only let that fiendish and strangely clean grin spread and become a sneer. He ran a hoof along my cheek, before clenching his lower leg around my head and pulling it sharply forward.

“But that’s all later. For now, my job’s to give you a little incentive to *not* say a single word. Not about what Shackles did to you, not about Sunny Days, not about that little mare he knows you’ve got your mind on from a few days ago. I’m here to *deliver* that incentive.”

Oh no. I could hear the other Shades gearing up and chuckling in anticipation. I wasn’t truly valuable to him, only a potential trip for whatever The Master had planned to usurp power. The slavers were right nearby. If I screamed...

I took a breath.

“HELP ME! SOMEPONY! DOWN HERE!”

They stopped, I felt one of the Shades grab and choke me into silence, his hooves wrapping around my neck and blocking my mouth. I struggled, lashing out and trying to bite his leg, but his grip was like iron. Above the lip I saw two slavers rush over. Thank the Goddesses! One of them had a *quad* shotgun battle saddle! The other held a thick wrench in her mouth and had a combat rifle slung over her back.

“Oi, what’s goin’ on down there? Stop that! Every slave’s needed, let go or we’ll have you in the Pit!”

The Shade only twisted to throw me between them, I heard the battle saddle’s ammunition canister activate. The unicorn beside him drew the rifle, pointing it down at them.

“Don’t you get tough at me! Waste ’em Garrot!”

But by then Barb was already behind them.

I hadn’t even *seen* the raider leader move, he had just melted from my peripheral vision, emerging from the smoke behind them and landed upon the slaver mare. Spinning off her, I saw the slaver’s throat erupt with blood as his throat parted from a curved knife held around it and drawn as he twisted off. Grabbing the corpse with his magic, it was flung between him and the shotguns, tearing the body apart and stopping the shots. Barb and the slaver

were left staring at one another, his glowing horn and raised knife against the brutal power of those cannons.

“Get on the floor slave! I got my eyes on you now.”

The Shades around me seemed relaxed. I’d have thought they would have leapt for the slaver themselves, but they simply watched, grinning. What did they know that I didn’t?

“I said get on the fucking flo... oh fuck it!”

The shotguns roared again, bucking the user back a foot with the recoil. Before him, the impacts slapped into Barb, blasting him into nothing but a black mist that drifted away in a sparkle of black magic. What kind of spell was *that*? I wanted to shout a warning to the slaver, but the hoof clamped down over me so hard that I merely choked on the words when I saw Barb’s knife shear through the slaver’s throat from behind and pierce out the front. Gurgling, eyes wide, he collapsed on the spot, twitching as he bled out, his spine cut.

Barb simply stared down at the corpses, before magically shunting them into the ditch and trotting toward me. I fought in his subordinates grasp, feeling all too exposed and vulnerable after trying something I shouldn’t have!

“Not a good idea.” His voice had dropped, losing the arrogant streak of playful craziness. His lethal gaze bored into my wide fearful eyes. The sheathed knife didn’t make me feel any safer. Baring teeth, he reached forward with both hooves and grabbed my face.

“You listen here, little filly. I gave you chances, I offered you opportunity, but now I’ve just about had it with you, got it? Shackles wanting you alive is the only reason I don’t gut you from neck to crotch on the spot and leave you to die hugging your own organs. But you never, *ever* do something like that again.”

I whined, nodding as best I could, feeling my eyes becoming wet with fear.

“You probably think I’m all talk, don’t you, filly?”

I shook my head, trying to mumble that I *really* didn’t think that!

“I was one of Brimstone’s Big Four, just you remember that. The others got by on size, strength and power, but I got to be the best of them by simply being the most dangerous motherfucker in the entire place. Do *not* fuck with me. Now to make sure you never do, tell me, filly...”

His voice had dropped again, regaining a little of that almost joyful cockiness.

“...how long has it been since you were so beaten up you couldn’t even beg?”

I flailed, throwing my hooves and body weight to try and break free while cold terror flowed through every vein. Mumbling, begging through the hoof blocking my mouth, I struggled in vain until the leg around my throat clenched tighter. Barb stepped backwards, magically raising a little lock of pink hair before him.

“Oh, and if you want to know a reason not to go running to that egghead in the Mall? Consider that this is from when you and the whore were last sleeping. You’re *never* safe.”

The pink hair dropped to the ground before me. Barb looked around him, before nodding at his Shades.

“Make sure he can still walk to get back. Make it look like he just got in trouble with the slavers. Elsewise, just do what you want for ten minutes.”

I struggled, fighting the legs holding me in place, seeing the others closing in with hideous smiles.

But there was nothing I could do to stop them.

Nothing was clear.

Everything around me was just... just hazy and... and hurt.

The trek home to the Mall was long and painful. The overseer, after taking the charger, had simply sent me back, seeing no more use for me in my state after I had collapsed before him. I had been told to return in an hour once I'd had time to rest or find a slave healer if I could. If not? Well, 'thems the breaks' as he'd said.

My front right hoof was a mess. They had torn the bandages from it that held the perpetual shrapnel wound closed. I had to stagger my way on three legs, holding the bad one close under me while struggling to see through swollen and blackened eyes. Fillydelphia was just a crimson blur. It hurt to even cry or to breathe through a chest that had been stamped on and battered. My ribs were likely bruised.

They hadn't cared at all. Just unfeeling raiders seeing me as a toy.

They'd *laughed* when I had screamed.

Limping through the gates of the Mall and wiping blood from my split lips, the throbs of pain at the end of my muzzle set me worrying if my nose had been broken, while my mouth tasted of blood from where I'd bitten my tongue. All of this on top of the day's aches and pains from slave work and the thin cut on my muzzle from Slit.

I just wanted to hide and cry and draw and pretend that nothing was real.

Caduceus, the earth pony buck and nurse that Glimmerlight had spent time with was waiting in the shop cell. Sitting on the sofa, he looked up with surprise as he saw me, not her, return. Through my eyes, he was little more than a light brown shape with a blonde streaked mane.

"Oh. Murk, was it? I didn't expect you so— oh my! What's happened?"

I barely knew him, but Glimmer had told me he cared for ponies and saw Weathervane as a somewhat good example for medical ponies. Hopping from the sofa, he immediately galloped over and supported me until I could lie on the rug. Crying out as my ribs hit the ground first, I almost pulled away from him, not enjoying the sensation of somepony else I didn't know too close to me. But his hooves gently held me in place, one arcing around my muzzle to lower it down without harming my broken nose.

"Hey, hey, I'm a healer, take it easy." He drew over a saddlebag, pulling only slightly dirty rags out and dampening them with a small bottle of cloudy water to help wipe the blood away from my hoof, the worst injury. "Bloody hell, what happened to you?"

"S-slavers..." My voice was little but a whisper, blown through sore lips. I felt his hooves holding my injured one carefully while a little hoof and mouth work tied the rags over the hideous shrapnel wound. I heard my own voice making a rather pathetic whine as the rough bandage was pulled tight to stop the bleeding.

"Look, I'm not technically meant to be here, but I don't have any shifts, and I wanted to, well, see her again. Not often you find somepony nice like her. She talks highly of you, so don't worry. I'll do what I can for you, too. Here..."

From the saddlebag, he pulled a sparkling purple glass beaker, a healing potion. Over the next few minutes, I sat as silently as I could while he did what he could. He dabbed rags soaked in the potion's contents over my wounds, before making me sip the rest through cracked lips. The potion's magic sealed anything still getting worse and dulled some of the more intense pain, but I knew that the aches and stings wouldn't pass for a while. My nose swelled and stung as the healing took effect on the sensitive area, making me cling to

Caduceus' hoof between mine until the sensation passed. At least I could see better again as the swelling eased around my black eyes. I'd been so scared when they had started pulling my hooves away to hit my eyes, I'd thought they were going to blind me. They had just been sadistic savages once they realised I wouldn't fight back.

"Just lie still, you can get up to rest in a minute. Fluttershy's memory, they really did a number on you."

Now, the rag gently brushed against the bleeding arcs around my body as Caduceus worked to help the worst damage their hooves had done. The earth pony sighed, seeing that he didn't have enough resources to help every part of me. He was kind, yes, but right now I just didn't feel very well at all, one potion wouldn't heal the worst part. My terror stricken heart and vulnerable feelings. I needed space, time away from everypony, go into hiding...

Away from this entire city...

The moment he was done, I thanked him meekly and simply slunk away to the back door to go to the rooftop. My body hurt terribly, but he'd at least got me away from a danger zone of simply bleeding out and expiring as a little heap in the corner. I could sense his wish to keep an eye on the little slave before him, but with only a quiet promise to let Glimmerlight know where I'd gone when she returned, he kept his distance as I wandered away with a hung head.

The sun was low in the sky above Fillydelphia, a vague hazed shape through the clouds to give the roughest showing of light. Whether sunset or sunrise I did not know, direction and time was quickly becoming without meaning after the irregular schedules of normal work had kicked in. But it was my focus, the one thing I could look to and just wish to follow over the horizon.

This time, I didn't even care about griffons. Shuffling on three legs to an open spot I sat down to let the potion do its work and watch the great Walls in every direction around me. Today had already been nothing but an example of the ruining of my life in this city. Enough that I already felt despondent to the point of losing hope. I wanted to cry, but it just wasn't coming.

Testing my hoof on the ground, I found the wound had sealed under the soaked rags. Nothing was critical, but it all simply... hurt. My nose still felt stuffy, my lips swollen and if I checked my new little mirror piece I could see my eyes surrounded by purple puffs of darker blackened rings. One side of my face alone was discoloured even through my coat while one eye looked almost like Brimstone's bloodshot one.

I had been brutalised by the raiders. Flickers of being held on the ground and stamped down upon. The others had howled in laughter at the sight.

"Again! Do it again!"

The feeling of a hideous crack when a tooth had broken loose still flew around my mind. Caduceus' explanation that it was probably an old tooth that would regrow in time was little comfort. My groin still ached from the 'revenge' kick the female raider's brother had given me.

"Haha! That made him fuckin' squeal!"

I couldn't take this much longer. I was being dragged back to moderate health by luck, scavenging, and the care of the few willing to look after me. But every time I felt better, this

city found a new way to damage me all over again, set me back to being like any other of the weakened and limping slaves. It was no wonder nopony got out of here, it felt like some malignant entity was twisting fate to keep us unable to fight back.

Standing to get my numb hoof working again, I began trotting in circles, my mind whirling and thinking over every aspect of my life.

They would do it again and again. They'd promised to do it whenever I didn't do everything they wanted, no matter how many times I was healed. Just because they *could*.

I wanted away from them. I *needed* to be away from them!

My head shook, shivering and gritting my sore teeth in frustration. Somehow, my eyes remained dry. The emotion was not sadness or being upset. Like a building force in my breast it just whirled and grew and grew.

The only escape from the attention of other slaves *was* to do the work! Harsh, unforgiving and pointless work, in ceaseless industry that sapped my will and spirit the more I went through it. Every shift eroded my determination that little more to falling back in line. My only place of safety from the slave raiders was the *acceptance* of slavery!

My trotting became frustrated stamping, pacing back and forth in ever-increasing speeds and aggressive panic. This feeling continued to work up, making my body shiver, and causing me to seethe and suck air through clenched teeth. My body stung with pains, but I just kept trotting backwards and forwards. I kept tossing my head, muttering under my breath or wiping my brow at random periods and all for the simple sake of trying to expel the sheer... the sheer... I didn't even recognise this feeling, it was so strong.

What was worse, I knew this healing, kind as it was of Caduceus, was only ensuring me a return to work the moment the next shift came up. It just never ended!

Rearing up, I slammed my hoof against the nearest vent. The frustration and—that was it—*anger* building in me just wouldn't stop. This wasn't fair! *Why* did I have to be trapped in slavery? *Why* did I have to be in Fillydelphia? *Why* did it have to be *ME*!?

Why?

Why!?

WHY!?

The slaves wanted to kill me! The slavers wanted to abuse me! Everypony I knew was being hurt or taken from me! I'd been scared, tortured, shot, stopped at the very last moment and irreparably hurt and scarred for life. My voice was strained, pushing out through clenched teeth.

"I... I don't want to be here. Please just..."

It all began to come to a head.

"Just!"

Staggering in circles, out of breath, I felt my breathing quicken. I was stomping on the spot and ignoring the spikes of pain, as it all just finally expelled in one echoing scream toward the sun and the great Walls.

"LET ME OUT!"

Leaning forward, holding and drawing out the scream on the final word, I let it all go, until my breath gave out.

Every feeling and emotion that had gathered in me since arriving in this city, toward the wastes and free ponies I loved that were being denied from me. The cry echoed off the metal sheet tool sheds and vents atop the roof, holding the great cry long after I had fallen to my knees. The dull warmth of Fillydelphia stifled the air around me, as pressing and cloying as

the will that kept me inside. Hearing the shout bound back and forth between the thick concrete buildings across the road before dying off under the ambience of industry, I felt only reminded of how small I really was.

Shaking, I dropped onto my side and stared morosely into the distance, feeling like I'd never be able to muster the will to get up again.

"Murky...?"

Taking a sudden breath, I turned my head to see Glimmerlight hobbling her way up the staircase to find me. She was healing better now, with just a few safety bandages left on her head and on her left hindleg even after one night since her treatment. But she had been weakened, only now did I begin to see the effects of her life in here too. Her body clearly had once held a healthy shape of a mare in her prime, and her white coat had obviously been brilliant, both had marred and been weathered by life in slavery.

And yet, her eyes still sparkled with life, and she let a relieved smile come to her face upon seeing me. It quickly turned to concern as she saw my condition, and came cantering over to lean down. Her hooves stretched to hold me, but held back, as though afraid to hurt me.

"Caduceus told me but, oh, Murky. I'm so sorry."

"I... I'm still here, I'll be... fine." I didn't like seeing her worried. I hurt and felt terrified for my own health, but I couldn't bring myself to look for any sympathy from somepony else in the same hell as I was. "I just wish we weren't here."

"Me too. Me too. I don't think anypony but Brimstone ever truly wanted anything but their freedom back."

Judging by her face, she clearly didn't believe a word that I was 'fine.' She could tell that just by looking at my battered and hastily healed body. Glimmer sat beside me, close enough that I could feel her side pressed against mine, a gentle comfort when tight hugs would be considered too painful. We sat and stared at the horizon for some time, like we had while outside the Wall. Idly, I began playing my tongue over the sore stump of the knocked out tooth on the left hand side of my mouth. Annoyingly, it hadn't been the loose one.

At least with her here I felt reminded that there was that one chance still waiting. One last route to success.

"G-Glimmer, did y-you find any—"

Beep!

I blinked. Pulling my saddlebag over with my uninjured hoof.

Beep!

"Well now, maybe this will help cheer you up, eh? Nothing heals faster than a smile, I say. Why do you think I always try to do it?"

Why indeed. As ever I remained perplexed over her ability to simply forget and move on when I got bogged down in all the emotions I wasn't used to. How did she manage it? What let her just ignore it all?

Click.

"Hey. It's Sundial."

"Hi."

Glimmerlight cast a sudden glance as I responded to him, chuckling slightly at the oddity, but just gently ruffling my mane and not saying a word. Truth be told, I was simply trying to hold back my feelings now that I knew the truth about who his father had been.

"I'm not going to talk about what, uh, what I said last time. But he's still been asking me, day after day— no, sorry, I shouldn't talk about it. Maybe... maybe tomorrow. Today was happier, let's just stick to that, it's all any of us can do. The Ministry of Peace therapist I've been seeing told me that's what I had to do. I hope I don't get diagnosed with Wartime Stress Disorder and lose my job. But I did go out to meet Skydancer's folks today. Yeah, nerves and all."

"I once met some mare's parents at a trading post." Glimmerlight grinned at me. "Pity they met me by walking in on us. Just kisses. Promise."

I allowed a tired grin to crawl out from my swollen lips, never would I want to be away from her, even after an escape. Even if I would have to put up with trotting in on her now and again by accident she really was worth it to have around.

"But, turns out they were really cool! Her father's involved in a lot of the mining going on up in the hills to build Stables, so he and I got on really well chatting about engineering and stuff. I think he kinda approves of me too! I overheard him saying to Sky that he rather likes an armour engineer being the one to go out with and protect his daughter. Truth be told? I think she'd be the one protecting me. Sky's stronger than she looks with all that mail flying she does."

The thought struck a harsh chord with me. If I ever found the Stable Dweller out there, would I need to meet her parents? Oh, they'd never approve of me. Not at all.

"Lovely dinner and all. They've invited me back next week again after my shift finishes. I'm working day and night shifts when I can now to help raise money for Sky's ticket but, well, no. I promised not to go on that topic this time, I won't! All I'll say is, so long as I can keep this up, all I need is two years of hard work and I'll be free to buy her ticket too at this rate. If I can go and spend time with her and her folks in between, well, maybe it'll help me do it. I never much see my pops anymore, what with him having to follow the Shadowbolts. It's kinda cool meeting Sky's mother. She's really nice, like, welcoming and warm, just wants to nurture everypony. Kinda reminds me of my mom..."

There was a rather odd pause after he stopped that sentence. My neck went a little rigid and my jawline tightened, trying to just stay focused.

"It's been so long. Dad doesn't talk about her much. I was a bit young, but I still remember a few things. Little sights and senses, her face, the taste of her cooking. I... I kinda wish I could see her again, or remember her voice. I was just a foal."

My hooves tightened around the PipBuck a little, keeping my eyes fixed on the device. I could hear Glimmer turn to look at me, but remain silent.

"Right, well, night shift time. We're getting a little visitor to fit the suits so I better be there early. Goodnight, anypony listening."

"Goodnight..."

"...and uh, g'night... mom. Wherever you are..."

Click.

I didn't move, just sat and stared at the PipBuck. At most, I think I let out a few forced breaths. He hadn't really known his mother either.

Glimmerlight nudged me with her shoulder. Shaken from the distraction, I turned to her. My thoughts were a little confused, but I shook my head, winced from the movement and looked up to her.

"I, ah, huh?"

"You alright? That seemed like it was a little close to home for you. Just made you sit there and stare. You mentioned your mother to me before, y'know? In your big rant when we met, and in the Stable? You kind of avoided the topic then. Is... is there something wrong about your mother?"

Her hoof lay across my shoulder blades gently, caring and willing to talk, but I just shook my head.

"No, no. I'm fine. It's not a problem."

I turned away.

"Murky—"

"It's fine!"

Standing up with grunts and groans, I began packing everything into my saddlebag.

"I've been on my own long enough. It's okay."

Clipping down the saddlebag, it took me four tries to get my shaking hooves to actually do it before standing up and trying to force a smile at her.

"I mean, I'm hurt and-and scared but that's fine! She... she was nice and I remember that and... and... yeah, she was nice! But I'm-I'm fine! Yeah, fine! Just dandy!"

Still sitting, Glimmerlight's face gradually lost some of its spark, her eyes softening in worry. Slowly, she pushed herself up, watching me carefully before just standing there a few feet away.

"Look, I'm sorry you were taken from her, Murky. You don't need to hide it, I miss mine too, so if there's something bothering—"

"No, no! Really, it's fine!" Hooking my saddlebag up, I gently eased it onto my back, pacing about as I did. "I... I mean yeah it's bad and— but I've got friends now, right! I've got you and... and Brimstone's gonna be waiting for us when *we* get out, right?"

She nodded, but her face remained serious. "Yeah, yeah, we'll stick together and—"

"Exactly! You guys helped me not be alone so... so I don't need to miss anypony! I mean, it's been over a decade since I saw her to-to get over it, y'know? I don't need to feel bad about it because I've got friends now, right?"

"Murky, it's *alright* to be upset..." She stepped forward, face deathly serious, eyes caring and pleading.

"Upset? I'm-I'm not upset! See how not-upset I am? I... I can smile now with you so I don't need to be upset about the fact my mother and I were split apart before I was really grown up! She was good to me then and-and what else do I need to remember, huh? I mean, maybe I can't remember some things l-like the words of the song she sung to help me sleep. O-or the ending to the stories she told me about the Goddesses stopping chaos!"

Breathing hard and fast, I forced my smile wider and wider. I just kept speaking, trying to hold myself higher, not even feeling where my mouth was running to.

"Who needs to remember their mom or what she really looked like or... what her voice sounded like or... or her n-name..." I hiccuped on a breath, forcing myself to keep going and be happier. "But I've got friends now, and that's better right? Because you're here, and I can smile and laugh! I can laugh! See, Glimmer!? Haha! Hahaha!"

I just laughed, forcing it out, laughing to the Fillydelphian skyline and wondering why she just kept looking at me sadly. Why was she not laughing with me too? I was laughing! Not crying. Not... crying...

Slowly, it dawned on me that the tears were already dripping off my face. The laughter continued for another few seconds, slowing dying, before everything just flipped inside me,

and my heart simply broke. My face twisted, my smile falling into wretched sadness.

“And I... I...”

I dropped down limply.

“I miss her so much, Glimmer! I... I really miss her! I want to see her again!”

She rushed forward, pulling me quickly in with her hooves, feeling them wrap around me as I began bawling and crying out. She pulled tighter, almost crushing me against her. It hurt, but I just grabbed her back and felt the long suppressed pain coming. Years upon years of pushing all but the most basic feelings down. Ones I had revived in a pigsty with a simple drawing.

“I don’t remember her, Glimmer! They—” I choked on a sob. “They told me to forget her because I had a new master and... and *I did!* I didn’t know how to think for myself! I just obeyed and it’s been so long without remembering! *I don’t remember her name!*”

I could feel drips on my back, falling from her own eyes as she rubbed the back of my neck and swayed gently. I knew I would never have made it to where I was without her, my big sister best friend forever. Especially now that I was beginning to remember, and feeling guilt and loathing. Those feelings from knowing I had been so indoctrinated as to have forgotten my own mother, simply because I was ordered to.

But now, I wasn’t alone. I dreaded to think what I might have done by now if I had been. She whispered quietly just for my ears. There was no reason to be so quiet, but it was all the more personal knowing it was just for me.

“We’ll get you back to her, Murky. She’ll recognise you; parents *always* do.”

Alone on the rooftop above all the chains and slavery, we simply held one another. I knew she missed hers fiercely, too. I could feel it in how she seemed to take as much comfort from me as I did from her. Two lost ponies in a city they never wanted or asked for that wanted nothing more than to return to the ones they loved.

“We’ll get you back. And I might know how.”

My battered face, soaked with tears, drew back, looking at her own puffed and red eyes as she forced a small smile.

“After you left for the work detail, I did a little more digging in those memory orbs you brought back. I might have found something to help us, Murky. Come on, let’s get you inside and resting. I’ll explain everything.”

Caduceus maintained a watch over my injuries, retying my hoof bandage to check the mess that lay underneath it. I averted my eyes. I could feel the wound’s savage damage without having to see it. Glimmerlight had insisted that I be on the sofa and draped in the stitched blanket before she began to say even a word, and brought me a small bowl of water from the fountain. Allegedly it was about as clean as water in Fillydelphia really got, so presumably the saniwhatsit was still being set up. I gently sipped it, still huddled up and feeling rather hollow and fragile.

My journal sat open beside me. Within it, the first drawing of my real life, my mother, stared back up at me. It had been drawn only been the vaguest of feelings and the flow of my emotions. I didn’t know if that was truly what she looked like or not.

I’d see her again once we were out and correct all of this. I had to.

Sitting beside Caduceus, Glimmer cleared her throat and turned to look at both of us,

making sure to give me my own time to nod that I was alright.

"I may have found a lead on a way out of Fillydelphia."

"Impossible." Caduceus shook his head. "Come on, Glimmer, that Wall isn't passable in any way, shape or even vague form. You can't get over it!"

Glimmerlight patted his head with a joking pout.

"Oh, stallions. Always thinking about being on top of things, right Murky?"

The sudden wink at me almost made me drop my bowl, spilling only a little over my blanket and muzzle. Come on, sis', not when I'm emotionally shattered and in the middle of a drink.

"No, I'm talking about not using the Wall at all. In fact, we're doing rather the opposite. I had a chance to look through some of Aurora Star's memory orbs and files that Murky brought back from the Ministry, as he well knows. The metro station and line walls were regarded weak enough to forge a concern of anypony, or any zebra, simply being able to tunnel through."

Her magic lifted a mess of papers filled with spidery scrawled writing and a few dull orbs that seemed at their life's end of power. The orbs hung in the air, while she let the papers drift to show diagrams of, well, lots of words and lines. Aurora was not a particularly good artist if these were meant to look nice.

Caduceus slid one over to himself with a hoof and glanced down at them.

"A funding request for mining equipment?" He looked up with a little confusion. "Why would Aurora ask for that? Wait, you mean if she could, we could? You're not seriously hoping that you're going to somehow start a mining operation to tunnel out of Fillydelphia are you?"

Glimmer rolled her eyes. I hoped that my own bewildered and confused silence wasn't included within the gesture. "I know a lot of things, sweetie. Jack of all trades and all that, but low level mining and construction isn't one of my strong points. But we shouldn't need to."

A memory orb floated up from the half a dozen or so. It glittered with a pale blue light in the dark of the storeroom.

"This one was possibly the most boring orb I have ever seen. Aurora no doubt had a somewhat ironically bad memory if she had to extract and record her tax return forms. But about midway through, this rather polite little apprentice called Sparkler, who *completely* had the hots for her; believe me I can tell, ran in to give her a bit of news. Simply put? He told her that the mining was finished and that they had been granted full access to the underground station."

Lightly biting a swollen lip, I put a hoof to my chin, trying to figure out precisely what that had to really do with getting out. Only after a few seconds did I spot Glimmerlight watching me with a growing smirk.

"I can almost hear the little gears grinding in there, lil'bro. Don't worry, I'm not done. Now that didn't mean much to me yet either, but look at this."

Another of the reports I had swiped flitted up, with Caduceus and myself craning forward to both read it. Or at least Caduceus did anyway, I just pretended to try and not look quite so stupid. Thankfully, he read what it was aloud.

"A warning from Fillydelphia's mayor to the Ministry of Arcane Science, regarding the mining in the disused metro station coming too close to the outer circle's tunnels, due to the aforementioned thin walls..." Caduceus skimmed the large bodies of words, his eyes

flickering rather dubiously at the concept. “Just like you mentioned, so I see. So the Ministry wanted to put something underground, interesting enough. Something I’m sure Red Eye’s lot have already checked out, but what’s it to us?”

He had a point, but instead of explaining, I saw Glimmerlight simply raise an eyebrow.

“Us, eh? One roll in the hay and you wanna join us to get out of here?”

The nurse blushed widely, eyes glancing at me as though embarrassed that she had spoken so openly of their activities around somepony else. Truth be told, it wasn’t a major issue to me; slaves had often done such thing in clear view around me to try and make the best of their lives. By now, it was nothing incredibly special. Well, not to know about anyway, it wasn’t like anypony had ever shown interest in the little pegasus holding his ears shut to try and sleep.

“Well, I guess? Really part of me isn’t sure, I’m learning so much from Doctor Weathervane’s experience, and I can’t help but think Doctor Helpinghoof would approve of me trying to help these slaves as best I can. Red Eye allows it so...”

He shrugged as Glimmerlight just patted his shoulder, indicating him to not worry the point right now, before turning to me.

“Caduceus here was one of the trainees at Tenpony Tower before he got snatched. Originally wanted to be a trader of commerce in the tower, but parents shoved him toward medicine. You’re good though! Helpinghoof Clinic’s healers are pretty well known among the wastelanders. Good reputation for getting a job done quick, even if that applies to other walks of life too.”

“*H-hey!*”

“Quality before quantity, sweetie!” She lightly pecked him on the cheek before giggling at his blush and going back to the matter at hand. “Look, the outer circle is this huge deeper line that goes all through Fillydelphia, including the suburbs outside the wall. Red Eye’s got all the inner circle stations locked off with enough guards to make a Ranger outpost think twice, so the outer circle is otherwise inaccessible. Now here’s what I’m thinking...”

Throwing a hoof over my back (I appreciated the caring gentleness away from my pained body) and drawing me in closer to the pair of them, she lowered her voice.

“We put together enough supplies and weapons to survive down there, locate the disused station the Ministry apparently wanted, and then we go to ground. It’s near to the outer circle right? All we need to do is slowly chip away at the walls in the right direction and we’ll eventually break through to the outer circle. That lets us go *under* the walls to emerge from one of the stations outside without anypony even knowing there’s a breakout going on! We wait in the tunnels till night falls, then slip out under cover of darkness.”

I had to admit, I was rather impressed. All this time I had thought of escape as a daring rush for freedom, but this was quiet, sneaky, and sounded *much* safer than frenzied leaps off a giant Wall. In other words, my kind of plan. Hopping onto the sofa, I swivelled and lounged back, dropping my legs off the edge to rest my body. (What was Caduceus looking so weird about? It was comfy...)

“So, um, what do we need to do?”

The brightness of her smile almost managed to make me return one as she saw me being a little optimistic about something. Truth be told, I didn’t feel a huge amount of faith in it. Escape attempts only reminded me of bitter feelings, but there was no way I was going to stop now.

Glimmerlight seemed more intent than I ever could be, slapping her hooves together and

rubbing them with a gleeful look of conspiracy.

"Grab your charcoal, Murky. We're making a list!"

That infectious cheer managed to gain a bigger smile straight from my heart. So much was hurting me, physically and emotionally, but so long as I could ride the wave of escape planning, I'd make it yet. Pulling out my journal, I flicked to a new page and sat ready. She giggled, softly rubbing her hurt forehead before shaking her mane out.

"You really are too cute sitting there like that with that stick in your mouth to draw. Now, we need to start building our supplies and hiding them, probably just outside the back door. Brim opened. Food, as much as we can gather. It's a long trip till we find anypony we can trust out there, and we'll need to be able to survive the trip. That's our number one priority, doesn't matter what we fight if we've died of hunger. On that note, containers for water, the fountain should make that easy enough. Murky, think you could sew together some waterskins if you stole some leather or heavy fabric?"

I had no idea what a 'waterskin' was, but I knew I could sew pretty well, so I nodded. Already I'd drawn a few cans of food, ready to cross off as we found enough to support two or three ponies. Beside it, I just drew a beaker of water. I could even fill it up by shading in as we found more!

"Caduceus, I know this is a lot to ask but if there's any medical supplies you could get us, it would be great."

"Well, I don't have the key to the storage, but I'll see what I can do. To see you smile like that, I will give you my word."

Glimmerlight looked up and winked.

"Aren't you a gentlecolt? In Fillydelphia too, my, that's rare!"

"Well..." Caduceus looked away, a little awkward at the praise. "Tenpony sort of pushes it into you. In here it-it's one of the only things I've got to hold onto, to keep me feeling like I'm more than just a... a..."

"A slave?" I spoke quietly.

"Yeah... so, I'll do it for you, somepony nice."

Glimmerlight more genuinely smiled at him. "Well if you can't, point me at somepony who does and I'll see what I can do to persuade them instead, eh?"

She grinned madly, I honestly couldn't tell if she was joking or not before I leaned down to draw some rolls of bandage onto the paper. On a whim, I threw in some RadAway sachets, too. We'd need them. Well, *I'd* need them.

Caduceus actually smiled back from Glimmer's comment, seemingly proud to announce his response. "Sorry Glimmer, the others are either taken or not after your type, guess you're stuck with me!"

"Oh, what a shame. Now, weapons, that's the hard one. But for now let's just wait and observe where we go, see if we can't steal away little parts now and again to build our own. Anything that looks valuable, bring it back and we can hide it inside my little scrap pile. Protégé trusts me with. I've got a few spark batteries and magic circuits so I may be able to whip something up if you can get some old parts. Murky, if either of us gets put on anything involving tools, try and swipe some to help the digging; a gas mask or two if you see them discarded wouldn't hurt either. Don't take a risk if it's not worth it though, one slip up could cost our whole stockpile."

Small guns, knives, and a few bullets to represent ammo went down, and a growing road to preparedness was being laid out before me. My charcoal began to twist and score in more

confident strokes, each curve and shape lifting my hope that little more... I couldn't *wait* to start checking this off! Picks and auto axes were drawn in more lavish detail. My swollen lips stung from the charcoal and my bleeding gums around the missing teeth felt horrible, but this was too big, too important. Finally, a gas mask was added, the eyes seemed to curve in a happier expression than the terrifying ones the slavers wore.

Finishing, I dropped the charcoal and looked upward to see the other two. I may not have known Caduceus other than Glimmer's apparent ease with him, but I was beginning to sense that I could get to know him. We needed every ally we could get now. He had helped me too.

Which reminded me.

"Cadueus, um, thanks for helping. Sorry I kinda ignored you."

He waved a hoof. "Hey, it's what I do. Glimmer's been telling me about what you go through; I'm happy to stick around with you two if it'll gain anything or keep you alive. Helpinghoof told me I was to help those in need, well here you are. I'm with you."

I almost wanted to cry. He was polite and kind. I had been missing Brimstone so much that it was just nice to have somepony else around Glimmerlight and myself.

"Hey!" A slaver's voice echoed into the plaza, probably from up on the balcony above the cage door. "Murky Number Seven! You're wanted over at the forge, what are you waiting for?"

And there went my happy mood.

Until Glimmerlight leaned forward, pressing my new checklist into my hooves with a smile.

"You can pull through. I absolutely believe you can. We've still got a plan, now let's make it a reality, bit by bit, okay?"

I couldn't do anything but nod, carefully hug her, and receive a quick smile from Caduceus for good luck, before limping away.

Let's do this.

"Murk! Where the blithering hell are you? *Murk!*"

The cry came across the factory floor, stifled in the heavy air and thick ambience of shouting, clanging metal, and hissing steam. Looking up from my work, to scrub clean the pistons of a stamp press for future reactivation, I saw the gangly overseer stomping around the slaves. His name was List Seeker, I knew. He was far from the worst slave master to have, but forge work was never easy.

As such, I was glad for any excuse to take a minute off. My hooves were stinging from the cleaning fluid soaked into the cloth while the stench was making my head spin. Limping down from the machine, I waved a hoof to get his attention and began moving over.

"Ah, there you are. Tend to miss you in here, that damn small. But I need exactly that quality about you, follow me."

I just nodded. Really, for all the hope and optimism of knowing we were putting together a plan in secret, doing any work for Fillydelphia just drained you bit by bit. All the same, I'd have to try to just keep the goal in mind, keep thinking about it! I tried to keep my head high as I followed, but quickly lowered it out of worry anypony was looking at me. Eventually, we approached a huge piece of machinery, one I recognised as producing the

massive rounds for the big rifles many of the griffons carried. Urgh, this was going to be annoying, wasn't it?

I'd rather keep thinking about secret plans... they were exciting! We were like some sort of secret society to do all this!

"The shell injector's messed up. Big complex thing, really, so I'd rather get it fixed *before* Stern finds out that we can't make any more anti-machine rounds without it. She'll bring it down on all of us if we miss the quota, not just the overseers either. See, whenever we try to move it, the servos jam and grind so much I'm afraid they'll break, Cogwork thinks it's a shell got stuck in the workings."

We'd just work away without being seen, come up with plans and... and have *meetings* and maybe a smart pony like Glimmer or Caduceus could make a motto! Ooh, I had to think of a name.

"Now, we've deactivated it for now, I want you to crawl inside and see what's up. You can fit with that scrawny body of yours so I'm going to send you in the conveyor end where it's jamming."

Escapetastic Fantastics? I wasn't even sure if that was a word. The Freedom Threesome? No, Glimmer might get ideas. The Ex-Slaves? Did that really count before we escaped?

"Just look for anything in the gears, it might even be a forge glove that's been dropped in or something..."

Wasteland Crusaders? Ooh... maybe that could—

"Murk!"

The sudden shout drove itself through my still very vulnerable skull when I felt the overseer whap me across the face with his hoof. I looked up to see the overseer impatiently staring down.

"Are you even listening to a *word* I've said!?"

"Y-yes, master! Sorry, master! Go in, get the stuff jamming!"

"Good, now get to it!"

Staggering about until the pain settled down, I was left to get the job done. I glanced at the thin opening into the darkness of the machine. On the outside it just seemed to be a series of large metal boxes atop a conveyor; with small pistons above it driving something hidden inside. Shells went in one end and came out the other with their innards all ready for the actual bullet to go on top.

"Well, might as well get it over with."

Crawling up onto the conveyor, I pushed myself into the dark interior by lying low to the ground and crawling. Blinking, I got a sense of the shape once within it, trying to fight the claustrophobic feelings that resulted from not being able to stand. Much of the noise from the forge dulled out, but the heat was stifling. Around me were loads of gears, small injector arms hanging loose, and dead with so many discarded shells rolling around either side of the conveyor, likely knocked off the line during the balefire and never recovered...

I grabbed a few of them, maybe Glimmer could use them for something? Thinking of stripping off some of the more complex looking wires for her too, I eventually concluded that I'd most likely break it even more. The overseer would probably be more than happy to blame me if it failed again as well. Casting my head around, I crawled in further, pushing a few arms to the side that rested above the conveyor section. Really, past the low entranceway, there was quite a bit of space in here, if dark.

So, jamming. Jamming. Look for gears, I figured...

There were gears on *everything*.

Well, fudge.

I began running my hoof over a few of them, feeling more than looking for items by trying to make them turn. Some gears made an arm swing back and forth when I turned them. That was pretty cool! My hoof pushed one gear to the left, and the arm copied it above the conveyor behind me. Delighted, I tried another one, a second arm moved downward. Wow! This was *really* well made. Pre-war ponies sure lacked any sense about railings, but they knew their stuff!

The third gear refused to move at all. That was the one!

Feeling around, my hoof touched something softer further in. Above me I could see a small slit in the machine through which the orange hazed light shone, likely where this blockage had fallen in.

Tugging hard enough that my hind hooves were pressed onto the outer wall, I turned nearly horizontal with the strain of yanking the offending item.

Likely, I should have thought better of how gravity worked for when it sprung free. I *was* a pegasus. Flying or not, I should *know* these things. As such, amongst a sharp spring and whirr of gears, I collapsed backward to land on the conveyor itself. A whirring sound from the gear filled the dark space as it whirled with the released tension. Screaming, I rolled to the side as an arm slammed down from above me and snapped against the conveyor where I had just lain. Dropping from the conveyor onto the innards of the machine itself, I just lay still to get my breath back. Oh Celestia, my body *hurt*. Just that one dive had drawn a fiery throbbing from my ribs.

In my hooves was the object itself that had jammed it all up. A simple forge sock, designed to slip over a hoof to protect against hot surfaces. Made of thick leather, they were fairly popular amongst slaves.

I had different ideas for it though, as a water carrier! Throwing it into my belly pouch of the multi-pocketed fleece, I grunted and groaned till I had climbed back onto the conveyor and made my way toward the far end. Well, that was fairly easy as far as slave work in Fillydelphia went, maybe I could just hang around in here for a bit? Get my breath back and pretend I was still hunting? It's not like they could *tell*.

"Hey, boss! That red light's green again!"

As if my life were ever that kind.

"Guess it fixed itself then. Tell the overseer he don't need to get that little runt no more. I'll start her up."

No! They thought I wasn't in yet!

"HEY! I'M IN HE—"

The whine of the motor and sparking of arcane boards drowned me out. Pacing on the spot, I panicked. I had to move, but the conveyor was beginning to trundle its way forward! Thinking faster than I felt I normally could, I galloped and hopped onto it, trying to run for the far end before the arms started up.

No such luck, the arms swivelled back and forth, while not sharp, the ends were pointed enough to deal some serious harm if they slapped down on me. Dodging left and right on the conveyor, I hopped and dove around them. Landing on my stomach, my efforts were shot by the flare of pain in my chest, resulting in a thick, sticky cough. A sharp pain on my flank made me scream as an arm fired down, a thankfully blunt joint knocking me around in a half circle. The sudden pain gave me the strength to keep pushing, trying my best to

dodge them. Another arm scythed past my tail, and a third almost caught my outstretched hoof. This was a nightmare, trapped in a dark and small area with a dozen little mechanical arms trying to stab me.

The exit was a thin shaft of orange at the far end. With the conveyor moving, at least I could concentrate on dodging and still move on. The moment I was in range, I dove for it and began pulling myself through the horribly small gap. My saddlebag came off, being shoved through first before I squeezed my aching body under the gap, with the conveyor scratching and burning against my knees from the friction of me not moving with it fast enough...ow ow ow...

Mercifully, finally, I popped back out into the warm glare of the forge, making one hazy slave mare faint as she saw her work machine apparently give birth to a pony. Dropping off the conveyor, I concentrated mainly on trying to get my heart rate and breathing down to normal levels again. Oh Luna, thank you for saving me in the dark.

The sullen face of the overseer glared down at me with almost surprise, before looking back at the machine.

"And they said you were useless. Pfft, any worker's got a use. Good work. Now get up."

The adrenaline was passing, replaced entirely by a shaking and re-emergent agony in my body that required three attempts to stand upright and lift my head to look at the tall overseer.

"That would have cost me if Stern's griffons couldn't get the shipments to help fight any Rangers, Murk."

Turning, he placed his head into a saddlebag and drew out four more of the forge socks.

"Maybe give you an incentive to stick around here, I could use a little scrawny pony with all this machinery. Take 'em. I'll try putting in a word to get you here more often. We try to take care of our own in here."

Bowing first, I bit the four socks and tossed them in my saddlebag, likely I'd find another use than he thought of, but I wasn't complaining. A small surge of pride swelled in my chest at the praise. I could really do this stuff! Maybe I wasn't that bad a slave after all! I was a good little...

...slave.

Turning to trot away as my shift ended, I could almost hear the mocking rattle of my cutie mark echo through the factory air.

Well, at least I had something to add to the pile for my part when I got back to the shop cell. I had returned to the Mall rather quickly, moving as fast as my tired legs would carry me through the streets of Fillydelphia, sticking to the well guarded areas where masked guards strode on walkways above the streets. I didn't trust any areas on my own anymore; every shadow could hold another raider, just waiting to hurt me again. The thought alone would make me sniff and sob, remembering how it felt to be utterly helpless and alone with them.

If The Master didn't want me, well, I dreaded to think about it.

Now, I wandered the hallways of the Mall on my way to the cage door that would return me to my friends. I hoped Caduceus had brought something, I needed it, my eyes were still blackened and swollen, despite his earlier work. The potion seemed to have helped my

broken nose, but I could swear I felt something still shifting in there while trotting on three legs down the darkened... corridor...

I stopped, casting my head back and forth. I could feel my heart beginning to beat faster. Ears perked, I shuffled against one of the walls as I could have sworn I heard a heavier tread from nearby. The sound of a door opening ahead of me gave reason to dive into the nearest shadows behind an abandoned cleaning cart.

"You can tell Barb that he'll have his reward soon enough for delivering the message."

The Master.

His heavy stomping was coming this way. Just like my nightmare. I needed to move, now! But where to? The route to the cage door would have gone right by where I could hear him!

"What are you even planning, Master? The fuck matters if the runt squeals to somepony? Not like anypony'd actually believe that little shit. You said yourself, he's got no proof of anything you've done to him, and it's not like he knows anything important."

"Never you mind, raider. You've all got your promises, you do **not** factor in any more than that, understand? He's too close to that upstart coltcuddler to risk him even telling about abuse. I don't need anyone messing around with me. He won't talk now that your leader's had him negated. I *know* he won't, not while he feels that mare he likes is in danger."

"Is she?"

"Explicitly." He almost caressed the word, breathing it with a deep chuckle that I heard the raider nervously echo. "Now get back to your cell, slave. I give you these chances, but I can take them away if you cause trouble, understand?"

"Y-yes, master..."

The sounds of hooves charging in the opposite direction kicked up, I *prayed* he would go the other way, but even amidst the hollow terror for the mare or Glimmer, it only got worse as he continued coming this way. Sweating, with no other option, I simply turned and galloped as fast as I could in the opposite direction. At least he'd just hear it as somepony else—

"I can hear your pitter patter, Number Seven!"

I audibly shrieked. Even down the corridor, that voice echoed up it, lidless and almost omnipresent before the stomping increased. Oh Celestia save me, *he was coming! How did he even know my sound so well?*

The cackle drifted up behind me, I pushed on, shoving all the pain down and using all four hooves to speed up the nearest stairwell. Behind me, I saw him round the corner I'd been looking at and grin.

"There you are..."

I didn't stop, the moment he commanded, I knew I *would*. I had to get as much distance and a hiding place as fast as I could. Exiting on one floor up, feeling a pang of horror on every thump of a cracking stairwell as he moved up after me. I ran to a door. It was locked. *Why were they always locked?* I didn't have time to try many more doors, it was just management corridors with nowhere to hide!

Wait, I recognised this place! I knew *one* door I could go into!

The sound of chains dropping to the ground and being dragged up the stairs sent shivers beyond compare down my spine and around my cutie mark. The rattling sound of certain enslavement followed me. Crying, I galloped on, please be in, *please be in!*

The heavy oak door was at the bottom here, I began hammering my hoof upon it.

Shackles emerged from the stairwell, his head slowly turning with the rotten grin before he began trotting down, taking his time, inevitably approaching. He spoke lowly, the volume that only Glimmer knew would be only for my ears, *how did he know these things?*

"What's the matter, slave? Noone home?"

He was only fifteen or so feet away. The collar clanged to the floor. Oh Goddesses no. If I was put in that again...

I tried the door, it was locked. He always normally had it open! That meant... that meant...

Backing up against the door, my head turned sideways to watch him trotting closer, ten feet away.

"Now, your Master commands, stay there like a good little slave."

My Master commanded. I obeyed as I felt my limbs deaden.

"Heh, good."

His eyes met mine, like strong to weak, like master to slave, like father to—

As a great surprise, I heard a click before the door fell open and dumped me upon the softer surface of the office floor. Line of sight broken, I wailed and rushed further in, colliding with somepony. Without even thinking, I just bucked out and ran further in. A grunt of sudden pain followed, quickly asserted with something falling to the floor.

Falling against one of the low benches that sat for readers next to the great wall of books, I turned, breathless and panting. I saw Protégé standing on three legs while the fourth, his back right, lifted in pain from the ground where I had struck his flank.

"Murk, what is the meaning of this?" His eye sternly focused on mine, before softening upon seeing the state I was in. "What's going on?"

"Ou-outs-side! I... I..." Words wouldn't come.

'Just tell him.' I screamed to myself.

Hoofing closed the book he had dropped when we collided, Protégé walked to his door and stepped into the corridor. Yes! Yes yes!

"There's no one here, Murk."

What?

Shivering more than I could ever remember, I pulled my sore body to poke my own head out. The corridor was completely empty. Protégé even trotted down to check the nearby junction before turning to face me again.

"I believe you have some explaining to do..."

"But... but master I—"

"Inside. Now."

And that was that. My master commanded. I obeyed.

I was sat before his desk, hooves rooted to the floor even though I wanted to hold or cradle a dozen different places. Even that short run had woken much of the pain that had been dying down. Caduceus had advised me to not stress much, but really I doubted I'd *ever* be able to follow a healer's orders well. Shaking, I ran over the thoughts in my head. The excuses. I was running from a loose raider. No, he'd *know*. I'd thought I heard a ghoul? There was one in here I knew, but it was locked in.

Of course, a portion of me had the simple answer.

Tell him. Come clean. Tell him about the abuse, about the plans. He could *help*. Just tell him, and all this would stop and I could go back to just being a meek slave and not an abused runt.

But every time I thought that, I thought of Sunny and the horrible conditions that were breaking her body and will, and my mind cast either Glimmerlight or the mare into the same situation...

I couldn't.

"Pray tell, Murk. What gave you such a panic as to rush toward my office and scream like murder at the door before rushing in so quick and in such a panic that you were shocked even by the pony you wanted to meet? So shocked, I might add, that it led you to kick me in blind fear."

He sat at his desk, the height of the cushion chair elevating him far above me from my hunched own sitting position.

"I..."

"But I am willing to look by that now that I see the... the horrible condition you are in. Something has happened to you, and I believe I know who it was. Murk, ponies hurt like you are not uncommon in Fillydelphia, especially among those who are smaller. But I know an unconditional assault and beating when I see one. I know the signs. The look in your eyes and the despondent, jittery fear. You've been abused by others, more than you are used to. I want to know who."

Stumbling over failed sentences a dozen times, I failed to say anything. Nothing but an occasional stammered 'I... I...' or 'It... it was...' left my mouth. I felt trapped, unable to choose a direction. I felt hurt, as vulnerable as ever from the pain and rotten exhaustion and now under absolute scrutiny for something that would hurt those I cared for...

Protégé's eyebrows narrowed, before he sighed and began to trot around the desk.

"I'm going to ask you one question, Murk. You don't need to say anything, just nod or shake. I won't tell anypony it was you who came to me, but I've had my suspicions ever since I first met you after your recovery from the Wall. I need to know..."

No, please, don't ask.

"Is this Chainlink Shackles doing this?"

My heart skipped a beat. My neck felt frozen, unable to move.

Tell him.

"He has a history of it, every slaver in Fillydelphia knows, Murk. But he is also very good at not leaving traces and few ponies care to actually bother stopping him. *I do*. It was a mistake to leave him alone with you before. One that, had I known you as I do now, I would not have made. I may be ranked higher than him, but I cannot move against a veteran overseer and take this to Master Red Eye without proof. Let me help you, Murk. I *know* it's him, but I need you to confirm as a witness to let proceedings start. So please, was it him?"

Tell. Him.

"It... it..."

"Don't worry. Just nod or shake."

Damn it, Murky! Tell him! Tell him and this is all over! He can protect them!

The sight of Sunny, savaged and bereft of all hope, of Glimmerlight under the wicked knife of Barb as he drew the life from her, of the mare being dragged into places nopony could see...

"All you need to do is just move your head, nopony will hear or know it's you..."

He isn't your Master, Murky! You are your own pony, Littlepip would know to do the brave thing! Shackles is planning something as well. Open up and tell him everything, do what you want, cry into his shoulder if you need to! He cares! Let it out! Tell him the truth, no matter how bad it hurts!

He was going to hurt or have killed everypony who actually liked me. I'd be alone again. Protégé cared but, he was still a slave master. I couldn't value him over my friends...

Amongst the voices careening in my head, back and forth, arguing and whirling around one another, one broke through with an unstoppable will that I could not resist.

Your Master commanded you to stay silent.

I shook my head.

Sighing, his shoulders slumping, Protégé just looked away, seemingly stopping short of cursing under his breath.

"Some time ago, a zebra in here, the one you saw rescued? She was the victim of a horrible attack of which I shan't describe. Nopony came to her aid or looked to deal with those who committed the crime, even if our leader would handle it. Most slavers don't care, but Murk, I have the ear of Master Red Eye himself, and I know he will not stand for such wanton abuse if given proof of a specific slaver. He knows it happens, but his concerns are not with the day to day individuals. But if I brought it to him... Murk he could help..."

"It-it was just because I got in t-the way..."

"You're lying, Murk."

I just looked away, hiding my eyes from that harsh glare of his. Sniffing, I could only shake my head a second time. A long silence ensued as he simply stared at me while I shivered and held my eyes to the carpet beneath us. Eventually, a sparkle of magic picked up, followed by a series of books floating by me off the small bench I had collided with.

"You can stay here for a time till you feel better, Murk." His voice was empty, oddly helpless.

At the unspoken command, I hobbled over to lie across the bench, curling up tightly. Protégé moved back to his desk and took up a scroll.

There was more silence in which I simply tried to calm down. I had gotten through that without endangering my friends. He meant well but... but I just *couldn't*. This had to remain silent, at least until we could escape, get to the metro and tunnel out.

"I have received a message from List Seeker at the forge requesting your presence there for future shifts. Would you prefer working there?"

The topic change was sullen, heavy with forced conversation. Lying my head on the cushioned bench, I took a few seconds to get my response out.

"Y-yes, master. He's not so bad."

"Indeed, he is a rather fair overseer. However, I suspect in a few days we will receive a new shipment of volunteers for the salvage detail. I do hope you'll have recovered by then. As such, I'm sending you to Weathervane's care overnight. You're on the list for medical support now that you've proven yourself to various slavers. Be a little more proud of yourself."

I hardly felt proud. This wasn't something I wanted to *be* proud of. All the same, it was good news. I nodded, if anything just to please him. I finally sat up a little.

"I'm sorry, master, for running in a-and being scared..."

"Don't let it worry you, Murk. I know how it feels. Now, just take your time, I did say

that you were welcome to come here should you ever wish to talk.”

Still casting his eyes over my vaguely healed injuries, Protégé eventually sighed and sat back, trying to place a smile into the moment. His efforts to maintain ‘cheer’ were hardly successful given it was coming from the pony who owned my life.

“I owe you this much. I am rather thankful for your efforts and, if I may say, rather proud of them myself. That was no easy infiltration at the Ministry. Grindstone is a particularly stringent taskmaster, one I am increasingly wary over. I had actually petitioned to take leadership of the Ministry worker den, but he has friends in high places among the ranks of Master Red Eye’s leadership base.”

I wasn’t sure what I felt more, the odd surge of satisfaction at pleasing him, or the crippling fear of letting on that I knew anything about Grindstone and The Master working together on, whatever it was they were doing. Oh, how I wanted to just even hint to make him wary...

I couldn’t. Barb could be watching. He always seemed to be. I took a short breath, rubbing a hoof on my neck to massage the sore muscles.

“The machine thing will help us I guess. I’m scared for Glimmer and the others.”

“It will help a lot, Murk, as soon as we get it charged up. I have Mosin and his assistant working on that right now. Now, is there anything you would like to talk about? You do normally have something on your mind.”

Casting my eyes around at the wealth of books in messy piles or disorganised heaps upon shelves, (Why in Equestria did he have a book on top of a lampshade?) I wondered if he had any information on what lurked in the metro. He had mentioned that things had gone down there before after Red Eye took over, didn’t he? Well, might as well do some digging.

“If you don’t mind, I... I think I want to learn more about Re— I mean, Master Red Eye coming to Fillydelphia. To maybe try to understand all this? Like, you mentioned things that he cleared out?”

Much of the sullen tone was banished as I saw his one eye light up, the quill immediately dropping into the inkwell once again. His voice was somewhat happier, joyous that I was asking on a subject he clearly held dear to his heart. Good, anything but trying to get the truth out of *me*.

“Of course, Murk! I am glad you’re taking an interest in this, perhaps you’ll begin to see in which ways we can all help one another, for Equestria.”

Protégé stood and began to pace around, presumably organising in some sort of method I would never hope to understand. I guessed he didn’t like just sitting doing nothing but talking for a time, but then he was a slave master. They didn’t often get time off.

“Fillydelphia was uninhabitable, Murk. We’re not sure what caused it, other than perhaps such intense radiation over so long, but there were horrors here that simply were unlike anything else we had seen. Of course, there aren’t any real records kept in the wasteland, so this is all based on talk and second hand perspective, it may just have been very odd ghouls. Master Red Eye rarely speaks of it, motioning that we should look to the future and simply learn from the past rather than fear it. But I must admit I did have a curiosity as to what had really gone on back then, so I did a little light research. It turned out that as well as the previous generations of slavers, ghouls gangs and the swarms of parasprites there were at least a couple of creatures that ponies feared above *everything* in this part of the world.”

Groaning slightly as I felt my swollen eyes sting, I gently rubbed them and tried to pay further attention. Despite the lack of a slave industry, Fillydelphia hardly sounded any better

back before Red Eye. The idea of using the metro was quickly becoming rather scary if it was still like the old Fillydelphia pre-Red Eye.

"You remember when we were in the building, Murk? The alarm?"

Oh, don't remind me. I averted my eyes, fighting as hard as I could to avoid any clench in my heart from that. I'd been embarrassed enough by throwing myself into his hooves while upset.

"Y-yes..."

"Well, there was a reason I was wary, Murk. Some of the sources I spoke to who claimed to have known others around that time reported that many of these creatures gave off an unusual and shrill alarm-like sound when they were in the vicinity. Not all, but just some. Nopony really knew why, as far as I could find out. There's all sorts of myths but very few facts, not even what they are or what they look like. Only one thing remained steadfast and repeated enough to be clearly true."

"W-what was t-that?"

Protégé stopped dead, looking at me.

"One simple survival instinct. If you smell rotten mint, gallop away as fast as you can and do not look back. Do not stop and do not try to hide."

A cold shiver fired down my spine. I wasn't very good at running.

"They *all* said that, every one of the older veterans. Some had even done so while sealing off the tunnels, never even seeing what it was. We lost a lot of ponies sealing off the outer circle metro lines, apparently."

"You sealed off everything?"

"Everything inside the walls, certainly. Those incidents were relatively rare, but the fear was so great that every outer line metro station inside Red Eye's domain was collapsed in on itself. It only made security sense as well, the tunnels were dangerous, but it also represented a breach in the defences were they not closed off. No, now the metro is simply used for underground shelter on the inner circle, while the outer is a forgotten abyss. They're still down there, we're sure of it, just with no way to get back up that we know of."

Wait, that they knew of? Could there be other entrances or ways down to the outer circle that they hadn't yet found? I wasn't sure if that was a blessing for an escape or a horrifying thought of one of those *things* coming above ground.

"Do you still have records of it all? Like maps or something?"

"Yes, yes I do, why?"

"I... uh... um..." I clammed up. I'd been way too obvious. "Just for..."

The sound of a bellowed warcry out of the window took both our attentions from the awkward mistake. Many shouts, swears, and crashes exploded into being with a violence that visibly shocked even the usually controlled Protégé. Almost stumbling across his office, he cast a glance from the window.

"By Celestia..."

There was a scream, followed by a shattering of wood and metal. Was it one of those things? Oh it was, wasn't it!? That was just how my luck worked these days!

"Come on!"

His revolver flew from the holster to his side as he galloped for the door. Pushing myself up as best I could, I cantered after him, the thought of being left behind alone in the corridors being all that gave me the strength to stay within sight. He made for the stairwell, pausing only to ensure I caught up before we descended.

"What is it master?!"

He didn't reply. We passed a group of slavers rushing toward the entrance with all sorts of armaments. Ragini was with them, striding alongside Protégé.

"Kysa reported from the air, the moment the cage was opened inside the gates—"

Protégé shouted over his shoulder.

"Coming here, I could only guess. Let me do the talking!"

"You should just shoot—"

"No, Ragini."

"...yes, master. Hey, flightless." She glanced back at me with a crude grin and a flap of her wings, her voice only briefly interested.

I was rather too concerned. What had they brought here? Quickly, everypony (and token griffon) rushed out of the front of the Mall. Why had he insisted I come along? What use was I in a fight?

It all became very quickly relevant.

Before the Mall lay a scene of devastation. Two carts were destroyed, bodies lying amongst the wreckage where they had been thrown or smashed through. All lay groaning, some still. But before me the brawl still continued, with one slaver hurling over my head to shatter through one of the doors to the Mall.

It was him.

Brimstone Blitz swayed to the side, avoiding the whirl of a cane, before striking the offending slaver so hard his gas mask flew from his face. Bucking backwards, he caught the griffon that had attempted to land and restrain him a wicked blow that hurled him into the side of a ruined wall on the far side of the road. Up the street leading to the Mall, I could see slavers lying in heaps the entire way, while one overhead walkway had collapsed from a shattered pillar beneath it. The slavers who otherwise would have shot him were slowly shifting on the concrete, holding their limbs or torsos in wracking pain.

Another slaver leapt toward him, hurling a magical shock stick forward that stung his side. Roaring with fury, Brimstone hooped and threw a rock to force him back. A slaver beside me raised a gun, only for Protégé's magic to sweep the barrel away. My master cantered forward.

"Warlord Brimstone Blitz!"

He apparently did not hear, slapping two slavers' heads together with enough force to make a sound like rocks colliding. He yelled again as the sneaky slaver with the shock stick scored another strike on his chest and dived back behind the wagon again. A full group of five slavers finally got their act together and rushed him. With ponies hanging off of his limbs and neck, the huge raider was visibly slowed. I saw the others rushing to pick up the rifles dropped from the walkways...

"Stop!" I shouted, running alongside Protégé. "Brim! Stop!"

His head shot around so hard at the sound of my voice that a mare was thrown from his neck. He might have stopped, but that shock stick stuck and held against his back leg hard enough that I saw the bloodlust rise in his eyes.

"Protégé, call them off! He's going to kill them!" I begged him, pleading to let this not become a massacre for either side.

"Slavers! Fall back! Let me handle this!" His voice needed no magical enhancement, simply carrying with a practised ease across the street. "Leave the raider be!"

Some of them dropped, one was thrown for not moving fast enough. The shock stick

buzzed once more before Protégé yanked it from his grasp with a telekinetic tug. Within the slowly expanding circle of slavers, Brimstone stood with all four hooves spread, dripping blood from wounds, and his eyes filled with a fury that was directed *entirely* at Protégé. He breathed heavily, hooves scraping on the ground.

“Where is she!?”

Glimmer. He’d come back for *Glimmer*.

“She is safe, inside with a healer. Those who brought her back were not kind, but I assure you she is—”

“She better be, *boy*.” Advancing toward us, until he was alongside many of the slavers who stood rooted to the spot (particularly the shock stick slaver) Brimstone looked down on Protégé. Despite my master’s authority, it was clear that Brimstone held the real weight here. He had led *hundreds* of ponies for most of his life. One slave master was nothing to him.

“I don’t care for your rules. I’ll play your game only if I’m with her. Some fool thought he could ‘claim’ me. Well he won’t be doing that from now on. So, are we going to have a problem?”

There was something ever more frightening about him when he *didn’t* swear. He didn’t need to pose and sound off to intimidate, you just *knew* he had the power to do so. Protégé held up well, not backing off, waving his hoof to tell the slavers to not worry.

“Technically, given I stopped you during your, hm, rampage through the streets to get here, I suppose that would count as me being the one to bring you back to being a worker. I would be glad to have your skills with us once ag—”

“Leave your drivel for somepony who cares, boy.”

Protégé only nodded, clearing his throat.

“Then I assume that your little war to get inside again then fight your way here is over?”

Brimstone narrowed his eyes, snorting air through his nostrils. His gaze remained fixed on Protégé even while his left hoof whipped out horizontally and smacked the slaver with the shock-stick hard enough to knock him completely away from the edge of my vision with nought but a blur.

“*Now* I’m done.”

“You stupid, stupid, fucking *stupid* stallion!”

Glimmerlight was letting her less than polite mouth flow freely, beating her front hooves against Brim’s rather unmoving chest. He merely stood in the gateway to the shop cell as she continued her rant.

“You were out! *You were out!* Why did you just-just hand yourself in!?”

Personally, I had stepped back, sitting in the corner with my needle and thread, piecing together the leather socks with some old bits of a hose to create a watertight container. I wanted to scream at him myself... but the moment we had trotted back in here, I had felt too tired to even try.

Besides, Glimmerlight had certainly done the work for me.

“You’re like-like one of those idiots who doesn’t get that it was just a one night thing and just always *comes back!* You were free, Brim!”

“I can’t be free.”

It was the first thing he had said all conversation. Glimmerlight, exhausted, fell against

him, butting her head on his chest a few times in sheer exasperation and anger, but simply too tired to keep it up.

"I'm a raider, Glim. On my own out there, I'd likely just fall back into the way I was before. Almost did, angry enough that I held up a trader to get what I'd need to get back here for sure. No, I'm meant to be here, but you-both of you-aren't."

Sighing, closing his eyes, he began trotting past her toward the layers of cardboard he used as a bed.

"That's why I'm here. I'm helping *you* escape, not me. Chances are, once you're safe I'll come back here again. That's just the morality of the whole thing, Glim, Raiders like me don't *deserve* the freedom to do the things we did again."

"But you aren't—"

"Don't."

His eyes met hers briefly, fiercely, ending that line of speech immediately.

"Just... don't. I'm not the all good guardian you think I am. Now, are you alright?"

Sighing, Glimmerlight stomped her hoof on the spot in frustration, looking unable to decide if she should nod or shake her head.

"We... we got by. It hurt, but we got by. Murky got beat up bad, but we held it together. There's a plan coming together. We could use your help."

My head perked up at the mention of my name. Truth be told, I'd long considered myself a side matter to these two. The one that just tagged along or helped out with some things. Glimmerlight was the real leadership here, with Brimstone as the one to point the best way or get stuff done. To hear her talk about me as though I mattered just as much as her to all this was strange, if reassuring. I caught a quick glance of her looking at me, a small smile forming to remind me she was still there. Her rage settled, apparently being able to begin to look by her anger and reassert the Glimmerlight I knew.

"In fact, no, you don't have a choice. You act like some big idiot lump and trot back into a slavery hell then you are *going* to help us. Here's what we need."

The plan was explained as we waited for the next food delivery to arrive. In that time, I created three waterskins and filled them from the fountain. Glimmerlight took my bullet casings and hid them amongst the scrap pile, pulling out a few little robot eyepieces she had found (apparently for trap sensors) at her workplace and even a discarded bolt from a rifle. It was a start.

Brimstone asserted that he could make some tools very easily, promising to try and bring some back from the type of work he was given and drop it nearby. At night, I could sneak out the back and retrieve it. It felt so strange... just being expected to go back to normal with Brimstone around again. Caduceus even got the fright of his life when he returned with a few sealed bags of purified water he'd gotten from the surplus bins in the hospital and immediately kissed Glimmerlight, much to Brimstone's chagrin. The big raider had almost been ready to hurl him out until Glimmerlight explained.

Today had been a ride of my emotions. Awful, enlightening, inspiring, and confusing with a series of events one after the other. From Slit and Barb to Glimmerlight and my mother, from desperation inside a machine to Brimstone returning and... and The Master...

I was beginning to sense how long and arduous a task it was going to be to escape this place. I just needed to be patient, roll with the blows, and endure until we were ready.

"Soup's on, everypony! Get your pasty flanks out here!"

Well, there was something we could do. We needed more food to store away; here was one more opportunity to stay on track. As a group, we trotted out, thankfully receiving much less crowding now that Brimstone was here again, which also permitted us to join the queue properly without worry of my presence sending us to the back. I glanced at Brimstone and Glimmerlight, Caduceus having decided to wait behind in the shop cell away from the crush. Technically, he shouldn't even be here to be allowed the Mall's food anyway.

The shop cells were under a lot less security now that the healers had departed, though many of the mattresses lay unclaimed and stained with the blood of those who had been treated. A sudden flap of fabric caught my attention. I looked up and saw Pinkie's flag whipping around, seemingly nodding toward me. Remembering the container, I shivered and turned away from it. Always watching, forever watching...

"So, um, any ideas on gathering food?"

Glimmerlight simply smiled and rustled my mane. What had happened to that mood? How could she just switch back over to happy like that?

"Don't you worry, Murky. I'm sure we've all got our own ideas. I mean, you're gonna slip some extra, right?"

"Well, sure—"

"Just leave us to do as we do, trust me, eh?" She winked and grinned. I could only dread what she had planned.

I approached first, holding up my bowl. They had a large urn for the gruel (at least it wasn't oatmeal again...) and several pieces of stale bread in some wicker baskets. The young slaver assistant, a few years older than myself, poured some in for me. He had a pretty lifeless expression, yawning a lot or glancing off to chat to his colleague who was handing out the bowls beside him. It wasn't exactly a difficult task for me to swipe a few extra pieces of bread when he wasn't looking. Then a few more. After a few seconds, I began to worry I didn't have that many pockets left that could fit slices of the hard bread, so I hastily moved along before somepony in the crowd saw m—

Barb was sitting by the side of the plaza just watching as he waited for his raiders to bring his food. *He* saw my sleight of hoof, and just grinned.

I shivered, sticking close to Brimstone. He was up next, carrying the largest bowl possible that he had simply grabbed from another raider with a growl and a warning 'tap' on the head. The young slaver simply looked up at him as he spooned in the normal amount.

Brimstone didn't move.

"Oh! Um, sorry!" In went another spoonful. Then another. And a third.

Eventually, he'd gotten almost twice the ration by stint of simply standing there. The moment he moved away, I already heard the complaints from behind in the queue, matched by the insults from those raiders brave enough to shout out. Finally, Glimmerlight trotted up with a little wink to me, somehow saying 'Okay, let me show you how it's done.'

Her bowl popped down from her magic onto the pasting table they set up for the food, where she leaned beside it with her front hooves on the tabletop. A spoonful was thrown in, as normal. I could see the buck was clearly keeping his eyes on her, he was a little more like her age than I was, so I guess I couldn't have blamed him.

"Aww, so little? How's a mare meant to get her energy?"

"Th-that's all we're told to give..."

She leaned forward again, her hooves resting on her chin, tail swishing to and fro behind her. Her lips pouted a little, leading the slaver to begin to sweat a little and glance back and forth to the others, who simply shrugged and continued giving out gruel from their urns across the bench. Clearly, they were of a rank to simply not care.

"Hey, I'll give you a peck on the lips if you give me another spoonful." Her eyebrows raised, before going ahead anyway. With almost shock in my face, I watched as she dragged him across the table with her front hooves and slapped a kiss onto his mouth with enough passion and energy that I saw many of the bucks in the queue suddenly begin to blush. Somepony cheered.

Oh, and his hoof with the ladle kept adding more.

Almost by surprise, Brimstone was suddenly beside me, I only realised after he prodded me with a hoof.

"Murk?"

"Uh?"

"Your mouth's open."

Blushing fiercely myself, I snapped it shut and gulped. "I... I was just-um-it was a really good... food gathering tactic..."

The big raider warlord chuckled lowly, regaining a little of that softer dry humour I'd known him for.

"Sure, kid. Nothin' to do with some wee unicorn on your imagination."

I simply whimpered and stayed silent, fighting to stop my frantically red face from growing any hotter. Glimmerlight eventually pulled back with a wet smack of sound from their separating mouths. Breathing deeply, she adjusted her mane and smiled to him before picking up her bowl.

"Dinner at my place, sometime?"

"Uh-I-durgh..."

"It's a date!"

With a cheerful wave, she trotted off, her bowl actually overflowing. She grinned at us widely.

"And that, my friends, is how you get extra food."

Skipping off into the shop cell, she hummed happily to herself before disappearing through the door.

It wasn't long before the next shift calls went out. To no one's surprise, Brimstone Blitz was called almost immediately. Leaving us to work, he stomped out, mentioning he'd bring what he could back from the scrapyards to make tools. Glimmer had sighed as he left, turning her eyes to me.

"I really wish he'd stayed out there. I feel a little guilty, y'know? Like me failing was what dragged him back into slavery. Sure I can throw on the happy Glimmer gets by everything style look, but I just want to see him find some peace. Big stallion wouldn't be doing this if *some* part of him didn't want to turn away from that life."

I honestly couldn't reply other than to nod and nuzzle up to her briefly. She had smiled

and wrapped a leg around me, whispering a thanks.

We began spending the time cramming what we could into tins and tying it down with thick cloth. The bread we stored in one of the leather socks to keep it dry. We ate what we could, leaving the remainder in a dark corner of the scrap pile. The gruel simply tasted like what I imagined rancid vomit might.

Sitting in the back, I was, at Glimmer's insistence, clad in the blanket. My injuries still hurt, and my face was still swollen and discoloured, so that apparently gave me the rights to a little bit of comfort. Caduceus had checked me over once, but now he simply sat with Glimmer, giggling as she recounted her tale for food. While I sewed waterskins, I wondered if he was just being polite to not be offended. Weren't they together?

"So, Murky, now you know how to be not malnourished! Try it next time!"

"But-but he wath uh buck..." My voice was muffled from holding the needle in my teeth.

"So? Seriously, try it sometime, bucks are good firm kissers if you take the initiative, see?"

She rather proved her point, again, with Caduceus. The look in his eyes said nothing but 'I am so lucky' as he returned the gesture. It began to linger, then grow a little more. I rolled my eyes while they just giggled, was I going to have to leave the room again? Yet mercifully, the pair separated.

"Mhm, yeah I think you can stick around when we get out of here. I could get used to a buck who isn't afraid to take the initiative a little."

Sighing, I put aside the last leather sock I'd been working on and spat out the needle. Anything to get those two back on track.

"How are we going to know our way in those tunnels?"

"Red Eye had a big operation going to take out every entrance, right? Well, he needs to organise that on a map. You think hot flanks up in his office might have one?"

Outside, I heard the sound of the plaza's main cage door creaking open.

"That's it! Sick leave's over, get in there!"

The sound of a slaver's voice drifted into our shop cell. Some seconds later, I heard the slaver slam the door shut and begin trotting away. The departure was followed by a mature female voice, bitter and low spoken.

"Better recovering than being dead from radiation, you lout..."

Glimmer's hoof that had been stroking Caduceus' head stopped. I heard her get up quickly, trotting for the doorway. Pushing my head out from under the blanket, I called out after her, but she didn't stop. From the brief glimpse I got of her face when she turned to head through the doorway, I saw a mask of shock and surprise.

"Glimmer? What's wrong?" Caduceus glanced over at me for any idea. But she was already gone. Unable to leave her to go alone and filled with my own curiosity, I hopped out from the blanket and hobbled my way over to the doorway after her. Behind me, Caduceus simply looked perplexed, but didn't move for the moment. Given he technically shouldn't be here, it was likely the best plan.

Various slaves were poking their heads out to see a small group of new arrivals, three mares and two stallions. All were rather weary looking and had clearly been in Fillydelphia for some time. One of the stallions looked near enough dead on his hooves, only just managing to stagger to a mattress and collapse.

The others simply trotted in, most of them heading for a shop cell further back, but one of the mares, a unicorn, hung back and glanced around her. I paused in thought. Something

about her seemed familiar. Pale grey coat, a dark blue and shot with white and black highlights mane was braided into two stands either side of her face and the remainder tied into a ponytail at the back, it all sparked a few thoughts of recognition.

“CORAL!”

Beside me, Glimmerlight raced forward, galloping across the mattresses and concrete floor towards the mare. The other unicorn turned, surprised at the madly dashing form of Glimmer for her.

Then she scowled.

Her horn lit, a dark blue like deep water that sparked and stuttered around her horn like a faulty light before it exploded into being. Even before I could shout out, a dull thump of overpressure blew across the plaza floor, kicking up water from the fountain and blasting a few mattresses aside in an arc before her. Glimmerlight was knocked clean from her hooves with a yell. Landing on her side, she could only glance up in apparent confusion.

The new unicorn’s horn fizzed and sparked in the aftermath of her spell, causing her to wince and reach a hoof to her head until it all died down. But quickly, she regained her composure, trotting over with slow and deliberate steps. She was much older than Glimmer, far more mature and likely in her early forties. Only now on her flank could I see the image of a reared wave of frothing water.

“Glimmerlight. You *dare* to think you can just run up to me and shout happily?”

My best friend lay on the ground, nursing one side that had impacted upon the concrete. I hobbled over towards her, laying down over her.

“Leave her alone! She’s hurt!”

The mare’s pained eyes switched to me for a second, before widening.

“You... you’re that little buck from the hospital.”

Finally, it all clicked into place. I remembered her. This was the mare that I had almost stolen RadPurge from! Guilt began to trickle into my mind, she had every right to hate me, which made her sudden relaxation seem all the odder.

“The nurse told me what you did, how you realised what you were doing and decided not to. Not many ponies would do that in this city. Not like *her*. I should have known it was you and your allergy that RadPurge was for. What are you doing with *her*?”

“Coral, what’s wrong?” Glimmerlight breathed out the words, getting the air back in her lungs as she sat up. “What do you *mean* about me?”

Coral stood up straighter, scowling, before trotting and again lowering her head.

“Are you being serious? Are you honestly saying you think you can just waltz back over to me, throw a hug around me and consider everything fine? Oh, but that’s right, you don’t do remembering the bad times, do you?”

This was becoming seriously confusing. There was bad blood here, but only in one direction. I stepped forward. Love for my chosen sister lended me an assertiveness I never knew I even had.

“Stop it! She’s saved my life and helped me! I’m Murky, Murky Number Seven, who are you to her?”

“I’m Coral Eve, old ‘friend’ of Glimmerlight from the village we inhabited. Or at least I was until we ended up in here because of her!” The voice was cold, long withheld fury seething into every word. “I’ll bet she didn’t tell you that bit, huh? Of how she *betrayed* us, led our village to be burned down and get most of us sold into slavery? I had my *son* taken from me, just a little colt! Now he’s been dragged in to learn from Red Eye and you think

you can just act like nothing's happened?!"

She was from the village? Immediately, I almost felt a painful spark in my mind as memories flickered and emerged. The memory she had shown me in the Stable of her own life in the village.

Foals bounced happily away from a pony I presumed was their teacher as they chanted "The bad wolves won't come back!" over and over. They circled around her as though playing a game. Glimmerlight hugged one of them, a chirpy little young colt wearing an old floppy hat clearly too big for him. He squealed happily as he buried his head into her (at this point) long pink mane and giggled before returning to his mother. For a second I thought I caught a glint of recognition. Perhaps just that motherly look anypony missing their mom would feel.

It was her.

She *was* from the village, I had seen her, that's why I'd recognised her in the Stable! I'd already met her in the hospital!

Suddenly, the harsh reality of truth in her words began to slip into my mind.

Shoving her head forward, she almost seemed to spit on her words, inches from Glimmerlight's face. My friend recoiled, looking shocked beyond proper thought processes. All around us, slaves were coming out to view the confrontation by the fountain. I saw Barb leaning against the edge of a shop cell with a wicked grin, clearly enjoying the drama.

"But-but I... no! That isn't what happened!"

"Oh, Glimmerlight. The mare who can forgive anypony else or anything, except that it's all a lie." Coral Eve turned back to me, those two braids swinging loosely. "Has she told you the truth yet, of how she manages to forgive and forget?"

Speechless, I just cast my head between them. What could I say? No, Glimmerlight was good!

"She... she cares..."

"She *forgets!* A pony with a speciality in memory orbs. You seen her collection yet? All those orbs of hers rolling around in her bags or boxes? What do you think they are? Oh how easy it is to forgive somepony when you can simply wave your horn and just get rid of all the bad stuff. Hey Glimmer, tell me, how'd that back leg get injured?"

Throwing a quick glance backward, Glimmerlight immediately snorted at the accusation.

"Slavers, when they brought me back in they weren't too kind."

"I didn't ask who, I asked *how*."

"They... they hit me or... or beat me up and..." Glimmerlight faltered, that ease of words failing.

My heart felt like it was being torn, the sudden doubt and grasping for straws in her expression told it all. Coral only stomped a hoof and tossed her head. I felt useless, way out of my depth in their history.

"Thought so. Probably wiped it the moment you got back. So you're still doing that, huh? Funny how that works to lead as guilt free a life as you do. No wonder you don't even remember what you did to us. What you did to *me*. You know it. Those orbs you'll never touch, the ones you know are memories you want to keep away and never have to deal with the way the rest of us do. I'll bet you don't even remember what happened to the village in the end. You're just running away, Glimmer. Escaping having to deal with your decisions, and the horrors you brought on yourself and those around you. You are no friend of mine."

Tossing a braid over her neck, Coral stomped past us, wincing as her horn sparked and flared again. Glimmerlight fell back to sitting down as her back leg gave out again, her

mouth gaping, her eyes wide and sad. With a clatter of hooves, Caduceus emerged from the shop cell, sliding to a halt as he found himself almost face to face with Coral.

"Hey, what's going o— Glimmer!" He saw Glimmerlight half standing from a limp near me and threw a stare at Coral, but found her only glancing back briefly as well, before giving a tired laugh.

"Another buck? You don't change one bit. Glimmerlight, the ride of the village. Barely a stallion or so-inclined mare you *hadn't* gotten with. Hey, you, nurse. How's it feel to know you're just another number for her? You see any looks of surprise when you showed up afterwards? She's only after you for one thing, another notch on her bed."

The pale grey unicorn rounded on us all. I moved to Glimmer's side, standing slightly in front of her, even as I saw her head droop, letting the short mane hang over it.

"Murky, I don't advise you hang around with her much longer. That mare is trouble, I promise you that. Even if she doesn't realise it."

Taking a strong stance, she screwed up her face once more.

"Funny how memory works, isn't it? Now stay out of my life!" Baring her teeth, she turned away, the show of strength broken only for a single hiccup of emotion. "You've ruined enough of it already..."

She cantered off down the plaza to the bottom, before turning a corner into one of the stairwells and disappearing. Locked in place, stunned beyond words, I could only really move toward Glimmerlight.

"I... Glimmer, I..."

Without a word, she ran toward the shop cell, head low. I could hear a sniffing and sudden breathing, leading me to push as fast as I could after her. Inside, catching up, I found her on the sofa, head buried into one of the side cushions crying her eyes out completely. Her body was quaking.

I didn't know what to do in this situation...

Caduceus moved past me, sitting and hugging her across the sofa. Lost, I could only trot nearby and offer what kind of caring look I could muster. Over Caduceus' shoulder, her tear filled eyes looked down to me.

"S-she was my friend. One of my best friends. I thought we still were! I didn't know!"

Around my hooves, all around the sofa, the memory orbs lay. Crushed in her sadness, I saw her eyes glancing from orb to orb before her magic threw them all into one bag in one swarm of hated memories.

"Coral's right, I... I'm sorry. That's how I did it. It was so easy to start with! A few crap days or things, but it just got too simple to get rid of the bad and-and just live with only the good out in the wastes! B-but I didn't know I'd gotten rid of that kind of thing. Now I've lost one of my best friends. She and her son were like... hrk... like a family to me after I'd left mine. I knew I had forgotten some real bad things, but..."

The bag of orbs was thrown behind the sofa. Caduceus held her tighter, nuzzling the side of her head. Closing her eyes, cheeks wet with tears, she gripped him back, stretching out a hoof to draw me in as well.

"I can forgive anypony, *anything*. All except the one pony I really know did the wrong thing..."

Sniffing, she fought to not break down again. Held close, I just tried to wrap my short legs around as best I could.

"...myself."

She was not perfect.

I had always known it. Had I been more aware, I might have seen how obvious it was that she had been bottling things up in some way. But I had accepted it because I had seen how loyal and caring she was as a friend. A sister, even. One I'd never had, but had always needed.

But now, as it transpired, Glimmer had one large flaw, one I had pondered on for some time now that I thought on it. The reason she could be so happy, even after being sold into Fillydelphia after a raider attack, was because she had sliced the worst horrors from her memory.

Coral Eve had returned to her life now, bringing the truth with her, and it hurt. Even while she had ranted and screamed, I had seen the pain in Coral's eyes and heard the bitterness in her voice. She was in pain. There was no clear good and bad here.

Now, she simply sat against the sofa, wrapped in the blanket and staring at a group of memory orbs that hung in the air before her as though considering something. Her tears had dried with a significant effort to try and smile through it all. Somehow that had hurt me even more, reminding me of my own forced laughter. I'd lost my mother, and she'd lost those she had considered family, too. Only now that smile had faded to a blank stare on a face lit only by the dark red illumination of the orbs.

"I wouldn't hurt anypony, Murky. Not knowingly, I promise. I don't know what happened, it's in here somewhere but-but it's all buried under orb after orb of horrible things..."

Sitting nearby to her, I had toyed in my journal, finding my charcoal sketching out Coral Eve as I'd seen her in Glimmer's memory. In the village beside her son in that floppy hat.

Putting it down, I moved closer and sat alongside Glimmer.

"If I go hunting for the village I don't know what I'll find before I come to the right orb. I can sense the order they go in but I don't know where to start or-or what. Coral wouldn't make things up, but she may not know all the details or... or something."

Nuzzling closer, I felt her lean against me. It wasn't often that I was the one supporting anypony with my presence. Caduceus was here too, but Glimmer had responded better to me than him, understandable given our shared experiences, but harsh on the poor buck in light of Coral's words.

Not that there was anything I could do to change that now.

"We need to get out, Murky. If I've done anything to put her and her beautiful little son in here, we need to get them out with us. I think I know what drives Brim now. Even if she hates me, I want her out."

I nodded, turning just that she could see me in the darkness. With a shuffle of movement, Caduceus stood and trotted toward us.

"I know I'm fairly new to you guys, but Glimmer, in a city of pain and labour I've smiled more around you in the past day than I have in months. I don't care if Coral's right, if that was just a once off 'thing'. There's nothing wrong with that, and I'm thankful for spending the time. I want to help you, so I can get out myself. I've made my decision to return to Helpinghoof, maybe try and take the things Weathervane invented like RadPurge to a place it can do better good, too."

Glimmerlight began to smile again, kissing me gently on the cheek and hugging me tightly.

"Thank you. Thank you both. I don't know if I'm ever going to look or know, but getting out, that's the main priority. It has to be. I'm not going to wallow in my depression for too long, promise. Just give me some time, please? This is, well, this is hard stuff..."

We both agreed quickly. As far as I was concerned, she could have all the time she needed. I trusted her, I couldn't *not* after so much, but I knew what it was like to have your world shaken.

"So, let's see, we've got good stuff from one day. How's the checklist doing, Murky?"

Her voice built on each word, growing in strength. Still, that hollow pain sounded in her tone, but she had something to move on with, to concentrate on. Flipping my journal back a few pages, I found the checklist.

"We've got, um, five waterskins, a couple days spare food, and six packs of proper water with three RadAways for my illness. Oh, and parts, but I don't know what you do with them."

Glimmer toyed with her pile of technical whossits, nodding gently. "Not bad for a day."

"Oh, and I talked to Protégé."

Their glares even overrode the lingering pain and emotion from Glimmerlight, who stared at me like I'd gone insane.

"Wait! I mean, I got some information!" I covered for myself hastily, waving my hooves rather too enthusiastically to the point of having to grab my shoulder in pain. While catching my breath, I explained Protégé's tale of the outer line circle and all the things that dwelt down there. But more specifically, the fact that he might have a map or information on what Red Eye's workers found.

"Well, beasties can't be any more dangerous than trying to simply run at the Wall," Glimmer spoke in deep thought, still clearly working to keep her mind focused on planning rather than drifting, "but you're right about that map."

Thinking for a few seconds, Glimmer eventually seemed to get frustrated at a loss for ideas. She sat back, placing her head in her hooves, taking a few deep breaths.

"Sorry, just..."

"We know." Caduceus lay a hoof on her shoulders, at least getting a thin smile from her. "Just take your time. Don't feel you need to be all positive, okay?"

I chimed forward, the only words I knew being the ones she had told me.

"It's alright to be upset..."

Glancing down to me, her 'little brother,' her thin smile grew a little before hugging me tightly. I could feel a tear or two drip on my back.

"I know... thank you, both of you. Hm, a map won't be easy. Protégé tends to either keep his office locked while he's asleep or guarded when he's away, judging from when I've been pulled up there to check some tech or fix his terminal when it shorts out. If he's still in the building, you can bet it's Ragini on guard, and he *always* locks it upon leaving. I doubt it'll be a cheap rusty one to fiddle through.

"Brimstone can pick locks." I saw their glance at me. "Well, he gets *by* them."

"I doubt he'd go unnoticed, sweetie."

"What you need is a distraction."

Both Glimmer and I turned to Caduceus, but he hadn't been the one to speak, and was looking around himself. Oh no, I knew that voice.

Emerging from the shadows of the room, from an *impossible* angle to have reached without going through any light of our lamp, Barb flowed into being, trotting toward us. I squeaked in terror, pushing back and behind the sofa. Caduceus simply backed off to be beside Glimmer, who at least stood her ground. Even if it was Barb, I imagined he ranked pretty low on her concerns in life right *now*.

“What do *you* want?”

His eyes were staring at me, winking, before finally swivelling to Glimmerlight. If he had any disappointment that she hadn’t reacted like I had, he didn’t show it.

“I want a lot of things, mare. Some of them beyond my current reach, some of them rather within it.”

Those bright eyes of his foretold all sorts of potential outcomes. His smile would almost have been friendly had it not been for those snakelike eyes that simply promised all sorts of harsher meanings to his words.

“But at this moment, the choice is on you. You need a map for another ill fated escape attempt? Well, I honestly couldn’t care if you got out, even if you are working with the traitor, though some of my Shades might not think that way. Best watch your step around them.”

He laughed and lounged against the sofa, lifting a hoof, wiggling a hoof over it, as though inspecting it for imperfections.

“But you need a map from Protégé’s office, and for that, you need him out of it in a rush. Something to take his attention that he wouldn’t bother locking it. Now I happen to want to start something soon myself, get a little revenge on some of the slavers who killed our own up on the hill.”

Any sense of friendly nature on his face dropped and disappeared on the spot.

“We don’t take *kindly* to that. Shades don’t let a grudge go. Your time will come too, mare, oh yes. But for now, you have an option with us to use our distraction as we, hmm, ‘end’ a few slavers as payback in here to get your precious map. The filly can get you out with his little clearances after he’s done the job I want.”

Glimmerlight took a deep breath, trying to stop herself shivering, I betted. The sofa felt all too small to hide behind. I wanted to move for the door, but the shadows promised any number of Shades.

“You want a riot.” Glimmerlight was unusually terse. “You’re looking to kick up a proper riot just for petty revenge.”

“Petty to you. We aren’t *like* you.” Barb countered harshly. “But we need something the filly can provide, for him to steal the key from outside the door, somewhere we aren’t allowed to go. Raiders get watched or chained, the filly doesn’t. He helps us get the keys to assure they can’t simply lock us up, you get a distraction to sneak up for a map of your precious escape route. Deal’s a deal, right?”

Caduceus half snorted nearby. “Why should we work with *raiders*?”

“Because without us, you think you’ll be content to wander the metro unguided? Or to try some other method and risk him discovering you? Or perhaps I might just go ahead and *tell* him if you don’t agree. You seem to have mistaken me for somepony with honour here, blondey.”

Between Caduceus’ offence and myself cowering, Glimmerlight merely maintained a stare at Barb as though afraid to lose track of him. I couldn’t blame her.

“Tit for tat, huh? We scratch your back, you stab ours? What kind of guarantee can you

give?"

Barb simply laughed, a horrible dry sound like his throat were made of dust.

"None, but we're not the ones wanting out, now are we? Your choice, 'escapees', your choice. You wanna risk it with us? Or you wanna go it alone and die in some stinking hole?"

The three of us cast glances to one another.

"All you're after is a few slavers?"

"Enough to sate my lads for those we lost, half a dozen. We'll drag them in here and do it raider style."

Glimmer kept her voice surprisingly level. "Spare me the details."

Again, those half glances and unspoken arguments flickered between us. Caduceus shrugged, Glimmer was clearly tempted, and I wanted nothing to do with this. Not with him. Even now I could see him half smiling at me. Eventually, Glimmerlight sighed, turning back to him.

"Give us an hour till Brimstone gets back. We need to talk on this."

"Absolutely not."

"Brim, this could be the only way we have! Who else has a full room of encyclopedias and old elements of the past in this damn city that isn't in a damned Ministry? The metro is a *maze* without a map! If we want to stand a chance, we need it!"

The big raider swung around, stomping a hoof so hard I felt the floor vibrate beneath me. I'd stayed back, hiding under the blanket at the confrontation. Brimstone had changed again, like he'd slipped, fallen back into what he once had been while outside. Perhaps it was just his mood after the shift, he'd at least got us some iron bars. I presumed nopony had even wanted to risk asking why he was taking them.

"Barb is not somepony to do deals with, Glimmer! He is below even the twisted sense of right and wrong raiders normally go by. The moment you've done what he wants, that's it! Deals off, why do you think he put your work to be done first?"

"But we've got *you*! They won't get to us if you're coming with us! You think I don't expect him to try and slip a knife in our back the moment the riot starts? Look, we can pull this off and avoid him at the same time if we just move fast enough and make our own way up to the office. The moment we're through that cage, you just charge in and break a path. Even the raiders won't stand in your way, Brim!"

The cargo trolley clattered, panels destroyed as Brimstone's hoof *crushed* it. I just squeaked, backing off and finding myself oddly pushing close to Caduceus. The buck was far too afraid of Brimstone to even stand near the mare he had apparently fallen for.

"We are not going to aid them or become a part of their mad plans! Barb can rot in here for all I care!"

"It's for a better cause in the end, Brim, if we can get *out*! Just get over how you feel about them!"

"They are murderers, Glimmer! Rapists, torturers, and looters! You want out, *I* want you out, but not like this! We are not going to help them to sate their madness!"

"We don't have any fucking CHOICE, Brim! He's going to do something to us anyway! And we might as well take the one that actually helps us!"

I'd not often seen the more fiery side of Glimmerlight that was confined behind her

casual flirty humour. But here, I saw her stressed out, ready to snap at somepony.

“I know, they aren’t like you. Hell, you saved me from *them*, just like how you saved Murky. But what I mean is that there’s no black and white in here anymore, Brim. We don’t have the luxury of picking and choosing. Murky’s at death’s door, the raiders made it clear they want me and they want me *soon*, we have to get out...”

I sat and cradled a sachet of RadAway, sipping away at it for today’s relief. But my eyes couldn’t leave the pair. Brimstone turned, glaring at me drinking the life-saving liquid.

“What do you think, kid?”

Huh? Me? Why did my opinion matter here? Almost spluttering on the RadAway, I glanced at Caduceus to see if Brimstone had meant him. No luck, the attention was square on myself.

Barb terrified me. He and his raiders had already horribly beaten, scared, or humiliated me multiple times. I feared them as much as most slavers, if not more so. Brimstone was right, Barb would not hold on to the deal. It’d be up to us to make use of what his raiders were doing. On the other hoof, staring down at the orange sachet in my hooves, I knew that I didn’t have a huge amount of time remaining. I *needed* out of here. In my heart, mind, soul, and body, I had to leave, to feel the joy of escape.

“We need the map...”

Those four words were like falling from a rooftop, feeling your own body casting your life in a direction you don’t *want* it to go in, but cannot now stop. Brimstone sighed, snorting to himself and stomping away to the darker parts of the room. Glimmerlight didn’t exactly look pleased, just tired.

“I can’t let anypony I’ve hurt with my life stay in here, Brim. If I need to trot in the shadow of those who might hurt me to help save them in the end...” Her voice was quiet, unusually emotional. “Coral Eve doesn’t deserve this, as much as anypony doesn’t, but to me even moreso. Some... *something* I did helped put her here, and I don’t know what, Brim. You understand redemption—”

“All I understand is that this will hurt somepony before the end. Barb doesn’t throw these things for pointless fun, he’s got a plan in mind. The moment I know what it is, regardless of where we are or what we’re doing, I’m going to drag you away from it. Map or not. Got it?”

Hesitantly, Glimmer nodded before turning to speak to no pony in particular.

“We’ll do it.”

A voice echoed from the shadows.

“Good.”

Whimpering, I just pulled myself back underneath the blanket to pray for our deliverance. I hoped the Goddesses would understand that I just had no choice. No choice at all.

Planning was awkward. We had been invited to sit among the Shades, where Barb had explained all. Brimstone had sat at the doorway, eyes fixed on anypony who so much as *looked* in our direction.

It quickly became clear that Barb was using this to help solidify his position as leader. Even I could see that if he didn’t permit some of these raiders their revenge upon the slavers

who had killed their comrades, his popularity would begin to fade. Some raiders lurked at the edges of their own shop cell, a large restaurant outlet stripped of most furniture, sharpening hunks of metal they had magically carved into knives. Others let their horns warm up, sparking and testing throwing pebbles. I saw a dozen hideous rituals of battle: self cutting, blood marking, head-butting, and even a quiet warchant in a foreign language I couldn't ever hope to understand.

My role was pivotal, the element that permitted them to not simply be locked in and left to calm down. I was to head out to 'visit Protégé,' but steal the key they would use to lock the cage door on the way out. Once it was done, I'd signal to Barb and his raiders who would... well, 'do their thing.' Often, I wondered why Barb couldn't use his freaky abilities to get that key. *Surely* he could lockpick or pickpocket the guard on his way out? I guessed that he had to be seen leading them. Either that or he was still taking an interest in 'developing' my abilities? I dreaded to think what he had in mind for me. I was too sick to resist anyway. Already, my fever was making my head pound. Either that or it was the stress. Likely both.

The moment we knew that the guards were distracted, the three of us would move on up into the management corridors, hiding in one room that Brimstone would get open under cover of the riot noise. From there, we'd wait until Protégé passed us, and then move on to the office. Hopefully, he wouldn't have locked it, or we'd have to risk Brimstone's method of entry again. Already, I felt oddly guilty stealing from Protégé. I owed him, yet in many ways given his role, I shouldn't. My thoughts on where he sat as ally or foe were still incredibly conflicted. He'd calm the riot and we'd... well, we'd try and slip back in or simply claim that we ran from it to stay safe. He'd believe me, right?

That was all. Get the map, get out, get planning.

And with all hope, we'd be one step closer to being away from confusing smart ponies, sadistic Masters, and frightening raiders.

Glimmerlight, Brimstone, and Caduceus waited amongst the shadows of the closest shop cell to the door. The other slaves, sensing a preparation of activity, had begun to slowly move to the back, not wanting to risk alerting the guards for fear of raider reprisal. I had seen Coral Eve on the balcony above, glancing down. Most slaves gave her a wide berth, seeming to look up in fear if her horn sparked. The faulty magic clearly caused her pain, but judging by their reactions, she must have been capable of some truly powerful magic on those who angered the bitter mare.

"She's always had problems with her horn since she has a disease as was a foal. Had to learn how to work as an earth pony for most of her life." Glimmerlight trotted up behind me, sitting and glancing upward at the pale blue unicorn. "But on the other end of the spectrum, there aren't many ponies who can match the raw power she can throw out, unrefined as it is."

Somehow, I could relate. I'd had to accept life as a ground pounder without the use of my wings, but the thoughts of what Coral could do if she unleashed that magic already made me shiver. I'd seen Littlepip demonstrate amazing precision *and* power in the Pit. Would Coral compare to that?

"I hope she'll forgive you." I wasn't sure why I said it, it's all I could think of. Seeing the

sad eyes Glimmerlight stared at her old friend with, I couldn't help but wish they would find a way to become friends again. Only recently had I realised how important that was.

"Me too, Murky. Me too. Maybe once we're out of here I'll... I'll find a way to understand what happened, what I did. You, uh, don't think less of me, do you?"

"No! I... I mean, it's sad, upsetting, but you've done too much for me to turn away."

Her hoof ruffled my mane, letting a smile creep onto her face. "Thanks, Murky. I guess I kinda need to know somepony's there for me too sometimes these days."

Her eyes twitched to the side, away from me to see Coral Eve leave the balcony. She had been staring down at us.

Yet behind us, Barb made his presence known.

"Right, filly."

My nerves shuddered even as I watched Coral trot back and away from the balcony.

"Time for you to go." He was behind us somewhere. I could hear Brimstone watching for him. "We're all waiting, don't mess this up or I won't give them a time limit next time."

I nodded, meekly, what else could I do? Glimmerlight gave me one more quick hug, Caduceus whispered a 'good luck' and Brimstone simply nodded. Pulling myself up, favouring my injured hoof, I trotted to the cage door.

"You wanting out, runt?" The guard behind it was one of The Master's lot. "Going to see the boss?"

"Y-yes. Just going to his o-office..."

"Fine, stand back."

It was almost routine now, I'd spent a lot of time going to his office lately. Stepping back, the cage door shook while the guard fought with the rusty key in his mouth. Creaking open, the large gateway swung upon its hinges into the plaza. Behind it lay the guardroom, filled with slavers resting, eating, or gambling. It must have been an old employee lounge for those on breaks from working the plaza, with a small canteen and numerous tables. Four doors led away from it, one to the main entrance, one to the management offices, and the others to goodness knew where in this sprawling complex. I hesitated, deliberately stalling in the gateway as though confused about something. The guard frowned, clipping me over the ear.

"What's the hold up, runt? Get moving!"

The stinging pain shot through me, giving me an excuse to stagger (Well, I didn't have to act too much, that *hurt!*) and fall into him. My hooves fumbled, feeling the key briefly till I could bite it and slip it into a front leg pocket in the tussle. With an offended snarl, the slaver smacked me across the head and lightly bucked me further into the guardroom. My forehead flared with pain, making my eyes water as the scar ached from the impact. The hot pain in my ribs from my illness wasn't helping either, to the point that I let out a horrible cough that echoed from the walls.

I had the key, that cough was the signal.

"Watch where you're stepping! Get out of—"

All hell broke loose.

His voice was cut short by a bloodthirsty roar from within the plaza. Every raider had joined the chorus, singing their lust for violence loud and clear. I knew I was 'on their side', but my blood still turned to ice under the horrible sound. They erupted from the shadows, charging the doorway. The lead raiders frothed, biting their own lips in sheer madness as they outstripped the others. They carried makeshift knives, club-like rocks in magic fields or

simply gnashed teeth.

The guard swore colourfully, rushing forward to pull the door closed. The hinges squealed and the metal clanged loudly as it slammed shut. He began fumbling for the key, searching all over himself to get it, but it was too late.

The tidal wave of raiders collided with the doorway. It fired backward, knocking the guard flat to be trampled over by the rioting ponies. I didn't even hear him scream as I dove aside into the corner to avoid them myself! Guards were perking up, grabbing weapons and calling for aid. Panic spread, leading many to freeze under the savage charge or fumble with the safeties of their weapons.

"Don't let them take the guardroom! Open fire! Fire you bastards, FIRE!"

Finally, shotguns roared, taking the front row of raiders clean off their hooves while two slavers upturned a table and began throwing pistol fire from behind it. Several other raiders pushing through the doorway were twisted around by the heavy shots, collapsing over the corpses of their allies to fall on the concrete. One was killed by his own side when I saw a sharp hoof stomp snap his head. But the raiders had the momentum, charging like ponies possessed into gunfire that would have stayed any other group. The first slaver was leapt on, taking the head off a mare with his rifle even as two others fell upon him. Knives flashed, ponies screamed, blood spilled.

"Get 'em alive! Grab them! Get their guns!"

"Been waiting months for this!"

Cowering in the corner, I could only stick to the shadows and fight the guilt. I'd had a hand in this, been a cause for the bloodshed that was now being unleashed. I owed slavers nothing, I doubted I'd particularly mourn them, but still, I could not help but feel a little wrong about this.

Any conflicting feelings were thrown aside as two rounds whipped into the wall above my head, a slaver was targeting me! Why!? He got little extra chance, a shadow detaching itself from the wall fell upon him, tearing the machine gun away and snapping his neck like a twig. Barb grinned, melting back into the shadows. He was mad. Utterly mad.

The raider rush had been aided by his intervention, however. Even as the pony assaulting me had been put down, I saw Barb launch himself among the rest. Distracted, dying to his flickering blades and desperately trying to find the real one as he shifted and created illusions of himself with magic, the slavers could not stop the second wave of raiders as they piled through. Overrun, I saw the slaver guards being knocked out or dragged screaming back into the plaza. Other raiders grabbed their weapons, opening fire down any corridor that offered resistance or became a route of guard reinforcements.

With the second wave ran Brimstone, hurling raiders aside as much as any slaver to clear a path for Glimmerlight and Caduceus. Only now did I leave my hiding spot to dash up to them, my heart was pumping as gunfire and warcries echoed around in the guardroom. I had to dive to the side and dodge around the raiders who ran rampant in all directions. The guardroom was still a centre of violence, but the raiders had taken it. Brimstone grabbed me in his teeth, hurling me onto his back. Barging through a group of three raiders, knocking them into various tables, he set a running pace for the closest doorway that led to Protégé's office. Soon, we had left the bloodbath behind us, replacing it with nothing but howls and shouts that reverberated down corridors and haunted the atmosphere of the Mall. Barb's lot were savage beyond compare. I had only seen them amidst a proper battle with Rangers and griffons, but here, in this cramped environment, they ruled supreme.

Having been dropped from Brimstone's back, I led the way as much by habit of knowing the directions to Protégé's office better. We crossed junctions and galloped upstairs, hearing the commotion picking up all across the Mall. Eventually, we came to the a large room of desks and filing cabinets. Not far now.

Without warning, my ears perked up before I could even acknowledge the sound.

"Slavers!"

They charged into the room from the opposite end, missing us only by my audio warning that led us all to duck into cover, Brimstone was back out the door, keeping his sheer size away from sight. There were a good half dozen of them, heavily armed and moving cautiously.

"Everypony spread out, look for *any* slaves that got free! Shoot on sight!"

Squeaking in fear, I looked from side to side, there were a few other doors we could use to make it there, but while I might have been able to sneak my way up, four ponies (including Brimstone) would never manage it.

Caduceus glanced up at them, then back at Glimmer and I. The nurse took a few breaths, clearly gauging the distance in his mind.

"Can you two find a way to get there yourselves?" He whispered at what felt deafening to me, of course. He didn't know my hearing. Glimmerlight thought for a second, before nodding.

"Be careful, Caddy."

The nurse breathed out, gathering his energy, but grinned at the sudden nickname.

"Mom always did say I'd do something stupid for a mare someday."

He launched himself up and away toward the next door, attracting their attention immediately, casting us a quick glance telling us to *get moving*.

"STOP THERE!"

A shot flew past him before Caduceus galloped through a doorway. Glimmerlight turned back to Brimstone.

"Go with him, keep him safe!"

"No, you are—"

"Not the time, Brim! You can't sneak like Murky and I can, go help Caduceus! He matters to *me*, alright?"

Snarling, but obeying, the huge raider nodded and stormed off, bucking a chair so hard at the slavers I saw it knock one off his hooves to almost do a backflip before landing on his head. The warlord disappeared through the door, bellowing for Caduceus to keep up or get strung up. Glimmerlight and I hunkered down, letting the slavers rush past our hiding place beneath the desks before glancing to one another. I was breathing hard, scared and out of my depth. The Mall felt much more dangerous now, filled with trigger happy slavers and bloodlusting raiders that could come from any one of it's maze-like corridors. I hadn't realised how oddly safe I'd felt there compared to the outdoor areas.

"You and me, Murky, classic duo, eh?"

How could she grin at a time like this!?

"Yeah..."

"Come on, lets get this over with."

We took our time, sneaking around to the far door that I knew led to Protégé's office. The stairs behind it took us up the final level into the management areas of the Mall. The moment we arrived, I could hear shouting, demands, orders and the clatter of hooves and

talons. Protégé's fluid and commanding tone was unmistakable amongst it. Glancing around, I spotted a cleaning cupboard, which Glimmerlight and I hurried into. Leaving the door just ajar as it had been before, I saw my master charging down the corridor, pursued by Ragini and at least five bodyguard ponies. Oddly, Mosin was with them as well.

"How the hell did this happen? The doorway can close over before anypony gets close!"

"I don't know, sir! No pony in the guardroom is around, they've taken it!"

Protégé shook his head.

"Well don't wonder for now, just get every guard on duty to cover the corridors and *contain* this riot, then we'll see what to do once we've killed their momentum. Get somepony over to Stern to request griffons if things go south, but get it sorted *before* they arrive! I don't want a griffon raid killing all the slaves who aren't rioting! Mosin, make sure your armoury is secure, if they get there we're done for! Move it!"

Protégé was direct and confident, even if his voice had betrayed a slight lack of calm. This was his pet project, an attempt to give slaves a chance under Red Eye's missions. I could only imagine how it felt to see it in jeopardy again so soon after the Stable. We waited till they had passed, before Glimmerlight poked her head out.

"It's clear."

Following her now, we crept into the corridor once again. He had sure seemed in a rush. I hoped that included the potentially unlocked door.

Unfortunately, over the clatter of their procession, even I didn't hear the two slavers that came up the corridor behind and spotted us trotting about.

"STOP, SLAVES!"

"Run, Murky!" Glimmerlight took off, half pulling me as I fought with my instincts to obey the harsh command and root to the spot. Half dragged and eventually properly galloping, we tore off. The two mares behind us shouted, drew guns and gave chase. Turning a corner to avoid the incoming fire we knew was about to start, I quickly realised our mistake. We couldn't run... not in our condition. Glimmerlight was limping, but I was effectively hobbling still after my beating earlier, moving at little more than a canter. I could see Protégé's office up ahead. We needed to distract them! But I couldn't find the information without Glimmer, so she couldn't draw them away and I couldn't outrun them like Caduceus or Brimstone could.

There were a few doors before the one into Protégé's office. We couldn't simply hide, they'd search! The only other route was downstairs, right back into the maelstrom that was erupting below us.

Wait.

I hopped up, bucking the door to the stairway as hard as I could, before directing Glimmer and myself to hide in one of the old office rooms. The stairway door I had kicked swung wide open, banging against the wall and swinging on loose hinges just as the slavers came around the corner.

"There! See the door? They went downstairs!"

"I see it!"

Hoofing it past our hiding spot, I heard them speed off down the stairwell before I finally started breathing again. Glimmer's hoof stroked my back.

"Quick thinking, Murky. All I had idea wise was to confuse them with interpretive dance, but I wasn't sure if you knew how to foxtrot."

Indeed, I had no idea how foxes even trotted, I'd never *seen* one. For now though, I just

rolled my head and peered back outside. The corridor was empty now, Protégé's door sitting slight ajar, yes!

Without waiting, I cantered out, half tripping in my rush over my injured hoof. Staggering, I felt Glimmerlight help me up and push me onwards, we had to get in and out quickly! His office was as messy as ever, a minefield of books. I didn't worry about avoiding them, he'd *know* if we took anything, so we had to mess this place up, make it look like some mad raiders tore through it!

The thought made me a little guilty. Destroying Protégé's room.

"Plush living for those with the power, eh, Murky? Fancy seat and a terminal with picture capability? Not often you find these ones." Glimmerlight trotted around the huge desk, marvelling at the cushy chair and various parts of pre-war furniture while casually knocking over a couple benches and a small table with a pile of old picture books. Sitting in his chair, she lounged back and glanced at his terminal.

"You take a look around for any brochures of city maps or something, they might have the metro layout on them. Don't worry about being messy, the madder the better to cover our tracks. Now, wonder if there's anything worthwhile on this machine, maybe the patrol schedules outside the Wall and anypony we should know not to trust. Hey, you think he has any good porn on this thing?"

My jaw *dropped*, just staring at her for a moment while I worked on clearing digging through a drawer of papers. Glimmer hadn't even looked up, other than a small glance, focused on the task. Did she just keep herself calm under pressure by doing this? How could she—

"Aww, you're blushing! What, it could be more 'reference material' like those hot magazines you brought back."

I felt my entire face burn red. She'd found them? Oh dear. Pulling

"I... uh, j-just for... pegasus anatomy."

"Certainly your kind of anatomy, Murky." She just winked, not having once ceased work on the terminal while I tried to avoid the temptation to simply go and find a raider to end my embarrassment.

She was tapping away madly with both magic and hooves, far faster than any pony I'd ever seen, biting her lip in concentration. She briefly muttered while working. "Besides, one of those poses you drew certainly helped get Caduceus to pay attention."

Oh come on! Have mercy! I hid my face under my hooves.

"You really are too easy to make blush. Anyway,"

Nodding, feeling myself sweating with the mixture of fear and sheer embarrassment, I moved across and started tearing open a filing cabinet instead, letting the drawers just fall to the floor where I could scavenge through them. I didn't know the words of the maps, but I could look for anything like a map and check it with Glimmerlight should I need to. Pictures of the FunFarm, skyport, and Mall were strewn on various old pieces of faded cardboard, all too specific...

"Got it! Haha! Password, 'Unity', of course! You really are too easy, Protégé. Now let's take a look." She pumped a hoof in celebration, before diving back in. "Find anything?"

"Just tourist leaflets..." I muttered quietly, pulling myself up and near enough lifting my rear hooves off the ground to pull myself in to look at the higher drawers. "I think... I think maybe in—"

The entire filing cabinet fell. Squealing in shock, I rolled away before it crushed me.

Papers flew out of it, exploding into the air and dropping all over and around me. My head was buried beneath a small pile in itself, that fell off my head when I stood up and shook my head. Oh, Protégé wasn't going to like this.

Nerves were beginning to make me shake. I could hear hooves stamping all around the Mall, gunshots were still roaring down below alongside rolling battles that seemed to change location. Protégé's guards clearly were struggling to contain the raiders.

Just keep pushing, Murky. It's gotten you this far. Upping to my hooves, I began pulling scrapbook after tome off the shelves, casting a quick look before letting them fall below me.

"Right! I think I've gotten into the admin files, geez, this is as disorganised as his office. The patrol schedule seems to update every month so I'll download this one to your PipBuck and hope we get to use it before they change the schedule again. Now what's this."

Pawing through an old scrapbook containing tickets and vouchers from Old Equestria, I looked up.

"I've found his journal."

My mouth seemed to wordlessly move. What *could* I say? Protégé's journal, who knew what thoughts were in there? Glimmer tapped the keys, scrolling through it.

"The most recent one. Titled 'Journal entry of the fifth year of my service, day seventy.'"

Glimmer looked up at the door, clearly debating the time we had, before reading aloud very quickly.

"Today marked another success on the road to the restoration of Fillydelphia. We located and searched another of the vaunted Stables. However it is my abject displeasure to say that we lost far too many ponies in the process. Yes, Master Red Eye's plans are coming to fruition, I understand the need for this hard sacrifice. I only wish I could make it an easier process for those involved. To this end, I continue to petition for a reward scheme to be initiated for the workers that prove themselves, and a transfer of budget to accomodation."

It was everything he had told me before, but this was not from his mouth, this was his personal records. It meant he likely was telling the truth! He really did care.

Glimmerlight continued.

"With regards to Murk, however, Master Red Eye permitted me to retain him within the Mall, and he was supportive of my wishes to aid him. His will is that I need only keep him alive, should his own grand intentions of Unity not provide the pegasus he wishes. Personally, I hope this does not come to pass. I see too much of myself in him, and would rather him here. At the very least, he is willing to give up his time to come and talk. I feel indentured, as though it is right to help him. Show him that he doesn't have to do this task alone for these coming years."

Glimmer read it in a slightly monotone voice, concentrating on it herself. She glanced up at me sitting nearby, as though she was my master. Her mouth opened and shut as a gunshot roared from a heavy calibre weapon below us, before finally gathering her words again.

"A plan involving pegasi for Unity? What the hell is this? At least Protégé seems to want to protect you. He really seems to like you, Murky. You're a wonderful little buck, but I can't say I can understand what caused it from a slave master."

Why indeed. Protégé always seemed to just 'get' me, to know what I needed to hear or how to influence me into doing things. Why? Why all the attention? Did he just feel sorry for me?

"Maybe he's got a crush on you?"

The paper I'd picked up in my mouth to investigate sprayed from my mouth in sheer shock. I turned my head toward her, simply agape at the suggestion, but she was already scanning more text on the screen.

"C'mon, gotta be something useful about Red Eye's ops on this. By the way, I was hoping I'd get another blush from you, find out for sure if you're just being shy and hiding in the barn or not."

Rolling my eyes, I leaned up, trying to pull at then next drawer. Shouts echoed down the hall again, and I heard a door slam on this level. I never understood how she could banter and work at the same time.

I glanced away from her, quickly trotting to work on the next set of drawers and concentrating on the work. I heard her giggle and go back to her work on the terminal, looking for anything of use, lifting my PipBuck from my saddlebag with her magic to load the schedule onto.

Protégé had plans for me that weren't for Red Eye? He had said by his side before, did he want a personal slave or something that wouldn't cause problems? Pulling the full drawer out and shifting papers aside, I finally spotted a small group of booklets bearing images of an underground train system. Aha! This would distract her from her crazy theories about me.

I trotted up, pushing them up beside her, where she merely grinned and nodded.

"This is it! Inner and outer circle sub-station maps! Now, I've been trying to get the underground plans here that we can overlay on the official map. That'll let us see where the tunnels are."

"H-how long? We kinda need to go soon. I don't like stealing from Protégé."

"We're only borrowing. You can bring them back or something, but *these* I am stealing back."

She nodded at the three orbs sitting on their holder. Protégé still had the spell orbs resting on his desk from where they had been recovered on Glimmer's retrieval. My friend shoved them in her own robe pockets before glancing back at the terminal

"Here's an odd entry. He's talking about the time he first met you."

"What?"

"Seriously, lemme go from the start of this one."

She tapped back to the beginning.

"I had that same dream last night, that of Equestria. Of green fields and friendly ponies who share fun and peace. Yet every day I must wake to the horrors that my generation must inflict to bring it about. I question, I worry, but Master Red Eye calms me, assuring me and helping me see the good. Every day, past the guilt and pain of directing these missions I see something wholesome emerge, like when I hear the children at the hotel laugh and play. We can do it. We must, I *will* see Equestria for real. See the sun and the sky with my own eyes."

This was his dreams and wishes, all laid bare. Somehow, I began to see him more as a pony, less of a simple figure of authority.

"GO GO!"

We dived behind the desk as the voice bellowed down the hallway.

"They've broken in! Get them!"

Glimmerlight exchanged a worried glance with me, quickly clutching a heavy book to propel with her telekinesis.

"What!? How did they get by the barrier? We trained for that!"

"That lot are fucking intense!" The first voice barked back. "Every time we hold them off they just sneak around and ambush us! Now get moving or they'll outflank the main armoury!"

"Oh fuck, they got Hollowpoint didn't they? Please tell me they didn't get him!"

"I don't know! Just move! GO! They're behind us!"

Gunfire thudded into the door, splintering the oak and sending books through the thin wall flying across the room. We crouched to the floor, hearing them panic and run. One yelp of pain and a soft thump was all it took to signal that one pony had been struck and collapsed outside the door. I could hear that much. The running gunfight spread down the hallway before fading away. Somepony was *really* determined to get them to ignore the office, or they just didn't know. I doubted raiders were brought here much.

We finally breathed out as they passed, but it didn't speak well for the ongoing riot outside. Glimmerlight and I exchanged glances, before she took a breath, looked up and began to continue the diary entry.

"Right. We finish this entry on you, and then go, I'm as curious about this pony as you are now, Murky. Where was I?"

She coughed into her hoof, before continuing, this was wasting time, we were risking being discovered, but this had hooked my interests now. I could perhaps answer some of that confusion I had. While hiding behind the desk, I got a look at his side of things. I saw half finished food that I quickly shared with Glimmer. But behind that plate, on a small board propped on the light, I saw something else.

A photo from Equestria of the past was half hidden behind a fallen book. I saw grass, and a tree, a tree with a window? The desk was too thick for me to reach over and move it without being on the chair. But it was placed in such a way as though he looked at it a lot.

Glimmer finally found her place, and read.

"This pegasus, he attempted an escape last night, trying to run at the wall. An impossible task in his condition, but that is what stands out to me. As such, it has put a large drain on my resources to have been able to claim him, post-escape attempt. This poor pegasus has cost me dear. More than I could have perhaps afforded in these trying times of inner conflict, but the others are sure to notice the opportunity to gain such a prize themselves. One of the few remaining pegasi."

If Grindstone or Shackles had gotten me... oh Celestia save me.

"I had to pull a great many strings and even call in a few back door favours. If word of this ever got out it would be very troublesome, but I cannot permit him to be taken and killed. I simply can't. If Grindstone were to get a hold of him, I could not forgive myself. He has already placed a rather large bid to swing the odds for reclamation in his favour, to attain a pegasus. That cannot happen, it would be a crime against Master Red Eye's ideals if I were to turn my back on his plight. I am the student of his ideology, it is my duty to Equestria that I might save at least one pony, even if it is to cast him into two years of the hell I know all too well. He thought to escape. He can do it, I know he can. No matter the cost, I need to bring him to the Mall."

We sat in silence for a few seconds as Glimmerlight read through the list that came after. Weapons, chems, straight up caps in huge amounts, and even some high end pre-war technologies. All of it he had expended as trade to get ponies to look the other way and avoid me an execution.

He had given up so much for me before I'd even known his name.

"Woah..." Glimmerlight breathed the words lightly, "that's, uh, pretty intense stuff. He really believes he's doing well for everypony. But if he cares so much, why turn you away on the rooftops? Why shoot you down?"

"He said he couldn't. That he couldn't permit me to break Red Eye's rules."

Glimmerlight simply sat and stared at me, then the computer, before sighing.

"The answers are probably here, but we just don't have the time, we've got what we came for and none of this will matter once we're gone. He's a kind pony in a bad place, twisted as he is to believe Red Eye, but we don't owe him. We'll make our own way in life. So, ready to head out, Murky?"

I didn't reply, instead I was simply wondering about him. That eyepiece glowed in my mind; the student of Red Eye himself, his protégé who bore all the authority and willpower to dominate the wastes. But take it away and I couldn't help but just see a lonely pony searching for those he felt would wish to understand him in return.

She glanced at me, before letting that grin fade and patting my shoulder.

"Hey, Equestria to Murky, we gotta go! I know it's all confusing for you about him, but we'll keep you safe, alright? I doubt he wants to harm you, he's always done well by ponies even before you came along. Don't worry about any plans, we'll be gone long before they occur, okay?"

"Okay..."

How could she be so supportive and calm, so jokey and carefree even amidst the chaos? And now even after her flaws had been laid bare by Coral? Could she have used her memory orb since? I couldn't tell anymore. I simply wished I could be as decisive. But then, she'd had a life of free will to choose and think. I was left with but a week or so to learn to think for myself.

"Come on, Murky. Let's stop minds wandering and just head on." She wandered toward the door, checking out carefully as we heard the sounds of ponies down the corridor, but they were moving away.

Unfortunately, they were also in the direction we needed to go, so instead we trotted alongside the windowed corridor in the opposite direction. We needed another route back, but with so much stuff happening all over the Mall, how could we know the right direction?

The corridors were not empty, we hid, dove into rooms and ducked as rounds were fired off both above and below our level. The Shades had lived up to their name!

We passed an observation station containing two raiders wrestling with a single stallion. Sacred Celestia! The riot had spread up here! Growls and grunts of pain and exertion sounded from the room when we passed, as gunfire on *this level* sounded out behind us. What was Barb doing? He said it was only to get a few of them! I hadn't even thought of what he intended to do with the consequences. It was likely he didn't care so long as he had somepony to take the fall.

I shrieked as a thick glass window looking inwards to the building pinged from bullets attempting to fire at us. It stared down into the plaza from an odd angle. The shots had been strays, fired by raiders and slavers fighting in wickedly brutal close quarters atop the balcony above the cage door. Stopping only briefly, we glanced in to see a few slaves running about on the plaza floor, some helping others or hiding away. They must have been terrified to have been stuck within all this...

Never again. I would never work with raiders again, it was too horrible and guilt filled...

The corridor led to a larger room with multiple steel doors taller than three ponies and

often double sided. Already we could hear significant sounds of conflict behind us, prompting the escape to simply find someplace to hide and let it quieten down. Protégé would understand.

“Storage, this place should be—”

Very quickly, two familiar voices shouted down an adjoining corridor.

“Keep up!”

“I’m trying!”

Both of us twisted as we heard the sound of our friends. Storming out of another doorway into the storage area, Brimstone Blitz hammered his way in, closely followed by Caduceus. The latter looked absolutely exhausted. Seeing us, Brimstone rounded off, nodding a greeting. His hooves were smeared in blood.

“Did you get what we need?”

Glimmerlight tapped her saddlebag and motioned toward my own bag containing the PipBuck.

“Yeah! All there, patrols as well, if we take less than a month it’ll be all we need!”

Caduceus leaned against the wall, breathing hard.

“Sounds... good... phew, less running though? Geez...”

Glimmerlight grinned at him, before turning back to the steel doors.

“There’ll be a lot of running to do before the end, no doubt. But we need to survive this first! Damn it, Barb’s taking this a few steps too far, isn’t he? The entire place is in chaos! We’ll hide in here, it’s the storage area, right? Well, might as well use the opportunity! We can take stuff from storage and sneak it back in through the madness! I don’t think I wanna go through that yet anyway...”

Brimstone nodded, but grumbled as he cast his eyes back to the corridors we could hear screaming from down. Somepony was wailing in pain. Crying for their mother.

Oh, sweet Luna.

“I did tell you.” Brimstone didn’t sound like he was talking down. He was just stating a fact. “Still, he’d have tried this on his own somehow even without you. I’d be surprised if it weren’t the things I taught him. We’re not going near it, we’re no doubt acceptable targets now. The main store room is in here. I’ve worked it a few times, get what you need and let’s go to ground inside it before anypony comes back here. No arguments, we’re heading to the old offices to lurk in rather than here, they *will* come here soon.”

He gruffly stomped over to the largest of the entrances and shoved open the heavy double door. He had to lift himself up for the leverage and strained against the heavy doors. Grinding on the floor with an intensely deafening sound, they finally slid open enough to see beyond.

Behind it lay much more than I had ever thought could be inside this building! A colossal room, piled high with boxes, moveable cages and thick pillars that stretched out and out. It must have been at least the size of the plaza, length and width ways anyway. Made with heavy bricks and a stone floor, it was clearly not meant for much but simple storage, but amidst the old crates lay piles and bags of newer wasteland items that had been dumped here. To one side lay an office, presumably to act as a kind of quartermaster in the old days. Which, judging by the items strewn around, still had the same purpose. It had a large cage built around the walls to keep it safer, although the door was open anyway. Possibly the lock was even broken from the way it simply hung there. But I could see masses of huge lockboxes inside it. A safe room for the slavers’ personal effects? Nopony was present to ask.

"Now this is what I'm talkin' about! Think we might get weapons in here?"

Brimstone wandered in after us, flanked by Caduceus. The big raider regarded the area.

"Perhaps. Sometimes they throw items in here Mosin doesn't want by his 'standards.' But this is lucky. I've brought crates in here for them before. Follow me, I know the way to some better stuff."

As a full group, we galloped on into the massive stock room. We passed pillars piled high with shelves, bins filled with thousands of plastic straps, and large cardboard cut-out advertisements. Rotten food leaked from the occasional crate while the random piles of possessions taken from slaves were haphazardly piled. I could still hear the battle going on below, an odd sense of separation coming over me as I realised how little we'd been involved in it. Who was winning? Who had died?

I caught myself hoping that Protégé was alright.

It took us a good five minutes of wandering in the wide room to find the boxes Brimstone seemed most interested in. He dragged one off before nodding.

"Right, here we are, get digging while I get these open."

Brimstone began searching in a very specific pile, while we spread out. Five minutes of hectic scavenging passed, punctuated only as we heard further passings of ponies outside that whooped or cried out orders. No, this was no battle, it was just illogical madness and violence with neither side willing to back down and say 'that's it! Enough!'

I found plenty of cloth and fabric in black bags, likely stripped from slaves as they were brought in. Stuffing what I could into my saddlebag, I took heart in the thought of what I could do with it all. I could sew up wasteland clothes for everypony! Glimmerlight sorted out containers and canteens from a chest full of them while I saw Caduceus rather unwillingly picking his way through the dismal contents of somepony's bloodied saddlebag.

Tossing everything we found into the middle of the floor, we soon had a pile of random bits and bobs. I found some new red thread which went into my fleece pockets. Digging a little further netted me a lantern and some bandages. Behind me, the pile was growing larger as clothing, tools and even a couple old watches were tossed on it. No doubt Glimmer wanted to repair them. Brimstone was still ripping open boxes with increasing fervour whilst Caduceus was being a little *too* picky... that'd be a Tenpony born pony for you...

"Oooh! Now this I could get on board with."

It was Glimmerlight. Caduceus and I both looked up to find her look up from the clothing racks, pull something onto her two front hooves, and strut nearby to us wearing striped pink and light blue socks. Leaning over to us, she batted her eyelashes and wiggled a little, posing over a box with her torso bent inwards.

"What'ya think, boys?"

Caduceus blushed fiercely, eyes going wide at the alluring pose. I saw him shift a little uncomfortably, mouth trembling a bit. His eyes were flickering back and forth across her. Somehow the clothing seemed to *emphasise* the rest of her.

"Wow... um... uh..."

"I... I..."

My own stammering had joined him. I wasn't attracted to Glimmerlight, due to the age over me and seeing her more like a sister, but I couldn't deny that, well...

I *really* wanted her to draw that pose.

Spotting Caduceus' blushing, she only grinned madly and blew a kiss at him, before hopping off the box and wandering past him back to the pile.

"If you kids are *done*, you can either screw on the floor and get it over with, or get back to working before some fucking raider turns up!"

Brimstone was terse, reprimanding us harshly with a ferocious glance up from his own work. Caduceus sobered up, shaking his head and diving back into the piles of old bags. Glimmerlight just huffed and blew her straggled mane from her face. Even with all the dirt and grime that matted her, she could still somehow look as good as she did through those eyes alone...

"Fine, fine, *granddad*, but I think we've got about as much as we can carry, no real weapons—"

The weapons crashed onto the floor. Brimstone had dragged them clear at last. A set of brass hooves, sharpened on the edges and almost six inches thick off the ground. They weighed enough that I saw them chip the floor. One of them was wrapped in chain, holding a wicked hook. A shoulder brace with serrated edges clattered down, whilst a mouth knife with two blades on either side thumped and span to a halt.

They were bloodstained so deeply I almost mistook them as simply red coloured.

Caduceus looked at them intently, almost in horror.

"These are sick. Just brutal, they are—"

"Mine." Brimstone spoke softly, glancing at them. "Not the type of thing Mosin takes. Nor this."

Reaching in, a colossal suit of leather and metal armour was drawn out. Asymmetrical, patched and bulletholed, it looked heavy, and unmistakably adorned in the same marks that Brimstone wore upon his coat. The shapes were painted across the dull metal in red. I dreaded to think how.

"Woah." Glimmerlight struggled, failing entirely to lift one of the brass hooves in her magic. "Weighty kit."

"Decades of slaughter were all this suit of equipment permitted, Glim. All spearheaded by one symbol."

His hooves reached into the crate, slowly drawing out one more item. I trotted around for a better look, before whimpering in fear.

A dragonhead looked back at me, crafted of scrap brass and iron into a fearsome mix of mask and helmet. Horns were welded upon its brow from some great wasteland creature, while chainmail fell across the back of the skull plate like a crest to lie across the back. It looked mean, lethal, and filled with the promise of one thing.

Carnage.

"It's designed after the great dragon Brimstone. It terrorised Hoofington during the war, and brought the name into infamy. I brought it back to haunt ponies once again through my actions. To spread the word... 'Brimstone terrorises the lands once again.' Oh it worked. It worked well, makes you wonder if the name will ever mean anything else..."

Brimstone Blitz, sat holding the helmet, staring into its eyes like it were an old enemy; a long defeated foe. His own brow narrowed, nearly scowling at it like some savage intimidation contest. The dragonhead merely glowered back through that metallic visage. Eventually he spoke again, not taking his eyes away from it.

"Take the stuff to the front and check the lockboxes. I'll join you in a minute."

"O-okay." I backed away from the colossal pony, only noticing after a second I was trying to remain stealthy through sheer force of habit when scared. But it was Brimstone. Why was I scared?

It had almost become a joke. 'It's Brim.' Very quickly I began to remember *why* I should be scared of this pony.

The other three of us lifted what we could (or rather, they lifted most of it and I dragged a bag along the floor with my teeth), leaving him to his thoughts. Glimmerlight had lain a hoof on his shoulder and patted it gently before moving. He hadn't reacted. The five minute walk back to the entrance was quiet, oddly quiet even, like the battle had ended around here. Far away I could hear the occasional pot shots. Had the riot been contained?

"Is... can we trust him?" Caduceus rounded on Glimmerlight, speaking quietly. She only nodded grimly.

"He's saved me and Murky more times than I can count. He's trying, Caddy, he's trying. But it's not easy giving up something that controlled your thoughts and directions for an entire lifespan."

Yeah, it really wasn't.

"I dunno, Glimmer. I know of the things he did. One of the students under Helpinghoof before me went out to help Ponyville. I can trust you if you say so, but I don't think I'll ever feel right around that stallion."

"That's alright, hun. Truth be told I think something'd be wrong if you did. Once we get out of here, I'll try and convince him not to come back. A new life, to create somewhere, that'd be better for him than any penance in here to redeem himself. Now, let's just get into this office and get what we need. I don't like how quiet it's gotten."

It was a locker room, filled with various lockboxes bearing written words with green paint. Many of the larger lockers at the back were controlled by terminals resting beside them, or at least, I assumed that was what they were for. I trotted in between the two larger ponies either side of me, feeling distinctly out of place in all this. I could help, but as usual, I just felt more like a tag-along than an actual 'very important pony' to all this.

"Huh, now *this* is interesting." Glimmerlight wandered further in, staring at the lock boxes. "Turnlock, Baton Mane. These are the names of slavers, it must be a saferoom for their belongings."

There were dozens of them, all secured with padlocks. Testing them with a hoof I found them strong and well made, likely new from Fillydelphia's industry. Well, we couldn't get into them, but the terminals for the higher ranks, perhaps? Glimmerlight certainly seemed to think so, for she was perusing along them.

"Silent Cord, Ragini, all the more important ponies and slavers in here, oh—"

She stopped, staring at one in particular, rusted and dented, it seemed stronger than any.

"Shackles."

I stepped back, whimpering. No, we shouldn't be here, why was she looking at it like that? No good could come of this. He'd know. He'd know somehow. I was the thief and I didn't like this.

"Glimmer, I don't think we should—"

"No, we need what we can get and that bastard deserves it to have something stolen, he'll think it's any of the raiders or something. Let's take a look."

"Yeah," agreed Caduceus, "strip it out. I've dealt with too many of his 'victims' to care about any rights he once possessed."

Her magic grabbed the terminal, lowering the keyboard to begin work upon it. Chewing her lip, she focused all her attention upon the terminal while I lay against another lockbox watching my friend work. Password after password, try after try. It beeped and blooped as

she came closer or failed. I could hear some ponies begin to run by outside, calling out for their friends beside the shouts of somepony determined to get everypony out of hiding and on the hunt for 'rogue slaves'. Raiders were loose in the building freely? We couldn't stay too long.

"Long damn password, come on."

Caduceus began using the sink to clean some of the bandages he'd found, apparently favouring a little irradiation over infected dirt. I rooted around in the other lockers, opening any loose cupboards to find little but some floor cleaner and buckets. Maybe I could make a helmet.

"Aha! Getting there! Three words... three words..."

Her voice died away, glancing across at me before narrowing her eyes at me when I turned, wearing a bucket on my head. Blinking, I just looked back at her and tried to smile.

"Um... to stay safe?" I tried grinning wider. I saw Caduceus slap a hoof to his face, his blonde mane flopping over it.

Glimmerlight just laughed, shaking her head.

"Sorry, Murky, I doubt that's going to work."

Aww. But the handle even fitted under my chin.

She paused, staring at me for a few seconds, before returning to typing with a suddenly sullen face. Why the emotion change? Slipping the bucket from my head (it smelled anyway...), I trotted closer.

"Glimmer?"

The put three words in, and the terminal beeped with approval.

"Got it..." She muttered, sighing.

"What was the password? Three words, right?"

I pressed closer, as though I could actually read it, she began flicking through screens quickly, almost robotically.

"You... you don't wanna know. Let's just get this open."

With a hiss the door slid open on the thick locker, Glimmerlight stepping back and suddenly giving me a tight hug. What was that for? I knew I was still a little upset or maybe she still needed comforting over Coral beyond the bluster and humour but why that change?

Inside, there was a good few items of his possession. Multiple healing potions immediately caught my eye sitting beside a thick folder. There were spare clothes and numerous sizes of shackles at the bottom and a couple of apple shaped grenades. Glimmer's magic drew the healing potions from the locker, immediately pushing them to me.

"Drink, come on, you need them. He's hurt you enough, let's steal some life back."

I couldn't touch them. They were *his*.

"Murky, come on! Rebel a little!"

My hoof reached out, before hesitating and stuttering on the spot before flying back.

"I'm sorry. I just..."

Taking a deep breath, I finally took them. I downed one potion, then the other, offering the remaining half to Glimmerlight. She needed some too after all. A tingling surged through my body, tightening the loose wounds and clearing my skull of a headache I'd forgotten I had. Breathing out slowly, tasting the odd berry flavour of the healing potions, I felt the pain gradually fade from my body. Oh that felt good.

My shoulder, my chest, they felt more *whole*. Finally a full and proper healing potion to

bring me back a bit. My right hoof even dulled from pain a little, even if I knew it wouldn't particularly heal. That needed time and more attention from Caduceus. He was checking me over, nodding with approval as he sensed most of my wounds beginning to soften or fade.

Chugging her own one quickly, (Did she drink alcohol like that? It would explain a lot.) Glimmerlight glanced into his locker again, floating out the grenades to me.

"Throw them in your saddlebag, you never know, might give you something to placate Barb. I'm gonna take a look at this."

The folder floated up to her face, opening the musty pages as she began reading through. Stuffing the explosives into my bag, I twitched my ears, hearing another group rush by the doorway. We really needed to get in and get it dealt with now before it calmed down.

But Glimmerlight's face had gone pale.

"It's a list, all ponies he's had and the way they died in Fillydelphia. He *records* this shit... sick *bastard!* Lead Head... death from exhaustion. Fluffymane... whipped until she bled out. Jelly Bean... left in stocks for trying to escape."

Caduceus swore, the first time I had ever heard the healer earth pony do so with such crude conviction, his normally gentlecolt tone of Tenpony was so prevailing. I could agree, though. This was wrong.

"There's *so many*. He's been doing this for years, just taking ponies and breaking them, destroying them until there's nothing left or they snap. He doesn't *care* about what they do! Wait..."

She flipped a few more pages, I began to see one column of the tables cease to be filled in.

"The ones still liste. Clockwork... Heather Hay..."

She paused.

"...Sunny Days."

I felt my bottom lip tremble. Please be okay till...till we could, I don't know.

"Hey, Murky? You alright, buddy?" Caduceus held me still with a hoof, noticing that my hooves had been quaking at the knees. That could be me sometime. Oh so easily me. Just another name, another *number* on a list.

Glimmerlight continued flicking through, her face twisted in disgust. Eventually, snapping it shut, her magic hurled it roughly back into the locker and slammed the entire thing shut again.

"*Bastard.* Just wants control, ownership, like it's his only fucking purpose. I'll bet he only gets kept around because he can keep the raiders in line."

Or work with them. It still confused me why Barb was doing this and threatening his position with The Master. Oh well, his mistake. Let The Master take him.

Caduceus prodded Glimmerlight with a hoof, inclining his head toward the door. "Come on, let's just get all this stuff out and into one of the less obvious doorways in the corridors."

I trotted out with him, Glimmerlight pausing only to buck The Master's locker harshly; breaking the lock and jamming it shut. It wasn't often I had seen her angry, but the thought of so many ponies not living the free will she loved so much...

We spoke little, gathering the biggest bags and stuffing clothing and tools into them. It felt oddly good, taking so much stuff. Like a huge rush of fear and satisfaction that pleased the little thieving mindset I'd come to listen to lately. Listening out, I heard little more than those sporadic gunshots from the same direction. Even I could theorise that it was a point of proper defence finally set up. Likely that was Protégé's influence at work.

"Hand me that bag!"

"Okay, okay, can I get those screwdrivers? Keep them with these hammers..."

"Fine, you got any old wires?"

"Nah..."

I stopped as they worked. I had put some clothes together, but my intellect didn't extend to wasteland preparation. Instead I simply sat and concentrated on listening. At least I could be an early warning pony.

I heard trotting from far off. Then gunshots, a brief three round burst. A cry of pain, and then trotting nearby.

"Quiet!" I hissed, reaching out to stop Glimmerlight's hoof from moving any further. We froze.

The trotting came closer. There was multiple ponies.

"Hey-hey how many's the boss after?"

"Many as we fuckin' want..."

Raiders.

They were in the same outside area beyond the massive doors that led in here. We couldn't move, any slight sound could make them spot us if they were Shades and not just the normal variety.

"Hey, storage!"

"Aw yeah! Boss'll pay us big if we get some good shit! Come on!"

I could see the look on my friends' faces, the same fear that was on mine. Where was Brimstone.

The door rattled, shifting and sticking.

"Fuckin' door's heavy! Can't shift it!"

It rattled more, jamming backward and forward. We had to do it, we had to try moving.

I began to creep toward the lock box room, praying that the others would match my pace. To my ears, they sounded embarrassingly loud when they began shifting toward the door too.

We couldn't rush, but we needed to hurry!

The door shifted, scraping a few inches. Light from the corridor was beginning to shine in.

"Together! Push the damn thing!"

I had heard seven voices now, one line each and all of them different, all male. There was tons of them! I wiped my eyes hard to stop the dripping tears from making a trail into the room. We were only a few feet away now. A little more... a little more and—

The door slid open with a shriek of metal being pushed along concrete, shoved by all seven raiders at once. We were still short! I dived into cover, but Glimmer and Caduceus were still in the open!

"Ohoho! What have we got here? Get 'em, lads!"

They barrelled forward, I recognised them mostly as the same raiders who had beaten me earlier in the day. Glimmerlight turned, surprising one with her will to actually fight back and bucked him hard in the face. But the next two dove for her. While I knew she wasn't exactly an unarmed fighter, she was no wimp. Glimmerlight thrashed, kicked out and swung with a determination that was driven from the fear in her eyes. Caduceus was charged by another buck, tussling together on the ground, rolling end over end.

I saw him slammed to the ground, his head raised, with the raider's hoof above it, about

to be stomped onto against the floor.

“No!”

Galloping out, I hopped up and slid on my back toward the raider, bucking him *hard* between the legs. The howl of pain echoed madly amongst the huge room, before he fell to the side. Caduceus clambered free, before trying to shout a warning. Too late, I felt another of the mass of raiders grab me from behind, a hoof going around my throat and tugging tightly to the point I couldn't even squeal for help. Being pulled away, I saw Caduceus throw himself at another of the wiry but surprisingly strong raiders to try and reach me or Glimmerlight. The Tenpony healer was determined and brave in the defence of us, wrestling hoof to hoof with a wasteland raider, but thrown to the ground and surrounded by three raiders as they stamped and pinned him.

The brawl had lasted at most twenty seconds, but he was pinned, I was being held and nearly choked. Glimmerlight slapped another one across the face with her front hooves, but the three assaulting her were on all sides. One simply hurled himself onto her, weighing her down before, with horror to me, I saw one slam a hoof clean across her jawline. The mare fell, the raider atop her collapsing on her back.

We were beaten.

“Well...” the lead raider, a burly earth pony, spat blood from where Glimmerlight had bucked him on the mouth, “got a little *fight* you three, eh?”

Caduceus tried in vain to rise, but received only a half buck to the chest, making him cry out in pain and collapse, holding his midsection with two front hooves. My throat was burning from the steely grip, before I felt myself thrown to the floor, head down. Scrambling, I only was pinned once more as he sat on me.

“Get the *fuck* off me!” Glimmerlight scowled, whipping a hoof against her captor's back leg. He winced, before simply throwing her against a crate. I saw her head rattle off the wood, before she slumped down. The raider dragged my sister up by her robes, staring her down before tossing her into the grasp of two other raiders.

“Give me the chib!”

He reached out and took up an offered knife in his mouth.

“Gonna get me some revenge for that suckerpunch, bitch...”

“Get. Off. Her.”

The raiders stopped, the burly one looking up at the voice, before stepping back and dropping her heavily to the ground.

He must have galloped all the way from the moment he heard the door explode open. We'd left our friend a five minute trot away, after all.

What stood here was not our friend.

Clad in the armour, decorated in blood and symbols of a lifetime spent destroying pony's lives, the Great Warlord of the Raider Clans loomed between the crates. The dragon's head peered at us, beady eyes flickering with sheer, undiluted and uncontrolled *hate*. Upon each leg were the thick brass hooves. The shoulder blades were mounted and the dual sided knife hung below his mouth.

Standing taller and wider, every ounce of his body *oozed* power.

The raiders holding Caduceus backed away, glancing to their leader. Bent over Glimmer, he snarled toward Brimstone Blitz before hopping backward and off.

“Thought you said you'd stopped all that, eh? What's this but an old stallion trying to pretend he's still the big boss of the wastes? That armour don't scare me...”

Those holding Glimmerlight shared a glance. They didn't look so sure.

"I said... GET OFF HER!"

His voice *alone* hurt my ears, slapping my senses like a brick to the face. The stallion moved over and stroked Glimmer's mane.

"Little mare here just needed to learn her place, big guy. Get her a-ARGH!"

She bit him. Furious, he reared up, slamming a hoof down upon her head and knocking her away from his two lackies.

That did it. Ooooh boy... *that did it.*

The floor *shook* as Brimstone charged, bellowing a warcry the likes of which I had heard the other raiders attempt but *never* even come close to. The armour must have doubled his weight with those massive plates and weighty hooves. He was among them before any could even properly draw their weapons.

The first raider found himself simply gored upon the horns of the dragonhelm, lifted screaming into the air, his chest impaled by a good twelve inches. Brimstone didn't even stop, crashing forward to throw his entire weight into a second. The twist *threw* the first from his horns to land atop a third. Their leader attempted to blindside him, but lasted an almost anticlimactically short time, Brimstone's rage simply swatted his hooves away and ripped that mouth knife into his side. A brass hoof collided with his head, forcing the stallion to the ground before... *oh Luna...*

I almost vomited on the spot. The moment the stallion was down, Brimstone ripped the mouth knife downwards, drawing it along the side of the leader, slitting from neck to flank in one merciless and powerful motion. Screaming, trying not to throw up, I threw myself towards Glimmerlight, catching up with Caduceus as we both held the quaking mare. She was in shock, still reeling from the blow to the head.

Behind us, I heard one raider yell a surrender and simply *run*. A chain shot out, wrapping with that hook around his neck and piercing into his side before dragging him, drawing blood the entire time, back toward Brimstone. It had come from one of those hooves, which forced him down and stamped *hard* on the stallion's back. A single great snap cracked into the room's ambience, followed by the raider wailing in pain.

"MY BACK! I CAN'T MOVE! *I CAN'T MOVE!*"

Two double teamed Brimstone, leaping on his back and trying to shove knives around his throat. They caught on the chainmail, permitting them no time before Brimstone simply rolled. Trapped beneath him, I heard ribs snap and the raider's scream as those shoulder blades dug into them. Under his thrashing and attacks, they were torn and pounded to a messy end. Brimstone was still roaring in feral rage, his frenzy carrying him to repeatedly beat the other raider's head off the floor between two brass hooves until his face resembled nothing but a battered pulp, dropping teeth and spittle across the floor.

Those who had been thrown or knocked aside before raised, only to have their ally hurled at them again. Charging after the thrown pony, Brimstone stamped his hoof so hard on a back leg I saw the joint not so much snap as disintegrate under his weight. The leg flopped uselessly, the raider falling back screaming. His friend was hurled across the room so hard that he crashed *through* the chainlink fence *and* the window of the office to slap against a lockbox, covered in a thousand glass cuts.

The remaining buck was trapped. He was a younger raider, bearing fresh coat markings and was still without scars. He backed away, waving his hooves as he fell into the corner. Brimstone stopped, raising his head to glance across at him. I saw the hot air hiss from the

nostrils of the dragon as he snorted, before stomping toward the remaining one.

The others lay screaming, wailing or crying in pain. The callous brutality of Brimstone's methods that shocked me to my core. For all his words telling of what he was, what he was capable of, I had never imagined him doing it. Stomach turning, I could only watch as I saw the leader of the small group desperately trying to hold his own organs inside. One crippled raider could move only his head and groaned pitifully. The others spluttered or shook in their death throes, lacking the ability to shout out. One was still spitting up teeth through the ruined mess of his muzzle.

This was how the strong prevailed among raiders. To shock the already unstable into submission. Violence and fear was respect.

I simply couldn't imagine what had brought such cultures to exist.

"BRIM!"

Glimmerlight tried to rise, tears coating her eyes as she raised a hoof and attempted to shout to him when she saw him approaching the remaining raider.

"Don't! This isn't who you want to be! Stop!"

The brass hooves stomped on the ground, making the remaining raider cry for mercy. They dragged across the floor, grinding and drawing a line in the blood that seeped from his last victim. He charged.

"Stop! STOP!"

He didn't. Meeting the raider, for all of Glimmerlight's trying he fell upon the young recruit. Brass hoof after brass hoof fell, stomping, crushing, breaking and slamming into the buck. I saw limbs broken, a chest deflate entirely, a jaw *torn* from the muzzle. His agonised wails gave way to a liquid like blubbing and eventual muffled hisses of pain. His head was grabbed, slammed against the walls, the ground and everywhere in between, a whole lifetime of rage and hatred pouring forth from one pony. This had been him at the height of his terror... bringing nothing but a painful and unstoppable cascade of hell upon those he fell on. No quick escape... no way to end it with dignity...

Glimmerlight finally got to her hooves, galloping forward, bucking Caduceus in sheer panic as he tried to restrain her. She screamed to Brimstone, not daring to get so close against his whirling bulk and blades.

"BRIM! The dragon is dead!"

Only now, hearing her did the huge armoured figure whirl, leaving his victim behind. He *towered* above her.

"They hurt you, I *destroy* them! Pain and death, all for them! They will NOT hurt you!"

He was drenched in blood, I could see it dripping from the knife, his hooves... his entire body. Glimmerlight was shaking, barely able to stand as her voice turned raw and raspy from screaming.

"You aren't them! You're just like you always were! You don't need to protect me like *this*!"

"They're raiders! Nothing but scum and missed chances to be good in the eyes of the Goddesses!"

"*They* think like that! But it's *you* that's got to be different to—"

"No one who does what they do deserves mercy from it! They caused pain amongst all the wasteland! They don't deserve a second chance or sympathy! No escape! I will not watch them threaten this to a good pony like you and grant them anything but a death as humiliating as they would have given you! You deserve to be on this world, ponies like them and I don't!"

His words echoed and slammed into my ears, his shouting blowing Glimmerlight's straggled mane with the force of his speech. But she stood strong, stomping her hooves and gritting her teeth against the Warlord before her.

"You're trying to become a protector! You can fight to DEFEND us, but you're losing sight of who you are! Who you're trying to be! You need to be BETTER!"

"They do not deserve ANYTHING but no mercy, and NO FORGIVENESS!"

"NEITHER DID YOU!"

In the aftermath of those three words there was no sound. Nothing but the simple stare of the Great Warlord into one little pony who had changed his life and offered him the second chance that even *he* didn't believe in.

"Because-because I'm not seeing my friend in front of me right now!"

Caduceus and I found ourselves very close, completely forgotten in the wake of Glimmerlight and Brimstone Blitz's relationship of ideals and wills clashing. Of their unique link that was driven by so much fate as sheer random chance being strained and tested at the harshest end.

"I... I've been hurt! Okay? I admit it, I'm *hurt*! I've lost my old friends to something I don't even remember! But I can't let that control my life! If I just fell into it all again and stripped myself of memory to forget I even knew Coral, I'd be betraying why she mattered to me in the first place! Don't do the same, don't forget everything you've been trying and striving for to become the Warlord again. Be Brim. Be our guardian, not the raider..."

He simply stood there, gazing at her. Blood dripped, seeming to never end from the helmet. The dragonhead longed for more, that shape and design channelling incarnate rage through it to long for more battle. Breathing heavy, snorting on each exhale, it eventually slowed the more he looked at the slender mare before him.

Raising one hoof, almost tenderly, he let it slip from his head. Beneath it, oily from the armour and blooded from the battle, was the tired and old face of Brimstone Blitz.

"I will never understand ponies like you, Glim."

"Someday you can—"

"**No!** No, I cannot. Change can happen but... but never can so much be forgotten. I am not becoming a better pony, not yet. Those days of redemption are far away. Out there in the wastes, given one chance of freedom I just felt myself falling into the same **anger**. The same way of thinking without anything to guide me."

His eyes turned intense, glancing to the carnage he had wrought.

"I tried to get you out and in the end, only I did. Everything-**everything** that had begun to properly matter to me I had left behind, all morality gone to just become another raider cast adrift in the wastes. No, there are more ponies than you who would need to forgive me for the things I've done to ever truly matter outside you. I was **like** these bastards, destroying them was like destroying a part of myself, righting a wrong I created."

Glimmerlight shook her head again, pleading with him.

"But not if you just turn your rage around and do the same to them. You can kill every raider in the wastes, but that won't ever get rid of the raider in you."

"Mm... maybe... but the dragon is in here." He tapped his chestplate. "He can never disappear. You should not be so forgiving of me. I am not somepony who will ever become what you are. But I will abide by your wishes. As your guardian, that's all I have left to hold onto. All my freedom proved was that I'm still the pony the wasteland fears."

He moved to the side, knocking the door clean open with a hoof that struck the metal *far*

harder than was needed. So much rage still flowed in him, just being held back, barely kept in check.

“For good reason too...”

He stomped off into the corridors with a large sack of our provisions. The anger so evident in each stomp of those dinnerplate sized hooves. But it was an internal anger, a frustrated one, unable to grasp the way to the pony he wanted to be...

Glimmerlight stared after him, crying deeply, even as Caduceus lay a hoof over her shoulder and held her close.

“I won’t give up on you, Brim. It doesn’t matter if I’m the only one...”

He didn’t reply, simply moving on.

We followed quickly, leaving the bloodbath behind us. Whimpering, last out, I looked back upon the devastation he had wrecked and felt only sick.

The Dragon was still there inside him.

But even I caught myself hoping through all the terror, all the fear of him snapping and destroying *everything* in his single-minded protectiveness of the one good pony he knew he had left, that he might someday realise that it was possible.

I *knew* it was possible to let go of the chains that bound your heart through the inspiration of another...

The riot had gone well for Barb.

Ahead of us, below us, through the interior windows, I could hear slavers as they were tortured, put through the hell that would have been unleashed on us had Brimstone not saved us. But the horror had expanded, gone beyond all that we expected. As we had galloped down the hallway, we came to the interior windows that gazed upon the plaza.

Brimstone swore loudly, almost smashing the glass with one brass hoof in sheer resurgent anger. Glimmerlight stared on with wide eyes and a hoof to her mouth. Caduceus seemed to shake in offence.

I simply gasped when I saw the reality of the situation.

Below us in the plaza, the slavers were not the only casualties.

Raider corpses were strewn across the fountain area, shot down. But we witnessed ponies being dragged into cells protected by raiders on the top floor. The raiders had won. They controlled the entire plaza.

Barb himself wandered across the balcony with a loudspeaker floating before him.

“Slavers of Fillydelphia! This is for your benefit! Know that the plaza and guardroom are *ours* now. You sought to bind the Bloodletters. Now you shall see the bloody mistake you have created!”

The wails of torturous agony flowed even through the glass. I could see slaves and slavers alike being dragged by raiders into cells and imprisoned within their own ‘home’. Looting, revenge attacks, and horrid acts with sharp blades followed on those who had in some way wronged them.

“Be ready, slavers. You shall see what you have unleashed by keeping us here. This is our fortress of delight, our place of reminding you why you should *fear* raiders, not keep them as pets! The slaves will suffer. They are in here with us, our *playthings*. This is *your* fault, ‘masters’. Now you will have to watch and deal with the consequences.”

The loudspeaker clattered to the ground. Barb had turned on the slaves. He was bringing them into his hell as much as the slavers.

"He didn't betray *us*, he just hid what he really wanted..." Caduceus breathed gently, shivering and turning away as he saw a slave try to run and get roughly thrown into the fountain and nearly drowned. He was then pulled toward the stairs, being dragged up and into the higher levels of the plaza for whatever purposes...

But the *screams*. There were so many. A full raider camp of sorts inside the plaza that was now letting flow all the built up tendencies raiders were known for.

Brimstone seemed to quiver as he looked through the glass, but Glimmerlight placed a hoof on his shoulder.

"This is what you can be free of. This is what you aren't."

"I am, but this will not go on."

Glimmer narrowed her eyes, but shifted her back legs, still obviously feeling vulnerable. Another cry of pain shot up from below, making her wince again... and again. I saw her take a sudden breath.

"No, it *won't*."

She trotted off, clearly with a purpose in mind. Brimstone glanced around and followed, as did Caduceus. I galloped up beside her.

"Glimmer, what are you doing? Where are you—"

"We had a hand in this. Barb tricked us around, used our fear of him to get us to aid in this *atrocitiy*. Brim? You want a good cause? Here's one."

I could hear voices ahead. I recognised one of them intently. Glimmerlight continued.

"If you need the proof, Brim? Well, I'm going to help put a stop to this. Coral is in there. A pony who doesn't deserve any of it. If you seek redemption, follow me, because I'm on a quest of it myself. Murky? Caduceus? You don't need to come."

I found myself slack jawed. Brimstone and Glimmerlight stomped off ahead of us toward the voices, glancing at each other, Caduceus and I simply followed in shock.

How could they stop it? Who could—

After a few minutes of following the pair, we emerged into another room, following the voices I knew I felt we should be avoiding...

Protégé and his slavers were within the next large room, clustered around a table filled with the blueprints of the Mall. Protégé was wearing his battle barding, the revolver strapped to his hoof. Ragini was here, too, as was Mister Mosin. I saw The Master glance up at me harshly, making me fall closer to Caduceus. Slavers whirled their guns onto Brimstone, but Protégé raised a hoof.

"What are you doing here? I advise you to go to the back and stay out of harms way until we contain and solve this—"

"No." Brimstone brokered no argument, stopping Protégé dead. "*You* don't know Barb. Not like I do."

Glimmerlight nodded.

"We're not going to sit idle and watch those we care about get hurt."

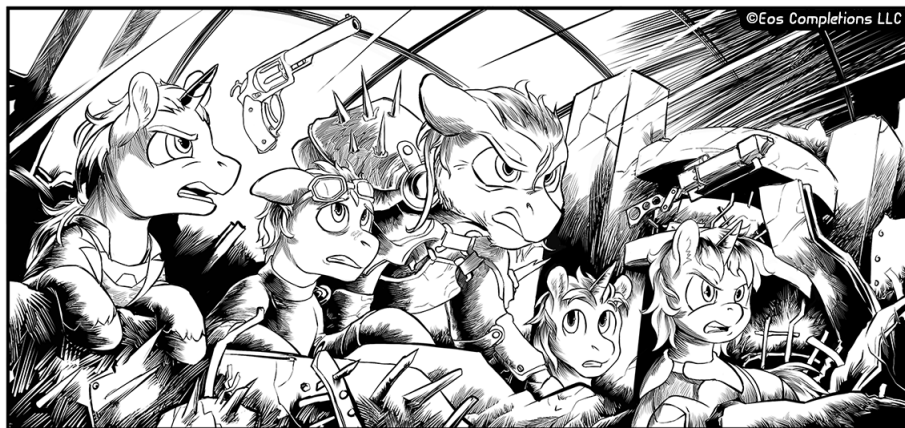
She trotted forward, lifting one hoof to slam it on the table, putting a stern look into her hurt eyes and obviously fighting to control the trembling from the whole experience.

“We’re going to help bring that bastard’s raiding days down once and for all.”

Footnote: Perk Attained!

A (Very) Little Dash – While wearing light armour or no armour, you run 10% faster. Such a pity that hoof’s still aching...

Sixty Minutes in Hell



“Look buddy, my job here is to keep the peace, and if I have to break a few heads to do it, then a few people are going to be hurting.”

“What was it like to go out there and fight the good fight?”

Utterly, utterly new.

I’d fought before, yes. I’d lost, but I had at least tried. I’d even shot a gun at a few things recently, griffons and parasprites. I’d not hit a single griffon and perhaps only one parasprite while panicked and just pulling the trigger out of sheer terror. Never killed anything. I’d lashed out, bucked a few groins, helped take down a sneaky raider...

But to actually move forward, armed and ready, with the express purpose to move in and eliminate something or somepony to help bring peace? To take a stand, make the decision to commit and then push yourself into the firing line to save others?

Could I do that?

Ponies needed help. Brimstone and Glimmerlight had stepped up to the challenge already, but the weight of the decision burdened heavily on me still. If I were to go in, wouldn’t I just freeze or run away? It’s what I always did. I’m no fighter.

Even one raider would kill me.

That image was seared into my mind, of one plunging a knife into my shoulder and twisting the cold metal against the bone. Even seeing a raider, I couldn’t get rid of it. The thought made my muscles twist and stiffen up, and made me stop in my tracks. What possible help could I be to anyone?

Yet they were all just, innocents. They were all just trapped just like me. Even if they hated me, even if they would spit and curse at my very name, I didn’t hate them back. From the pigsty to the Ministries, I had been somehow growing. Every hardship, struggle, scream, and tear had been pushing me further and further from the slave that I was. Yes, chains remained, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t pull in other directions to do what I was quickly

beginning to feel I had to. The DJ and Littlepip had given me the inspiration, but it had to be me that made the decision. I had proved to myself by now that I could survive, endure, and find a way to keep living, even if it wasn't perfect and often went wrong. But that had all been of necessity.

Protégé had offered me one chance to make a decision for myself. To gauge risk against reward. I had taken it without realising whether I was truly doing it as a pony or a slave. Whether I was choosing or obeying. Now I saw that this was the sort of situation he was trying to prepare me for, when I had to *choose* to face great danger, to help do some good for other ponies, to choose to take risks so that it might pay off better in the end.

Of course, wasn't that what he had been doing with Red Eye all along? Was I only falling further into the subtle hooks of Red Eye's ideology?

Or was I finally beginning to not just listen and wish, but *decide* to follow the things told to me by a voice across the wastes on the air? To fight the good fight, any way we could.

Either way, ponies needed help and, for once, both slaves and slavers had the same goals.

To end Barb's sick rampage, forever.

"Working with the slaves? With the *raider*? Hell, no!"

"They'll just turn on us the moment we go in!"

I cowered behind Caduceus, watching while the slavers lambasted Glimmerlight and Brimstone's assertion to offer aid. It hadn't gone down well, with the vast majority of those slavers assembled rising up in opposition to the entire idea. Mosin had swore colourfully. I hadn't understood what he'd said, but anything said with that much malice had to have been a curse.

The planning had been taking place above the plaza in an old security room. Tough inner windows of thick glass looked down upon the shop cells. Only occasional raiders could be seen running along the balconies. Mostly, they were hiding in the shop cells, keeping their strength and stolen armaments a secret from all prying eyes. I could still hear the screams.

My imagination had been running rampant with what each one could mean. The long ones were the worst, drawn out and filled with as much shock as pain. Oh Goddesses, protect the ponies within there.

For their part, Glimmerlight and Brimstone had simply stood with stern eyes and waited the criticism out, ignoring the slavers entirely in favour of appealing to Protégé instead. The dark unicorn had simply stood and watched them back, apparently gauging their readiness to help.

Really, I couldn't blame them for accepting the help. Only out in the corridor I could hear the frantic calls for ammunition. The raiders were only barely being kept at bay. Less than twenty feet away through a couple of walls there were slavers holding the line behind upturned tables and opened doors, trading shots that rang and echoed all the way to sting my ears with raiders who occasionally tried to sneak around their defences or make a concerted push. Every slaver present was on edge. The word had already gone out that the entire Mall was on lockdown. No pony was to move more than a few dozen feet from the perimeter until this was done. I'd heard as much from the planning when we had entered the room.

We were as trapped as the rioting raiders.

"Somehow I don't get the feeling this was one of their brightest ideas, Murk," Caduceus muttered back to me. The nurse was trying to brush some of the dirt from his white clothing. It was already stained beyond recovery from just living in Fillydelphia, but he persisted as though from some nervous tick or motion.

"Just throw them in chains and wait till it's over before he rejoins them!"

"You think they can do what we can't?"

I cast my eyes around them. Earth ponies and unicorns, stallions and mares, all types of ponies from the slaver team in the Mall were consistent in their belief. But there was one voice I expected to hear, but didn't.

My eyes found The Master. He was standing on the opposite side of the table from Glimmerlight, looking smug as ever. Spotting my own eyes lingering on him, he twisted his head to grin at me. I retreated behind Caduceus again, pressing close to his side.

"This isn't their job!"

"He's already bloodied, look at him! He's killed some of us, I bet!"

Finally, I heard Protégé's voice clearly ring out through the opposition.

"They may aid us."

The shouting reached a height upon which I could not even detect individual voices. My head hurt.

Protégé raised a hoof for silence, aided by The Master slamming his huge hoof on the desk for order. At their combination of wills, the slavers shut up immediately. Protégé looked at each of them, before lowering his voice.

"Brimstone has never defied our rules as a worker. unless Glimmerlight is threatened. That much I understand. In this case, I have no reason to doubt his resolve in this matter."

"I *am* going in." Glimmerlight stated the matter with a seriousness I'd never heard before. "Coral Eve is in there, and come hell or high water I will get her out. She may hate me, but until I know why or what caused it, I'm not turning my back."

Protégé nodded reassuringly.

"You will have your chance, Glimmerlight. We—"

A screaming suddenly broke through the background noise, begging and high pitched. A stallion's voice, fearful and simply howling.

"Don't! Please, oh please, no! DON'T! NO! PLE—"

A detonation from the plaza erupted up, cracking and damaging the internal windows that looked upon the plaza. Everypony present ducked, but the tough glass held. We all ran to the windows, looking down to see a small mushroom cloud of smoke rising from a series of exploded boxes. Raiders were laughing and running around it. I could swear I saw bound pony parts away from the centre of the explosion. Had they just tied somepony down to them and execu... oh Celestia on high.

I saw Protégé scowl. Brimstone merely watched with glazed eyes, his voice level and low.

"They're working themselves into a frenzy down there. Every bit of hate and crazed ideas that raiders get, that perversion of freedom. You trapped it. Pushed them into a hole, let it build up, boil to the top. Now you're seeing it unleashed. Not all raiders are bloodthirsty maniacs, but you turned them into what everyone thinks they are by keeping them cooped up so tight in there."

Protégé's brow narrowed, before he turned away from the window, staring at every slaver in the room, nodding to Glimmerlight.

"We will end this. We are a faction of believers in a dream, of a better Equestria when

everypony might help one another in better terms. Who are we to deny those wishing to save lives by aiding us? I will not stand to see workers killed in such senseless violence. We put them through enough in the pursuit of Unity. They deserve rescue from this. It is our duty to use whatever we can.”

Calm and polite, yet authoritative and permitting no nay-saying, Protégé had their attention. To my amazement, I saw The Master nod and speak.

“I say let the slaves work with him. That’s what they’re here for after all. To work for us.”

Around the table, I saw at least half of the slavers suddenly agreeing. Had Protégé swayed them with his more idealistic words or were they just agreeing with The Master? I had a nasty feeling where the real power in this room lay, regardless of rank.

“Thank you, Chainlink Shackles. Working together we can bring an end to this atrocity. Brimstone, you know Barb well?”

He nodded. “One of my Big Four, spent the best part of a decade running with him. If he’s commanding them, you’re not going to be able to play by any rules.”

“Right, well we want you at the briefing then. In fact, all four of you come along. Shackles? You too. Mosin, bring your assistant to help discuss what we have to correctly arm ourselves up. Ragini, make sure the defence cordons are still in place. How long do we have until Stern’s griffons arrive to raid?”

“No word yet, but I’d say slightly over an hour. By the time we make a push, it may be just about sixty minutes. They won’t wait long before launching an all out aggressive storming of the plaza.”

“Right. That isn’t going to happen. Keep your ear to the sky and find out for me exactly how long the moment you can get word from the griffons. Everypony do your duty now and reconvene here in less than five minutes. We can end this without unnecessary bloodshed of those who are trapped in there.”

He trotted over to the blueprints, stomping a hoof on them before glancing over the table at each slaver and slave in turn. His eyes met mine, resting there for a few seconds before looking up again.

“It’s time to prove that we really are pursuing the dream we all signed up to achieve.”

Preparations began immediately.

Protégé was busy organising the slavers into teams for the assault; the rest of them had left to deal with their various duties on the defence lines. We were effectively left to ourselves in the old security room, amidst the hustle and bustle of preparations and frantic calling to get together for Protégé’s briefing. Alone, dodging out of the way of a swearing slaver dragging heavy boxes of ammo across the floor on a cart, I looked around. Now empty cages lined each wall where weapons were once kept. Feeling vulnerable, I found myself trotting over to lie down with my head in my hooves inside one.

Glimmerlight had been staring through the window, Brimstone beside her. Those two, they were so convicted to go into the battle to come. Both had reasons and those to protect. They simply felt they needed to, choosing to be the good pony. Already I could see Caduceus standing beside Glimmerlight, laying a hoof on her shoulder and nuzzling her gently, clearly about to make his own choice.

“Glimmer, you’ll need somepony who can treat a wound in there, I’m coming.”

"You don't have to, Caddy. My life's mess ups aren't yours to—"

"Help all those who need help.' That's what Helpinghoof told me. We all believed it in there. Him, I, Life Bloom and all the others working or studying in that clinic. Trapped here, I found a new meaning to it with Doctor Weathervane, that sometimes we need to not just wait for those in need to come to us. I *want* to help. Not just because it's you, even if that may be a part of it."

He grinned, to which I saw Glimmerlight only chuckle lightly, seemingly thankful for the more innocent notion. Her hoof tapped his cheek.

"You're such an oddity in this world. A real gentlecolt. Guess Tenpony makes 'em that way. But stick behind me, okay? Don't get in the firing line. Besides, I doubt you'll have a problem with that view on things, eh?"

He blushed, but couldn't help but nod. The pair giggled, quickly hugging. Alone at the back of the room, I could see the little bonds that aided each other, the mutual humour and ease of speech that was keeping them calm about their choice to do this.

Now he was in as well, just leaving me alone in the cage wondering about my own place in this. The only pony in the room still too afraid to say 'yes'.

I wasn't a fighter or a healer. I didn't know how to survive battles. The real one I had been in ended with stabbed in the shoulder. I'd been a liability.

A thick stomping announced the brass hoof-clad Brimstone moving across the room. He had been touring the defences. Many times I'd heard his voice cry out to force slavers into a better position or when to expect a push. He may not have known how to fire too accurately, but it was clear Brimstone wasn't a 'Grand Warlord' for just the fancy title, with his grasp of tactics and understanding of his enemy.

I'd just hid in here, away from all the fighting outside, oddly detached from it all.

Settling near me, the armour clattered as Brimstone sat down, and I saw one eye peering down at me. He nodded at the pair of Glimmer and Caduceus, who were sat around an old rifle, Glimmerlight stripping it down while chatting to him about random nothings.

"Seems that wee buck's gonna follow her wherever. So, you coming along, kid?"

Lifting my head out of my front hooves, I glanced up at the big earth pony with wide eyes.

"N-no."

"Hmm?" He seemed surprised, turning more to face me.

I just looked away, quivering slightly. I knew he didn't mean to put me under pressure. It was just his way of life to be direct.

"I'm-I'm scared." I rubbed my shoulder. The sight of that knife pushing its way into my flesh, our encounter with the raiders had brought it all to the surface. "I don't want hurt again. I'm afraid of Barb."

"Everypony gets scared." Brimstone spoke quietly, closing his eyes. "Glim's scared of losing Coral. I'm scared of losing her. It's just about whether you can push it down, put on a brave face, and keep going."

"But I'm not worth anything to this, I'd just get in the way. This is just too direct, too big for me. It's best if I stay here and just pray for you all."

Brimstone shrugged.

"No need to stand still to pray. Actions speak louder than words to the Goddesses, Murk. You've made it this far, survived this much. You think I'd really let you hang around if I thought you were causing us problems?"

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not. Still shivering, I met his eyes before he slipped one hoof free of the brass weapons and gently tapped my head. It still felt like being hit with a frying pan. He chuckled at my yelp.

"Just have a think, Murk. But you don't need to come if you don't want to. Just know you're welcome."

Well, that was surprising. Was he trying to make up for earlier? That melancholy tone was in his voice again.

"I know I'd feel better knowing those ears of yours were watching out for us. You've got a place with us now. But it's up to you. Just remember what you've already managed to do. You're braver than you think."

Getting up, the raider stomped off toward the window, glowering through it with gritted teeth. I curled up again, whimpering as I heard another drawn out wail, a female voice this time from within the plaza. The sound of Glimmer screaming shot back through my head like a sickening wave. Nothing waited in there but pain. I'd be up against Barb. I couldn't beat him! He was just too good, too beyond any ability I had. He'd stalk us, outwit us, and kill me. He'd hurt my friends.

"Weapons here! Get armed up!"

Mosin had returned, galloping in with a cart from the corridors where the battle still raged to hold the raiders at bay, a small wheeled tray of weapons right behind him pulled by another pony. A younger assistant was guiding it. A unicorn buck, light grey as though a less severe version of Mosin himself, but clad in an oddly clean blue shirt. He hummed loudly as he polished an ornate pistol with gold trimmings and an patently absurd large scope on top the moment he stopped. That was likely the extravagant assistant Mosin had mentioned outside the Stable.

"Hoi! *Oyobuk!*" Mosin clipped the assistant over the ear. "I tell you! This is serious planning, not *ebanaty* weapon convention! Put away compensation, Blunderbuck, distribute rifles!"

"Ow! Don't talk about her that way."

He rubbed his head, muttering something under his breath that I was sure only I heard. Something about 'old fashioned blunt idiot who didn't know the beauty of a unique weapon if it was shoved up his—'

"Is silly filly gun! Not proper weapon unless at least slightly rusty and still working. Proves is gun for *stallion*. Now shut hole and get working or I *morgaly vikalyu, padla!*"

Outside, many slavers ran in, heads low. Shots whined past the doorway of the security room. Could Protégé not have put his planning room further from the front line?

They clambered to the armoury cart, snapping up magazines, spare rounds, and energy cells for the rarer magic weapons. A rush moved past my little hiding spot, clattering hooves on the floor making me hold my ears closed. Oh this was all too much. Ponies were reloading, test sighting, sharpening knives all for the big fight.

I spotted Protégé running amidst it all.

"You there! Get those mines down to the armoury floor as a last resort! Hardnut, I want you to take three of your subordinates to guard the storage room against further flanking efforts, go! Does anypo— DOWN!"

At the command, everypony dropped. The toughened windows as they were peppered with gunfire. Some flew right through, ricocheting around and lancing into slavers. I saw one ping from Brimstone's armour when he sheltered Glimmerlight. Caduceus leapt

immediately to a screaming slaver, holding him down to work on his neck. Five slavers sprayed blind fire from unicorn magic-held weapons over the broken sections of glass. I huddled into the corner.

Too much, just fighting and pain and death. Too much...

"Those were armour piercing rounds. Mosin, how much stock of them did they possibly get!?"

"Not much! I must trust slavers with *potato* long before I trust them with AP rounds!"

"Those will chew through cover at the wrong time if they save them though. We need something to even the odds. Do you think you can stock us up with some better equipment and ammunition?"

The strange armspony snorted. "Is no trouble. Armoury is precisely for this role after all. As you requested, I have brought appropriate weaponry upon cart from assistant. All may arm from him for higher quality firearms!"

His eyes crept over to Brimstone.

"Even if means this *svoloch* may break more rifles."

Brimstone stamped one brass hoof hard enough to make almost everypony jump in shock, myself included.

"Won't need any of your pop guns now." He almost growled at the armspony as he wandered past him into the far side of the security room to wait.

Glimmerlight rubbed her chin with a hoof, cantering over to the cart. Four more slavers were picked out as the arming up began. In the end, Glimmerlight had drawn a long rifle and simple pistol for herself, along with some leather armour stitched up with small metal plates on the shoulders. She dropped Caduceus a larger saddlebag of stored medical supplies and a small sub-machine gun for self defence.

I simply stuck back from the rush to get at the weaponry. Was I even allowed? Glancing across at Protégé, I saw him slipping some extra ammunition for his revolver into his battle barding. My master glanced back at me even as his magic drew another small backup pistol to store in a second holster. Our eyes met briefly, or rather his *eye*. Even with one visible, anything beyond the visage of Unity's student was hard to tell.

"Right, everypony! Briefing time, gather around, we don't have long!"

Thus began the sequence of planning.

Everypony leaned in over the table, a couple dozen in all.

My friends turned back toward the table as slavers were pushing in. Ragini swept through the larger doors from storage, returning from her hunt. Brimstone and Caduceus trotted over. Glimmerlight stopped near me.

"Made a decision, Murky?"

She tried to offer a smile, but it was strained. Her eyes held fear and apprehension, yet shone with determination.

I didn't want to leave her. But in the end, I shook my head.

"I'm not going. I... I just— sorry, I'm too scared of him."

My eyes couldn't match hers. I looked away, curling up inside the cage to spend my time. Her hoof gently ruffled my mane, leading me to look upwards again and see her grin.

"It's alright, it's not going to be nice in there. No shame, okay? We'll take care of it."

With another gentle pat, she moved on toward the table. I watched her go, followed by Caduceus. Everypony was coming together to help save a few slaves, Brim's raw power, Protégé and his slaver teams, Glimmer's training and stoic mindset, Caduceus' medical

abilities; everypony throwing in every little ability they had. How did they do it? How could they be so brave and go in there without being scared?

Brimstone's words echoed back to me. *Everypony* gets scared.

But didn't being brave mean that you weren't scared?

Protégé held the spot before the Mall's blueprints. Already I could see markings with chalk on the paper that circled various corridors.

"Now, the raiders have broken well free of the areas we sought to contain them in." Protégé's voice was terse. "The guard room that should have held them has fallen, permitting them access to firearms and a defended position that makes a direct assault on the plaza incredibly difficult. The only main entrance to the plaza is through the cage door. The very thing we used is now the biggest obstacle to us. It's a chokepoint. Not only that, but they've also branched out, here, here, and here."

A small cane pointed to three corridors leading out from the guard room away from the plaza cage door. Each had a red scrawled line.

"In other words, *polnyi pizdets*. Armoury is secure, but slaves have acquired much inventory from guards." Mosin tossed his head back to his small cart, tapping that wooden hoof over what I guessed was the armoury on the map. "There is no chance of them reaching the armoury now, however."

"Good." Protégé moved the cane. "Those red lines show where we stopped them, but it's clear Barb knew exactly what he was doing. Those positions were hard to take and cost him dearly, but very easy to defend from. Straight corridors with no cover and a hard shelter at the far end."

Mosin grunted. I began to wonder if he held more of a tactical position than I had previously realised within Protégé's staff of slavers.

"Makes little difference, we have rocket propelled grenade. *Boom*, yes?"

"Normally, yes." My master's face sunk a little, before tapping the lines again with the cane. "Those sick wretches have strapped the workers to their cover as living shields. Any assault would have to kill them to get by. That is not something I will accept as a course of action."

Brimstone nodded, simmering a little.

"Just what I'd have done, but he won't kill them himself. Those prisoners are all that's stopping anypony launching some hot metal down the corridor and blowing everything in it to hell."

"You're sure?"

"Barb isn't stupid. He knows his raiders can't take a direct hit from a heavily armed and organised group in a meatgrinder assault."

That made Protégé pause a second, rubbing a hoof against his chin.

"Then why make this whole stand in the first place? He must know that griffons or, if it got real bad, alicorns would simply wipe out the entire population."

Brimstone actually laughed, making many of the slavers cast unsure glances to one another.

"He's smart, but that don't mean the wee tryhard bastard's not still a raider! They don't want a slow death in here, boy. They want to burn out in a blaze of glory. To make people see their great last surge of violence and make all those behind fear them in their nightmares. He doesn't *want* out of this."

Wait, no! That wasn't true, Barb had said as much that he could get out and return to the

wastes more powerful than before. But why was he doing this then? Why incite The Master against him by destroying his slaves? He had a deal going. What was all this risk about?

I wanted to shout it, let them know he clearly had something else in mind, but those light green watchful eyes just kept staring into my heart from across the table. He seemed to chuckle as I withered under his gaze.

“Then what do you propose, master?” Ragini had been quiet thus far, but spoke up, trying to divert the discussion back toward the matter of the mission.

“A good question, Ragini. A question to the most experienced warfighter in this entire room. Warlord Brimstone, what would you suggest is the best way to placate this gang?”

Brimstone shot Protégé a harsh look. “They are *not* a gang. Get that thought from your head now or this is not going to last long. They may not say it anymore, but they are a *clan*. Strong as a group, ferocious in numbers, and without fear given proper motivation. Death before failure. One strong leader can make a rag tag group of mad ponies into an unending wave of frenzied aggression. They take after their leader. That’s why so many of them are as brutal. They had me. But now many are shifting to Barb’s style, deception and backstabbing with a sick streak to scare people. He is their icon. Kill the leader, kill the brain and the soul in one stroke. They will be much easier to bring down after that.”

“You think we can get to him? Last we spotted him from the internal windows, he was on the higher areas, deep within what is now their territory.”

“Barb is where he wants to be, don’t trust your eyes with him. As for hunting him?” He gestured to the slavers. “With this pish lot? Not a chance.”

The slavers erupted in protest, swearing at Brimstone. Glimmerlight leaned in, muttering by his side.

“Very diplomatic, Brim.”

Shackles slammed a hoof again, silencing them. He had been quiet thus far, simply sitting there and thinking with a blank look.

“Quiet down, all of you wretches! I won’t stand to see a stock under me lost like this! Shut up and listen or get out now! **Understand?**”

That shut them up. I wasn’t even talking and I felt myself nodding along with them that I was now listening. Protégé, meanwhile, seemed to go into thought for a while.

“Well, then we give them what they want, or what they think they’ll be getting. A distraction. We don’t assault properly, but detonate a lot of explosives and throw a lot of deliberately inaccurate fire toward them. Make it seem like a large storming that’s just stalled and is consistently failing on their barricades. Take all their attention. I’ll need three teams. Shackles, I want you to organ—”

Protégé’s eyes crossed across mine across the table and room. He must have seen something in my look. He stopped on the spot, thinking deeply. I knew he had his own suspicions.

“...no. Mosin, make up three teams from the guard groups. Call in any you need. Shackles, I want you to go and try to delay the griffons as long as you can. Stern has already contacted me to say her raid team will *not* be considering workers a valued hostage to rescue. We must get this done before they arrive.”

If The Master had spotted the divergence, he stayed quiet about it and carefully hidden. Instead, he just gruffly snorted and tossed his filthy mane at the mundane job offer.

“While we do what to get the slaves?”

“A raid. A small team shall infiltrate the plaza. I believe there is an outside door leading to

one of the shop cells.”

So he *did* know.

“I will take a group including Brimstone, Ragini, and a select few others to launch a surgical strike into the heart of the raiders while the majority are distracted out in the guard room with the false assault. The objective is simple. Kill Barb by any means and if possible. Clear one barricade from behind once we have a sustainable position inside the plaza. Other guards will follow us in greater numbers to cover our backs once the element of surprise is lost. Fast, direct, and aggressive. Cut off the head and let the body wither.”

Glimmerlight immediately spoke up, shifting away from me to lift her front hooves onto the table, trying to take what authority she could. I could feel her shivering. My poor friend was still feeling the shock of earlier.

“If there’s a team going in, I’m going too. We can try to secure the slaves inside or get them out the side door. Some of them do *not* deserve this.”

Shackles actually laughed.

“Silence, slave. Your masters will choose who goes and who stays. You offered your help, but a rookie initiate is not going to alter our plans.”

“No.” Protégé spoke quickly. “While I cannot say I fully agree with either of you, you are welcome to come and attempt to protect any we find or Coral should you locate her, Glimmerlight. But Barb’s death takes precedence to end the greater incident.”

Glimmerlight hadn’t taken her eyes off The Master, looking very wary.

“That’s fine, so long as I get a chance to help them.”

“Good. Get your things ready, we will be leaving soon.”

Glimmerlight nodded firmly and turned to canter to the other side of the room, continuing to strip the long rifle down and pull parts from Mosin’s cart. Without his knowledge, I noticed.

Caduceus glanced at her snapping it all together, joining the growing noise of preparations and then respectfully bowed his head to Protégé.

“You’ll need a healer with you. I had already decided to follow Glimmer. I suspect many of the slaves will require immediate attention after being under the raiders’ activities.”

“That is acceptable, I would also wish to ask you, Murk, if you wish to accompany the raid team. That hearing could provide a useful asset. That and a pony who can sneak around may be helpful against the Shades. Will you accompany us?”

Words caught in my throat. I’d been simply a bystander to all the important ponies in their planning and discussion. Now I felt eyes on me, everypony at the table had shifted to look across the room. I could see the same look on Protégé’s face as Glimmer’s. There was no shame to say no.

I wanted to say yes, I really did.

But I simply looked away, curling up again. My body was shivering and aching from wounds that, although healed, still seemed to hurt the more I thought about what these ponies were preparing for.

Just a coward.

I heard Protégé sigh lightly, before tapping for attention.

“The rest of you, stock up on every explosive and louder weapon you can to make the false offensive as convincing as possible. Mosin, find four of the best guards in the Mall to join us for the raid. Nine should be large enough for the team. Assault teams, be ready to make the push if we clear a barricade. Once inside, force a perimeter to any slaves and

evacuate them above all else! This is our time to show them that their service is valued more than any. We move in fifteen minutes, so we'll only have a short time to make it happen. Let's do it!"

The cheer hardly sounded enthusiastic, but everypony split off into a mass of final readiness.

Three stallions and one mare appeared from Mosin's picking and moved quickly to the weapons cart, stripping it almost bare of what remained. Two of the stallions, earth ponies, took a riot shotgun each and a couple of heavy duty pistols. The others, the unicorn stallion and mare, acquired carbines, one as a dual barrelled battle saddle (That lucky...). All stuck with the thick padding of their slaver guard, strapping a couple of cylindrical canisters to themselves and making sure their gas masks were ready.

They were going on what sounded like a suicide mission.

Glimmerlight racked shut the bolt of the rifle with her hooves, while holding a few test rounds in her magic. She'd left small parts all over the floor, instead crafting what looked like crude metal sights for the top out of some scrap. Her face was still and serious, concentrating on the work. Even as I watched, she moved on to a spark battery, stripping the casing off till I could see the pulsating magic gem at the centre. She held it near the barrel. What was she *planning* with that thing?

How could she think so calmly to do this? Going in with a team to the centre of almost a hundred raiders? They were all probably going to die! What let them make the choice?

Glimmerlight's eyes hadn't looked brave, but she was going in there anyway.

I just didn't understand. How could you be brave and scared at the same time? That wasn't how it worked, right? I wished I had time to tune into the radio. The DJ would know what to say, how the 'good fight' worked.

But there was another voice in my memory. The mare. Back when I had been beaten down, hurt and degraded in front of an entire city, she had been willing to stand up and show her support of me, despite her fear of The Master. She'd said something.

"Please, don't give up. There is a bright future. You will find your courage, Murky."

After those words, I'd stood on my own and walked almost proudly away, not letting The Master have the satisfaction of me being hurt before her.

I'd been scared, but I'd done it anyway.

Back in the Stable, when I had been trapped, separated from the ponies I had only then begun to see as friends, I had finally begun to know what it was like to take strength in others. To trust and have confidence in somepony.

I'd been scared then too, but Glimmer had talked me into knowing I could do it anyway.

Was that what bravery was? To be scared, but to be able to stand up tall and push through even when your mind tells you it won't end well? To take the risks because you know they have to be done?

I was so scared of Barb. That one pony was everything I feared. Somepony I couldn't hear or sneak away from. His raiders had caused me pain and tears in so many amounts. They had almost hurt Glimmerlight beyond thinking not one hour ago. They had to be stopped.

Another voice I remembered, much more recently, the Ministry Mare herself, Twilight Sparkle. The twinkling lights of that star-shape message emerged in my mind to utter those words.

"Make friends, take time to make amends, do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world. This message is to let you see from me the thoughts and fears of everypony

now. We're all dreaming of the same peace, even if we don't know it. Good luck."

Brimstone was right. Everypony was scared. We were all afraid, but we all wanted the same thing in the end.

A final voice, amidst the clutter and banging of the battle and arming up. It was so clear, just like before in the wreck of Mosin's wagon outside the city.

"The obstacles in our path can be overcome if we just work together. So don't abandon those you care about y'hear? Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better, no matter what horrors we all must share along the way."

The DJ had inspired me to take up arms before to defend my friends. Yet now, very quickly, a greater fear began to come to mind. I had seen the raiders execute somepony in the plaza, heard them torture others.

What if those were my friends next time, and I simply had to sit in here and listen to it happen?

Those words, from ponies I cared for, that I had been inspired by, or had learned from circled around my mind, repeating, meshing together their messages. My eyes were clenched shut, hearing ponies scream for help before being cut short in drawn out and agonising howls of pain. I heard slavers planning and shouting orders. Heard Brimstone galloping around, tirelessly aiding in the defence I hadn't even worked up courage to *look at*. Heard Glimmerlight muttering nothing but numbers and theories about her weapon work.

But those three voices cut through my cluttered head. The DJ, Twilight Sparkle, and the nameless mare. They'd told words of courage, of hope, and of inspiration.

"Only by sticking together can we truly save lives and make ourselves better, no matter what horrors we all must share along the way."

"Make friends, take time to make amends, do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world."

"Please, don't give up. There is a bright future. You will find your courage, Murky."

They whirled, as I remembered them time and time again. Those voices that had helped me in each individual case finally coming together. The one message I knew they had *all* been telling made up of their combined words. The message that in one beautiful moment of clarity, shut out all sound as I heard it simply spoken in my mind.

"Only by sticking together can we truly save lives. Do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world. You will find your courage, Murky."

I stood, quickly grabbing my saddlebag, fighting back the tears. I had come this far, survived Ministries, a Stable, the Fillydelphia crater, the parasprite pits, and even survived two escape attempts. Each had required me to gather my courage again and again. They were nothing near as dangerous as this was going to be.

But it *had* to be done. I couldn't let them face it alone.

Galloping across the security station, I ran into the room where everypony was gathering. Just let The Master watch me. I wasn't beaten yet.

Glimmerlight, Brimstone, Caduceus, Protégé, Ragini, The Master, Mosin, and every other slaver present turned at my pitter pattering hooves running in. Stopping, tears dripping from my eyes, I tried to get my breath through a rough heat scorched throat.

"I'm... I'm in. I'm scared b-but it needs to be done..."

Glimmerlight smiled. I even saw Brimstone nod in respect. Protégé maintained watching me, before grinning slightly with a knowing tilt of his head. The Master seemed to chuckle from the back of the room, but stayed quiet. I stomped my front hooves, trying to look

serious. This was a proper rescue, I couldn't let myself lose momentum.

"So..."

They all craned in, curious.

"What do I do first?"

The silence that lasted was somewhat uncomfortable, broken only by Ragini snorting with laughter into a wing. I even caught Glimmerlight lightly chuckling. Hey...

Protégé just nodded and stomped a hoof on the blueprints.

"Your aid is greatly welcomed, Murk. May I request your presence with the raid team?"

I had to stick with my friends, be brave for them.

"Y-yes, I'll be there.."

I felt my heart thump hard, sensing the inevitable slide into something I didn't want to do edging past the point of no return. Terror clenched at me. I'd just agreed to go into this. Oh Goddesses.

"Good. Fetch the armament you require. I want you beside me for this, warn me if you hear *anything*."

"Yes, master."

I turned, trotting over on shaky legs to the weapons cart. I found it almost empty in the wake of my friends and the slavers. All that was left were some long rifles larger than myself and a small series of revolvers that I just *knew* would be a nightmare to reload. Umzing and aahing, I paced around the cart, biting my lip. No battle saddles? Oh come on.

"Murk, is something wrong?" Protégé wandered past, checking his own revolver.

"I... I don't know what to pick. I'm not really f-familiar with guns..."

"I see." He turned away from me. "Mosin! Can you sort something out for little Murk here?"

"Negative. Nothing in the cart that won't break his little teeth. I assumed you only wanted tiny pony for warning when he cries or to act as distraction." Mosin seemed to chuckle a little at me.

Protégé did not laugh.

"I am not prone to wasting those under me, Mosin. Find him something. I won't leave Murk unprotected."

"Fine, fine, but not me. Too much *real* work to do arming ponies who won't leave puddle on each shot. Blunderbuck! Blunderbuck, where are you?"

The assistant reappeared from where he had been helping one of the slavers to attach grenades to his barding in a floral pattern and began waltzing his way across the floor to join us. Right, this buck was a little weird.

"Blunder, reporting!"

"Find this filly weapon. Take to the armoury and get something that will function on his level. Don't take too long to equip the little filly or—"

"Uh, Mosin, I don't think he's a fill—"

"Could have fooled me! Now *toropit'sya!*"

The buck saluted dramatically on the spot, before spinning in a completely unnecessary direction to face me, smiling entirely too much.

"Are you ready to *get* ready, friend?"

"Uh..."

I never had a chance to finish what I was thinking of saying.

"Let's get you to the armoury! Oh we are going to have *such* fun finding you something!"

Slack jawed at the entirely over enthusiastic, sing-song voiced Blunderbuck, I just stared to the side, noting Glimmerlight nodding her head encouragingly.

"Go with him, Murky. He's alright, I've worked with him before"

Blunderbuck brightened up.

"Ah! You remember me! Yes, Murky, is it? Wonderful!"

Protégé trotted past, away from the cart, nodding to his assistant armourer and myself.

"Be back within a few minutes if you can. We commence in ten minutes, with or without. We'll only have an hour or so to commence the raid."

"Got it, sah!"

"Y-yes, master."

I felt myself being pulled by Blunderbuck out into the hallway, where he happily trotted beside me.

"S-so, what are we going to do, um, specifi-specfu... exactly?"

"Do?" He asked with wide eyes. "Dear Murky, this is an important thing. A pony's proper outfitting is like acquiring a new suit! Oh we must find you that something that fits just right. Oh yes, I know you'll just love them! And they'll love you!"

He took off at a gallop, his magic pulling me lightly along.

"This will be so fun! Time to *find a gun!* Oh yes!"

The armoury was *gigantic* in the Mall. Behind a dozen guards and a huge door that was over a foot thick, it was even more secure than storage or the plaza. This must have been some sort of safe vault back in Old Equestria. But now, the large cages within it contained benches and racks of all sorts of weaponry. Massive wall docks housed shelf after shelf of parts and boxes of ammunition. Another cage had explosive warning signs all over it. All this from just the entrance, and I could see it only went further in.

Blunderbuck danced his way into it, springing from hoof to hoof before spinning to face me, a rather too large smile on his face as I trotted in, wide eyed.

"Oh, Murky my dear, I cannot express my delight! It's abundantly clear that somewhere in here is the gun that will fit you just right!"

Carefully trotting away from all warning signs, I followed him into the primary workshop, surrounded by all sorts of bizarre de-constructed firearms. Nervously, I tried to offer at least *some* requirements to avoid breaking my own mouth.

"I uh, can't wait to get started. But first, can I say a few things? It's kinda important the gun that I get, is something that's quiet and small."

He swaggered past me, passing a hoof around my neck briefly to wink and dive off into one of the large cages.

"Quiet! Small! Got it!"

A dull crash sounded as he dragged a box off of a cabinet top to dig around, shouting out to me as he searched. I picked at what seemed to be a giant cannon with a tiny bayonet attached to the end.

"I have so many wonderful firearms, just wait! You will see!"

I poked my head in the cage, finding him surrounded by a wealth of guns strewn all over the floor. He looked like one of the foals I'd seen in a Hearth's Warming Eve poster years ago with presents.

"Can I have something that fires a small bullet, so it won't hurt me?"

"Sure! How 'bout a *shotgun*? It's loud and proud and big as can be!"

The massive combat shotgun hovered up in front of me, the barrel about as wide as my hoof. Even I found myself looking around it with a little exasperation.

"...loud, proud? Have you even *seen* me?"

"Ah... well. Murky, have faith!" He threw one hoof around me, the other arcing out over the racks of pistols, rifles and shotguns. "You see I will *bet* you... that somewhere in here is the gun that will get you! Come on! I've got everything from mouth-held to battle saddles!"

I gasped on the spot. Yes! "Battle saddles sound good! I'd like one of th—"

I was distracted by a crash, caused by Blunderbuck throwing open another cage door and dragging out a box filled to the brim with pistols of all shapes and sizes. Digging through it eagerly, he drew one, shoving it right into my mouth without so much as asking.

"Really? Because I think this big magnum has your name written *all* over it! Aww... look it matches your mane!"

Glancing down, I saw the grip did indeed have a wooden construction rather similar to my own filthy hair, but the chambers revealed bullets liable to make me *swallow the gun* if I fired it. Sighing, I spat it back into the box.

"Uh... pass."

But Blunderbuck was already gone, heaving open a third of the tall cage doors to throw out weapon after weapon that, standing in the main workshop, I found myself dodging repeatedly. Behind him, I could see two larger cages in the darkness, heavily secured with more advanced locks. I could swear there was a pony shaped something back there. Something *big*, easily a foot taller than Brimstone himself.

"I have so many wonderful choices for you to decide!"

Galloping back out, he threw or dragged a couple of items up to me whilst I glanced into the back of the room until I was literally surrounded.

"There are big launchers and guns for massive fun!"

Indeed. All of them had long bullets or thick grenade shells dropped near them as examples. Finding my lower body half buried in them as I sat down, I just sighed on the spot.

"Launchers and big hunting guns are not *quiet*!"

Blunderbuck trotted over, almost disappointed looking before he nudged one of the thick grenade launchers, or rather the enlarged places where what seemed like small artillery shells would go instead. Mister Peace would have gotten along with Blunderbuck, I was certain.

"Maybe not, but I've heard of this *particular* shell launcher throwing people ten feet in the air when it lands!"

Urgh. This buck was just insane. I'd likely be better off asking Glimmer if I could borrow her backup pistol again. I stood up, crawling out from under the pile of firearms and weapons.

"That's all, I think. I'm gonna head outta here and—"

"Wait! There must be a gun here that will fit the ticket; how 'bout a minigun or a nice flamer?"

His magic pulled them out, holding the massive weapons beside him. True to Mosin's tale before, I could see a *sniper scope* on the flamer. What was with this...

Wait.

Those weapons were attached to battle saddles! *Eee!* Maybe he had one in my size!

“Smaller and lighter!”

“Smaller, lighter, right!” Blunderbuck dropped the heavy equipment onto the ground haphazardly (was that flamer full!?) and darted off to his workbench, where he started yanking a small mesh crate from below it, snapping together various parts. “I’ve got just the thing in this box, Murk! Meet your new fabulous big sniper!”

Holding it out proudly, I saw a silver and gemstone decorated anti-machine rifle emblazoned with some unknown writing along the side. It was garish to my art minded eyes, but just seemed to be like any other of the half dozen big rifles I could see on the walls.

“It’s... just a big and loud sniper.”

“Not just any big and loud sniper! A *silenced* big and loud sniper!”

He pointed with a hoof to a tiny bit on the end of the barrel that looked like it would silence it in the same way that me standing on a small book would make me tall.

“So, um, like I said...”

I sighed, turning to face the rather dejected looking armourer pony. He held the silver rifle close.

“Blunderbuck, please, these won’t do it. Any gun in my mouth will just hurt me. I need something on a saddle, something tiny! With recoil that won’t make me defy gravity!”

“Hmm...” Blunderbuck rubbed his chin, scratching his light grey coat. The rifle folding and disassembling back into the box. He began casting his eyes toward a yet untouched cage that only now I saw was filled with straps... saddles! “I’m sensing you want a gun that’s small.”

Even I couldn’t cull the deadpan tone from my voice. “You think?”

Not one to seemingly let my denial of his favourite big guns get the better of him, Blunderbuck swivelled on the spot, smiling the moment he came to face me again. I hated to admit it, but the joyful eccentric manner was starting to catch me up in his sheer enthusiasm. *Especially* as it might have a battle saddle by the end of it!

He began scrambling to throw open the cage door, ushering me inside before grabbing a measuring tape with his magic and checking me over with it.

“I have plenty of wonderful guns that’ll go by your side! Like a sweet combat shotty or a giant dual IF-Nine!”

“Better, but smaller!”

He began to pull some leather straps with small gears and slides of metal off the racks, wrapping them around me. I could barely contain my excitement, he was *customising* it for me! I was getting my very own at last! But what to have on it? Oh the possibilities!

“I see. Well how bout a carbine, or a sawn off or a pistol? There are so many wonderful firearms the likes of that.”

Each swept into the cage or down from above to hang before me where I let my wide eyes glance across them. Oooh...

“Or there are plasmas and lasers, they both have no recoil! Or perhaps what you need is a hushed and poisoned dart.”

“Now you’re talking!”

The odd contraptions for energy weapons hurt my brain to even imagine how they worked. But bright coloured flashes sounded really cool! I could even make them match my coat and mane! I wanted to skip in a circle, but the gradually building light battle saddle around me held me in place. I heard a whirring and sliding as it wound its way around my fleece, attaching little spindles and mechanical instruments to one side. The hooks for

weaponry and tools went on next!

Blunderbuck hopped around me. If anything, his voice became higher pitched the more he wildly got excited. But I cast my eyes across the half dozen weapons arrayed before me. I wasn't even really into shooting, but a battle saddle was just so *cool* that I had no idea what to pick for it. When would I ever get the chance again? My fear of the mission was thrown back, hidden for now by the delight of all this choice.

"Hm. But instead of just one stand out, now that's too many!"

He craned a hoof over me, holding his head against mine. Normally, I'd have recoiled at somepony being so close, but too much excitement was whirling around in my body to care.

"Not a bad problem to have if you ask me!"

Once again, I cast my eyes over it, feeling the momentum of the moment and his excitement mesh with my own.

"The darts would be awesome, but the carbine I'm liking too. Do you have something in a longer ranged dart?"

"No, but I've got a dart that's less than lethal, if them dying's not for you!"

Argh, so much choice! "Oh... what to do, what to do... OH!"

I visibly hopped, an idea finally coming to mind!

"Of course! That's it! There's really just one way, to find the gun that really suits me best!"

Blunderbuck's eyes widened, seemingly confused as I hopped into the racks and racks of small pistols, searching and searching.

"A shiny pistol! That's small! Quiet and polite, that will fit on this saddle just right!"

Aha! There it was! My hooves dumped dozens upon dozens of pistols out of the way or threw open the cages to spot it. *Rarity's Grace* lay atop a pile, right where it had been left! As gorgeous looking as ever, it would sit gracefully and artistically upon this new battle saddle of mine! I grabbed it in my mouth, before it flew out again from Blunderbuck's magic and began to clip on amongst the various fragile pieces he was attaching to my sides.

"Don't forget style! That should be considered!"

"So we know for sure it won't sparkle and glitter?"

"For the one who is sneaky and small..."

"Just like me!"

Finally, leather straps and a small metal frame descended over it. The entire saddle felt tiny on me, tight fitting and thin, with *Rarity's Grace* covered by thin black leather to hide the sheen. This saddle was probably the lightest one I'd ever seen to fit me, and only capable of holding small weaponry and tools, but I didn't care! I had one! I had one at last!

"It might hold much less, but it feels the best!"

"Cos it's all measured up just for you, see?"

Blunderbuck laughed out loud at hearing my pleasure with it. Pulling a strap tight to latch the mouthpiece to my... side? Well that was interesting, but with a quick flick of my hoof, pulled by Blunderbuck, the mouthpiece whipped off my side and flicked around to be ready in front of my jawline. Oh *wow*! Another flick sent it flipping back out of the way! But it didn't restrict me moving at all! It was just an extra little bit of leather and metal that sat around me to support light arms and things! I smiled so much to Blunderbuck. Why couldn't all slavers be as cool as him?

"This is the number one, greatest, and perfectest saddle in the world for me!"

Armed up, no, *saddled* up, I trotted in a circle, grinning, before heading to the doorway. *Rarity's Grace* felt snug and smooth beside me under a little flap of dark leather to stop it

glinting. Blunderbuck accompanied me into the corridor before waving goodbye.

"Then let the mission begin... and may the best side win!"

With a laugh, I turned and galloped off back toward the briefing. I'd be scared as all hell soon, but for now, I could be happy with a proper little saddle just for me at last!

...eee!

Unfortunately, merely owning a battle saddle didn't particularly make me feel any more powerful en-route back to the security room. Twice I was ushered by galloping slavers to simply flee with them away from a barricade as armour piercing rounds ripped through it. The corridors were a warzone of barely blocked off defences holding the ferocious raiders inside. They weren't the best shots, but they had a frenzied courage to not flinch from any incoming fire.

Sticking low, I dodged under slavers that returned the shots with their own, squealing whenever somepony kicked my small form out of the way or knocked past me in doorways.

I just stayed happy inside, tried to force it all out, and concentrated on the reassuringly tight and comfortable feel of a little battle saddle around me. Yes, stay happy, stay brave.

The thought occurred that Protégé must really trust me to simply hand me a weapon for the raid. Not too long ago, he had *shot* me. From taking so long to properly heal, I now had a scar on my chest from that. He had stood before me, denied me, and brought me down with a bullet. Now I was being permitted to be around him, carrying a loaded firearm.

The shock of the thought made me stop just outside the doorway to the security room.

What if I'd been the one with a gun? Could I have pulled the trigger if he had been in my way to freedom?

Somehow, achingly, I began to suspect that I could not have. Despite everything that he had done to me, I could not envision myself in that position and going through with the last horrific pull of a trigger to find freedom at the cost of killing somepony who seemed to care for me, as twisted as that kindness was.

Sighing and trotting inside, I found most ponies still in a state of half-readiness. Somepony had dumped armour and suits from the security station lockers on the floor, where they had been stripped of their metal plates. But the atmosphere was different. No pony was really talking. Most seemed to be in their own little worlds; checking weapons, carving wood with magic into little shapes, cleaning a bolt or barrel. Brimstone paced nearby. I couldn't see him in this portion of the multi-roomed security station, but I could certainly *hear* him. Part of me wanted to talk to him, but even with our little exchange earlier, I just didn't feel quite ready to know what to say to the hulking raider so soon after his complete rampage in the storage room.

Everypony had their little tricks to keep themselves distracted, to try and prepare themselves mentally for the upcoming storm. I could see Glimmerlight still working around her long rifle, attaching the spark battery to the end of the barrel. It's light blue glow shone through the protective casing with clearly overloaded energy. I could see three other drained batteries near her. Whatever she was up to, I doubted I wanted to be near it when it went off.

She looked up as I trotted nearer, smiling widely to me. But I'd been around her long enough to spot when it was just her forcing it. Even Glimmerlight couldn't be too happy

about this situation. She'd had a rough day with Coral revealing her secrets to us all and then the encounter with Barb's raiders.

"You're looking swanky in that saddle, Murky. It suits you!"

I tried to smile as well, succeeding in a much less effective manner.

"T-thanks. It just feel good to have, and-and look!"

I twitched my front leg, making the mouthpiece pop out and flick around on sprung gears. The oh-so-satisfying sound made my smile a little more genuine. With the same movement, I sent it back, then out again. Eventually, Glimmerlight just laughed, reaching over to ruffle my mane. But her eyes were more serious, looking into mine.

"Good stuff. Loving the flick action. But I'd prefer if you didn't need to use it. Please, Murky, try to stay back from the fighting when it starts. I don't know how I'd feel if I had to lose you so soon after we've met, y'know? After hearing from Coral I just..."

She looked away, then back, before hugging me tightly.

"I just feel glad knowing there's still a few folks care for an free living, spontaneous mare like myself. Don't think I didn't see you *trying* to help when those raiders."

I just tugged tightly back, nuzzling into my 'sister's' shoulder. My voice was muffled, but I tried to make it as sincere as I could.

"I just wanted you to be okay. I don't know what I'd have done up till now without you. If I'd been left to hear Sundial talk about his mother without you around t-to help..."

"We help each other, Murky. We're both hurting, but we're in this hell together. But, I have to save Coral now, no matter what, I'm going all out. So, if anything happens in there —"

I cut her off. "No. We'll both—"

Glimmer didn't even let me continue. "If *anything* happens to me, I want you to stick with Brim, alright? He says he's all for me, but I *know* he's better than that. He'll protect you."

Already I could feel my eyes tearing up, but I held it back at just a few drips, forcing myself to nod. "I will..."

"Thanks, Murky. But don't worry, there's plenty of fight left in this mare yet. Now, go see Caduceus, he wants to check you over before we head in. Don't worry about me."

She tapped the strange rifle she was toying with. I could actually see the individual bullets all popped open to be adjusted with something. What *was* she doing?

"I've got plenty of bang all readied up for those bastards in there. We'll go in, get the slaves, kill Barb, and then piss off to the Roamer to get stinking drunk. Might even try to hook you up with somepony."

I blushed on the spot, feeling embarrassment overwhelm even fear for one wonderful moment of simple worry. I hugged her once more, before leaving Glimmer to her work and wandering toward a huge pile of armour that had the nurse earth pony sitting near it sat nearby.

Caduceus was leaning on the wall and organising his medical supplies into neat rows, organising and counting. Most apparently for his pack or into the armour he had pulled from the pile earlier for quick reaching. Bandages, small healing potions, and a couple syringes stood out to me. He brushed that thick blonde mane from his face to glance at me. Compared to most of the slave bucks, he seemed better fed, likely due to his specialised role, giving him a much more reassuring 'non-filthy slave' feel to permit him to check me over.

"Ah, Murk. How are you feeling after those healing potions?"

"Better. My shoulder and chest don't hurt really anymore. But I still feel..."

"Beaten? Unsettled?"

"Yeah. My ribs and eyes hurt, and my forehead..."

Caduceus motioned for me to sit as he checked me over, resting his hoof over my chest or examining my scar. The young buck was firm, professional, and oddly comforting. He'd proven his will to help out by putting himself in harm's way for us twice already and by helping heal me after Barb's raiders had their way.

"You *are* mostly fine. I believe it's mostly just the body knowing it's not *quite* right yet. Healing potions, for all their power, are pretty imprecise. We never can tell quite where most of their power is going to go if somepony has as many hurt parts as you did. But I can assure you, as far as such a hurt little pony as you can be, you've got nothing critical other than your lungs left over for this mission. Even your shrapnel wound closed up at last."

He was right. Although I'd tried to ignore the hideous mark the chunk of shrapnel had left on my lower leg, it had stopped bleeding since I'd stolen The Master's healing potions. That was worth smiling about, right? I tried to do so to Caduceus. Really, I'd given him too little credit.

"Caduceus, I, uh... thanks."

"It's alright, Murky. Just doing what I do. Or what I should be doing, anyway."

I must have raised an eyebrow in confusion, as he looked right at me and began to explain before I could even voice the question. Darn healers... always so perceptive.

Caduceus settled down, letting the armour barding fall before him lightly.

"See, Murky, like I was saying before, I've spent all my time in Helpinghoof Clinic or in Hearts and Hooves Hospital. I've had patients brought to me again and again, handing me nothing more than the instructions to take care of them. My only goal was to be an actual doctor, like Helpinghoof himself or Weathervane. But it was just... horrible, now that I think about it."

"Horrible?"

"Every day, ponies were being wheeled in to me, hurt or dying. Many we would save or help out, but there was always more. The wasteland or Fillydelphia, they just created more and more ponies with injuries, hurt so many that our job was nothing but just hour after hour of pain and seeing torment."

He stopped, shrugging.

"I guess... I guess meeting you guys, I've just realised I don't want that. I don't want to be the one who just sits in a clinic waiting for people to get hurt. I'm no grand healer, but I can't ignore this chance here, to use my skills in a way to *prevent* harm, not just *cure* it. If that includes offering my healing knowledge to you in your escape, I'm in."

That was pretty admirable, I had to admit. The thought of him accompanying us was very comforting. But the buck bashfully seemed to bite his lip.

"So, uh, I know Glimmer's fine with me but... if I may be as forward, would you accept me as one of your little group?"

The question surprised me. *Me* being given some sort of query for permission? But he deserved it. He really did.

"Um... sure?"

Much to my surprise, he leaned forward, quickly giving me a hug. I just sat in shock. What was he—

"Thank you. Sorry to sort of throw that on you, but really, I felt you needed to know

Glimmer isn't the only one of us around you who feels you need a little hug now and again. You are a poor little thing."

That I guess I could be fine with. I could tell he was speaking the truth. Coughing into my hoof, still feeling a little awkward, I just mumbled a thank you. Having friends still felt so new. The idea that ponies could just be so nice and comforting to one another like this felt so strange.

"Now, I better get all this organised. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared witless, but a stand's a stand, right?"

"S-sure. I'll just get some armour or something."

He nodded, smiling and turning back to his own saddlebag and barding.

Trotting toward the pile of armour, I began piecing through it, carefully attempting to not make a noise that would disturb the dozen or so ponies around me that lay in wait for the time to move. Everything outside, the raider attacks, the desperate defence, and the cries of the slave hostages every so often as they were thrown and shoved into cells with each other for 'storage', it all seemed muted in here. Two ponies watched the window, training rifles through it that kept most raiders out of line of sight.

Somehow, I was more afraid of making a noise here than when trying to avoid most slavers out to get me, like I would disturb their peace.

Most of the armour was simply too big or heavy for me. Some plates of armour, stripped from combat barding, looked the right size, but upon lifting were immensely heavy, as though from a highly dense material. I dragged out a small vest. It seemed the right size; all nice and black, too! But a quick examination found the actual armour inside had been stripped out. Just my luck.

Digging through more, I found one that still had its armour plates inside. While not black, it was still dark blue and seemed about the right size I could sew down a little and fit into if I had time. It certainly seemed like a uniform of the ponies who worked here. I couldn't read, but even I could recognise the same shape of words. This one bore an emblazoned word in bright yellow upon its back, the same as above the door to this room's station, one all too easy to guess.

'SECURITY'

Immediately, I simply dropped it from my hooves, sighing at a lack of anything worthwhile. What kind of *idiot* would wear something like that? Anypony would see those bright yellow letters for miles! You couldn't hide and sneak around with them.

Eventually, I simply decided to forget anything big. Armour wasn't my thing, as I'd found in the past. It only slowed me down or made it harder to squeeze into little places. If I was being shot at, I was doing something wrong anyway. It'd be better to just stay light and as agile as my frail little body could ever manage, and avoid everything altogether. To that end, I simply took a few small pieces of thickened leather to shove inside my fleece around my torso. At the very least it'd stop it hurting so much when I hit the ground from diving or being thrown.

Pulling my fleece and battle saddle (Eee!) back on, I began to trot around, looking for someplace to curl up in and wait myself. I would sketch until the time to go, hopefully of good things to calm my mind that was quickly beginning to readjust, and remember what I'd agreed to do here. I'd have to draw something very nice to distract myself. Something that would make me smile and feel happy and warm inside and...

...and I could almost *hear* Glimmerlight teasing me in my mind for thinking of what my

mind had defaulted to. Oh come on, now she was invading my own subconscious?

But trotting through the station, I instead spotted one pony standing separate from everypony else. Ragini was leaned against the cage I'd wanted to go into anyway, fiddling with the scope on her light flyer's rifle. But Protégé, he stood alone, apart from everypony else near an internal window that gave security guards of old a view into the plaza. It was pock marked with bullet impacts, clearly until somepony gave up trying to get him through it.

I could see his face reflected in it, looking more sombre and forlorn than I'd ever imagined he could. Without really knowing why, I began quietly trotting up towards my master. His revolver floated in the air beside him, reloading, unloading, and reloading again. A consistent and ongoing fidgeting from his telekinesis. Spotting me in the window, he turned just enough for his one visible eye to see me.

"I see you've acquired something you always longed for then, Murk? Good for you."

"Yes, master. Thank you."

Trotting up further, I hopped up to peer into the plaza. It was mostly empty, but clouds of smoke emerged from burning wood near the fountain. Clearly, most of them were all in the shop cells for cover or underneath us in the guardroom for defence from slaver assaults. I had to stifle my whine as I saw the horrific sight of two ponies hung from the balconies that connected either side of the higher levels above the floor. Their limp bodies, one buck and one mare, swayed gently.

We said nothing more for a few seconds, while I tried to pull myself together. Protégé seemed to gaze at everything and yet nothing in any detail. He didn't even turn to me as he finally broke the silence. Speaking softly and barely moving his lips.

"I had a dream once, you know? Still get it sometimes."

"Huh?"

He stared ahead, talking quietly.

"A dream of Equestria. Of green fields, bright sunlight, and vivid colours amongst a peaceful and safe world for everypony. Of a time in which there are no divisions between individuals, and no hatred of purpose and direction. A world in which we did not live in fear that we'd never get to be what we truly wanted. No masters, no slaves; simply a free nation of opportunity and optimism. As best I can, I pursue that dream, Murk. Master Red Eye gave me this chance to create a world which I might be prouder of than the one I was born into."

He lifted a hoof, placing it on the glass, and gazing intently past it into the plaza, at the atrocities committed within, at the bloodstained and wrecked shop fronts. I had seen this world Protégé spoke of in Aurora's memory orb. Had he done the same? He was a unicorn after all.

"But this... this just isn't what I ever wanted to happen."

I turned my head to look at him. I could see a look on his face I'd only once seen before atop a roof outside Fillydelphia. Pain. Pain, and sadness deep in his eyes. He wasn't a harsh taskmaster or cruel overseer. Right now all I saw was one pony who longed for something better than the hoof even he had been dealt.

"I'm sorry, master."

"No, Murk. It is I who is sorry. For everything you've been through as a part of all this whole mess in Fillydelphia. No pony deserves to be born a slave, to never even know or be allowed to choose their own life."

I shuffled on the spot, turning to the window again, feeling a little awkward to see my master express such emotion even through a simple look.

I barely muttered in response. "Uh, I meant, I'm sorry that all this has happened. In here."

Protégé glanced briefly at me, as though judging to see if I were truly meaning it. I was surprised to find I did. Even if I felt guilty inside at helping cause it.

"Thank you, Murk. I'm just glad you and your friends are safe at the very least. But I have let down those I swore to protect. If I had the resources or options to keep those raiders separate, I would have. Fillydelphia, for all its ideals, I sometimes wish could do more to help those who don't deserve such a life in here."

An awkward silence took over again. It was clear exactly who part of that last sentence was really meant to refer to. Resting my head on my hooves that were up on the window lip, I simply remained beside him for a while. But something began to bug me. From his journal I'd seen and from the things I'd heard every slaver say about him, he just felt so out of place amongst slavers.

"M-master, can I ask you, s-something, um... before we go in there?"

"Of course, Murk."

I scuffed a hoof, trying to build the courage to just ask. Finally, I took a breath and spoke.

"Why are you with Red Eye?"

My master still didn't turn round, his eye following one slave as she made a break for it below, trying with all her might to stand, gallop, and escape; before being dragged right back into her cage by a raider.

Eventually, his eyepiece clicked off, hovering around before his face where he simply stared at the little device as though it alone contained the answer.

"To find freedom."

Those were not the words I expected. Swivelling on the spot, I more properly faced him, finding both of those bright red eyes staring back at me. Only now did I begin to see how unkempt and clearly run-ragged he was amongst the riot that had shattered his work in the Mall apart. His mane had straggled, strands loose from being tied back falling across his face while his eyes were sullen.

"Freedom from more than just the chains that bind. Freedom from the wasteland entirely, from all these horrors that we all experience. But not just for myself, for all other ponies who seek it or deserve it too. Ponies like you."

He reached one hoof across, laying it on my shoulder with a weak smile that died immediately.

"Master Red Eye helped me, Murk. He found me when I had nothing left, no belief driving me or virtue to take heart in. He saved my life, offering a direction to pursue a better world with. The road was hard, harder than anything I had ever been told to do before, but I knew it was worth travelling. Now, I seek to do the same for others that he did to me. To find those who deserve a better life or who have more to offer, and help make that happen."

My eyes widened.

"You mean..." I gulped. "You mean you want me to *join* you? To find other ponies who aren't all bad to make things better in here?"

"I want to *help* you and those like you, Murk. To help them find their freedom from where they've been brought, through Fillydelphia's hardships, and to perhaps help Equestria

along the way. That is why I brought you here, that I might try to keep you safer and on a more stable path to what it is you want in the end. Whether that be simply your freedom from all slavery, or to perhaps try and help me try to make this a better place. I can teach you, aid you, and protect you as best I can if you stick by my side."

I dropped my voice, looking away to the side.

"The freedom I want? I just want to be free, master. To one day know what it's like to be beyond the wall, no matter where that wall's ever been."

"That is your choice. But I promise Murk, when we come back from this, I will do more for you. Perhaps a chance to remain by my side more, away from those that may harm you when not serving your two years. Everypony deserves a fair chance to succeed."

"But what about Glimmerlight, master? What about Coral Eve and all the others? You don't give them half the attention or..."

I stammered on the word, afraid to say it.

"...or *care* that you give me."

He went quiet. I felt his hoof rest a little more firmly on my shoulder, before he lightly patted it instead.

"Some ponies have it worse than others. I've told you so many times that I understand what you're going through on these duties for two years, Murk. That I know what it's like to have such hardship. Perhaps the calm before the storm of battle has made me willing to reflect on life, but I have never once lied to you."

My mouth dropped open, drawing air sharply as some clouds in my mind cleared and put two and two together.

"Y-you went through..."

I saw his shoulders sink, as though remembering something unpleasant.

"Two years is a hard journey, Murk. It is filled with danger, hard choices, and the attentions of those who don't care about you reaching the end. Especially hard for somepony who was born into slavery."

Attaching the eyepiece to his barding, Protégé turned from the window to face in at the team making their final preparations. He stopped, turning his head back, but not looking directly at me. His eyes simply seemed to look at nothing in particular. I knew that look. I'd worn it many times when I'd been looking backward on my life. But he was once a... he'd been born a...

"It's not nice, is it Murk? Not knowing how to think for yourself or know what choices to make? Not understanding the emotions that flow through you after meeting the one pony who finally opens your eyes to something more?"

I couldn't speak, only stand with a mouth struggling to not just hang slightly open and quiver in an attempt to say anything. More than ever, I finally understood the link, the way that he always just 'got' how I was feeling or what I was thinking. The one element of life that connected us in a way only we could ever understand to ourselves.

Protégé looked more the striving lonely pony than I had ever truly seen before, as I saw him offer a thin smile and turn back to the teams as Ragini returned and strode over to him.

"Word from Shackles on the griffons. Sixty minutes, master! That's all they said they'd permit you to handle the matter internally before they make an example of everypony inside for rioting. Apparently a couple dozen slaves don't matter to them beside of making a proper showcase of why you don't riot. But Mosin reports all teams are ready for the false assault."

"Thank you, Ragini. Then I suppose we should get started. We don't have long."

Everypony looked over at the words. Stood in the centre of the team, under the gaze of Glimmerlight, Brimstone, Caduceus, Ragini, the four slavers accompanying us and of course, my own stunned look, he just spoke quietly.

"I shall not make a grand speech or shout words of encouragement. But our course is set in. Ponies require our aid in there. Whether we are simply following orders or pursuing something of greater idealism, we are one team seeking to save the lives of those who have no reason to die in a forgotten pain inside those walls."

He turned, eyeing each of them in turn. His gaze was sad, but not just for others. Now I knew the great truth behind why he cared so much about slaves. I saw Brimstone match it with that rock solid glare, saw Caduceus pull his saddlebag tighter, saw Glimmerlight show her support with a little wink.

"We do not stop. We do not leave them to this fate, in the same building with which we have been striving to create a better way than what we see every day out in the other worker dens."

Finally, his eyes stopped across mine.

"No pony deserves to just be a forgotten number."

My eyes felt like they'd turn damp, but I controlled it, forcing it all down and with great trepidation, nodded. In response, Protégé seemed to lift the corners of his mouth a little. Turning away, slowly, the eyepiece returned to his face.

"Luck be with you all. Let's go."

An artificial night blanketed Fillydelphia.

Storm clouds moved above us, rolling and swirling amongst the smog, creating a charcoal roof that darkened the normally red haze of Fillydelphia. Glows of the industry were the exception rather than the rule all too suddenly, as most ponies had rushed indoors or under cover from the trepidation of the oncoming thunderstorm.

With good reason. In Fillydelphia, the rain *burned*.

The wind whipped at me, whirling down the larger streets and howling in the alleyways, it was more like a siren of its own, warning everypony to get away from what the sky was about to unleash. On far streets, I could see the thin lights of a cordon keeping the Mall under watch for any raider break outs.

We waited around the back of the Mall, hiding in silence amongst ditches just away from the shop cell's metal stock entrance. Protégé and Ragini were up ahead, Glimmer and Brimstone behind them, then the four slavers, and finally Caduceus and myself bringing up the rear. The early warning and the medic. Behind us lay another couple dozen slavers, awaiting the chance to rush in and support our first push. Truth be told, part of me wanted to be upfront right now, with Protégé. My mind was whirling, confused, afraid, panicking, and absolutely curious now that I knew what he truly *was*.

Really, everything of how I saw him had been turned on its head. When we got back after all this... *if* we got back, I needed to have a long talk with him.

I sat amongst the dirt, crouching low and watching the door. I was tasked to hear the assault starting, but that meant I could also hear every gunshot, every scream from inside.

That was if I could hear it above all this wind. It actually hurt my ears, sending my big one flapping back and forth as it blew madly all over Fillydelphia and send small twisting

dervishes along the dusty roads.

With any luck the primary storm would just miss us before—

The sky, all of it, flashed.

“Eek!”

I found myself wrapped around the nearest pony. Unfortunately for him, that turned out to be Caduceus. Half choking as my front legs crushed his windpipe in shock, holding onto him with wide eyes. The sky had lit up for half a second... lightning. I didn't *like* lightning. With luck like mine, I was always afraid it would just hit me wherever I was.

Almost lethargically, the storm brewing above let out a distant and deep rumble of thunder that made my mismatched ears throb and jitter above my head. The sound grew and went on far longer than any normal sky had a right doing. Without pegasi treating it, the Equestrian weather patterns could be downright ferocious.

The sky rumbled again, louder, more urgent and wild. Squeaking, I crushed tighter, barely even hearing Caduceus' gasps and frantic hoofing of me to stop it. I hated storms.

“...urk! Ca... breathe!”

I dropped off him, still shivering on the spot.

“Oh! I'm so sorry... sorry sorry sorry, I didn't mean to—”

“It's... phew...” He lay on his side for a moment, rubbing his throat. “It's alright, no harm, whew... done. When I said hugs were fine that wasn't quite what I meant, heh...”

He forced a smile, nodding that he was indeed fine, but I still sat back in my ditch nervously. This waiting was making me so nervous that I felt ready to leap and just run or dig into the earth any second. I felt so exposed out here, even with the rickety corrugated metal shelters above our positions short of the door. Just waiting, waiting for it all to start in the blowing wind and hoping this storm didn't get worse.

Then I heard a drip.

It was followed by another, and another, then three more in quick succession. A little warm plop on my head was followed by even more.

Without any more warning, the clouds opened and streams of water battered down from the sky. Blocking sight lines, covering all around us, and striking the ground so hard that it pinged back upwards by a good two feet. The wind sent it whirling under our shelter, washing across us every few seconds. The lightning wracked the sky once more, flaring the majestic shape of the Mall into stark relief before us. But its contents only made me nervous now. A raider stronghold.

Every exposed piece of skin began tingling, a prelude to burning pains if you were left out in the rain for too long. But we had to hold here. We couldn't go any closer without risking alerting the raiders by sound until we absolutely had the assault's noise cover. That meant we simply had to endure, ever the tale of the slave.

Already my brow was stinging, my mane flattened almost immediately across it. Puddles formed, and I almost lost myself in the oddly lukewarm water with my short legs. Caduceus was tossing his head, trying to flick it all off. He was blinking a lot, the same as me. The water was making my eyes sear and ache. Whimpering, trying not to scream in fear of making too much noise, I did my best to stay under the little shelter we had. Those around us were almost invisible through the deluge, some of the slavers cursing as exposed bodies felt their skin crawl with pain.

“Well, thanks for that, Celestia, you great big bitch,” muttered one of the slavers, the unicorn mare. She caught my shocked look, before just rolling her eyes and turning away.

Protégé just seemed to stand alone, watching the crater under the rain that was striking the ground so hard it bounced as high as my head, sometimes spitting up into my eyes.

Really, I knew this was an opportunity, but my courage to ask had failed me. Now I didn't even know if I was looking at a slave or a master anymore. He was both and yet neither, stuck between two worlds and choosing the one that set him apart from me. Even just watching him standing and staring into the distant crater, I felt nervous to even think about his life. But it explained so much about him.

Under the storm's blackness, the crater was an eerie sight. I'd been in it before. It had just seemed like a blasted ruin. But in such darkness, I could see an ominous light glow coming from the core, drifting in the dust that swayed on the wind between the irregular torrents of rainfall. There was no pony but the raid teams around, giving rise to an odd sense of isolation within the normally bustling city.

Tossing my head and whimpering at the growing pain from the rain as it blew into my face, I tried to shelter down in the ditch as best I could, but the ground was becoming muddy, dripping water down the sides to cluster below my hooves. Everypony was fidgeting, all except Brimstone in his fairly enclosed armour, and Protégé, who simply stood with his eyepiece off and staring deeply into it.

Already, my stomach was twisting over and over at the terror of what would happen once we went beyond that door. Fear kept building. We were uncomfortable, trapped in the humid and heavy air, in pain from the poisoned water, and just awaiting the signal to begin a brutal assault. Even my rampant curiosity and confused glances toward Protégé were not helping me to fight the urge to run and hide.

But I could hardly think on that now. My eyes kept returning to him standing just short of the rain.

But I really didn't know if I were staring at a fellow slave just like me or whether I simply saw my master.

When we got back, I needed a long talk with him. I had to—

In the distance, I heard a sound. A hollow *'Thoom!'*

My ears perked before my face even reacted, was that thunder? But immediately after, there was a second, and a third.

My heart began to slow, like I wanted to ignore it, deny it.

It had been an explosion, dull and far off through many walls, muffled by the rain. But I had heard it.

I immediately reached over and clattered my hoof on a slab of metal, alerting Protégé without having to raise our voices. He turned, watching me intently.

"Murk?"

A roar of gunfire began to pick up. Those closer to the door were even beginning to look up now. I saw Ragini nod.

"The assault."

Protégé wasted no time in drawing his revolver and clipping the eyepiece back on.

"This is it, team! Brimstone, get the door! Everypony else, weapons at the ready and kill all noise. We infiltrate as far as we can before we have to open fire!"

Brimstone rushed up to the door, his great hooves wrapping around the bars to tug it open; the rain washing off his armour while he did so. He'd ditched the helmet. I guessed out of fear of what it brought out in him. Everypony else readied up, drawing weapons or tightening armour as we galloped up through the sodden ground. My skin stung under the

rain, my mane flopped and my fleece soaked it up within seconds of moving into the thick deluge.

I flicked my leg, making the mouthpiece flip out for *Rarity's Grace*. I had its three shots and the two grenades I'd stolen from The Master's locker. It'd have to do in my protection. But a strange wave of calm overcame me. The waiting was over.

With a creak and groan, Brimstone threw the door open, heavy metal hinges sliding uneasily on rusted joints. Even above the thunderstorm and rain, the firefight was now audible at a ferocious level inside, punctuated by all sorts of explosions.

Protégé was first up, disappearing inside, followed by Ragini. Everypony else followed. Glimmer, with a last firm nod to me. Brimstone, with that grim expression. After them, the slavers, who warily trooped in.

Caduceus stopped, offering a hoof back as the other 'back end' pony.

"Just keep moving; we stall and I'll probably be too scared to move too. We'll just stick together Murky, the two of us. Okay?"

Standing in the harsh wind, I took a few breaths before nodding, reaching out to take his hoof, and disappearing inside.

Here we go.

We were home.

The back of our shop cell was decimated. The sofa torn up and the scrap pile tossed and scattered from raiders searching for anything. Shelves were toppled, and the stench of waste and blood drifted throughout.

Brimstone hauled the door closed as lightly as he could behind us, leaving one stone in the hinge to let the relief force behind us in when their time came. But he hadn't needed to be that quiet, for the assault was drowning everything out. Explosions every few seconds and the staccato report of gunfire pounded throughout the building. I could hear raiders galloping by the front of the cell, rushing to the guard rooms and returning fire with long bursts.

Protégé was up front, ready and edging closer to the door. Looking back, he motioned me over as the remainder of the raid team settled into the corners, staying silent. I crept over, hustling up beside him and feeling the unicorn lean close to my ear.

"We need to know what's out there. You have it?"

I did indeed. My new toy. A few minutes waiting had been spent making it. Pulling the little mirror I'd found from the containers out, it was now attached to a thin piece of metal and bound on with fabric. My master took it, his magic angling it just out to peer around the corner and into the main shop.

Both of us stared at it, oh-so-patiently angling it for the best viewpoint that would show us the front of the store and whether there were any guards. Occasional blurs of motion on the dirty mirror gave rise to them pushing past the front in twos or threes. We waited. Still, stay still...

I listened carefully. After a while, with no more movement on the mirror and no sounds nearby, I nodded. The responsibility of the decision weighed heavy, but with recent knowledge, I found myself eager to do as Protégé wished of me. Somehow, he felt closer, like I had to help him all the more.

Ragini went first, proving herself remarkably stealthy as she slid around the corner and behind the counter of the shop. She *had* followed me all night once without me ever spotting her, I supposed. Griffons were light on their feet.

Protégé went after her, followed by Glimmerlight. Two of the slavers were waved into the store, where I saw them roll behind a low shelving unit in the middle. Each stayed in cover, out of the way of the main open entrance. I just hung back in the stock room with Caduceus and Brimstone; the big raider would move with us, waiting for anything to kick off for his might to be unleashed.

As if we needed any more. The assault was ear shattering. Automatic gunfire and echoes reverberating everywhere, accompanied by frantic shouting about reloading or to cover each other crossed over whoops of frenzied delight. It may have all been out of the plaza and past the guard room, but to me, it was as though I was right in the middle of it.

This was the hard bit. We knew Barb was on the upper levels, but the only staircase was out of the shop front and then fifty metres to the right across ground that was visible from above. Most of the raiders would be out front, away in the corridors, but any that were above would likely spot us. The entire point was just to get as far as we could before that happened.

“Everypony ready?” Protégé’s voice hissed out, responded by a series of light taps. I didn’t tap. I wasn’t ready, but I knew I had no say in this.

It was just going to be a straight run. One brutal rush to get upstairs and kill Barb before bunkering down around any slaves we could find.

“Go!”

Protégé and Ragini swept out of the store front. Glimmerlight went right after them, followed by the slaver fireteam. Brimstone shoved Caduceus and myself out before him and we galloped across the shop into the plaza.

Into hell.

Under the storm, the plaza was leaking terribly. Water dripped from the skylight above or down from rusty pipes on the walls. Already the surging wind could be heard under the rumble of thunder. Lightning flared, lighting the entire grisly sight of a raider encampment. Fires had their smoke mixed with the rain, offering sight upon the mutilated bodies that were hung from balconies or horribly tortured unto death while lashed to wooden planks. Skins or bloodstained clothes were scattered everywhere. And the stench...

My stomach twisted all the more with revulsion, requiring Caduceus to grab my hoof and pull me on. We galloped right into it, hopping over the foul remnants as we stuck to the wall of shops and every shadow we could. Above us I could hear the raiders. If I turned my head, I could see one or two on the opposite side of the plaza, up above on the balcony. They weren’t looking down, instead distracted by the sounds coming from the guardroom.

“Cover!”

Protégé’s voice sounded just loud enough for me to relay the message by tugging the others. We dropped into the next shop alone, scrambling behind old jewellery stands to hide. Poking my head out just enough, I saw three more raiders run across the plaza from the stairs. We’d dodged all sight by sheer luck.

The next stretch of the plaza would cover us much better. The balconies didn’t exist this far back, as the entire level above stretched across the entire plaza, filling the whole gap above us. But that didn’t mean raiders couldn’t be *anywhere*.

Already, I could hear them trotting around above us through the lower roof. We would

have to fight at the top of the stairs one way or another. Listening intently, I heard the door we came in open again, the second team of more slavers creeping in to await their backup assault. The stage was set.

“Move!” Protégé was curt and simple in his commands, avoiding too much noise. Ragini led this time, moving out around the shop to—

She walked right into a raider. The raider, a mare, reacted with shock at the griffon, before opening her mouth to cry out. Why hadn’t I heard her? Had she just been lying in the shadows out there sleeping!?

Ragini wasted no time. Before a single sound could be made, her talon wrapped around the mare’s mouth, using her superior size and strength to quickly wrench the raider’s neck hard enough that I heard a sickening *pop*. Shaking under both the tension and fear, I had to calm my stomach by looking away when I spotted the mare still living for a few seconds before the injury caught up with her brain.

I’d always thought that killed instantly.

Proving me tragically wrong, the mare’s eyes flickered, panicking, and finally going dead. Wrenching the neck once more to make sure, Protégé’s griffon bodyguard pulled the mare inside and dumped her in the corner. The griffon saw my horrified face, and just winked at me.

“Too much for you, flightless?” Her hushed whisper drifted into my ears. “Bet you just wish you had that pig sty back, right?”

I just looked away, leaving her to flick her wings with a grin and move back to the store front. Was she *enjoying* this?

We slipped out as one team, keeping to the wall. A low sound of moaning and pain entered my ears. Multiple voices alongside plenty of shuffling nearby. Slaves? I sped up, aiming to move over to Protégé and alert him that we were near the prisoners. This was going well, if we could just—

Protégé was blown clean off his hooves before I even heard the thumping sound of a gunshot reach us.

“SNIPER!”

“Where is he!?”

The slavers spun, but Ragini was well ahead of them, taking to the air and raising her energy rifle. Across the plaza, in another shop cell, a second muzzle flare kicked up that took a chunk out of the concrete wall above Protégé’s head. With a flare and snap of discharged magic, Ragini melted the sniper’s head clean off with a green lance of light.

That was it. There was one brief moment of horrendous silence. I hoped that it might have been lost in the noise of the assault. But then one shout went out, calling ‘everypony up’, then another to get guns, then a half dozen hooves.

We were busted.

Caduceus ran forward to Protégé, as did I. The slave master was already trying to pull himself up, favouring his left side.

“Hold still! Hold still! Let me get a look at—”

“I’m just winded, the armour took it. We need to— ergh! We need to move! Go!”

Even so, Caduceus and I still helped him up. Around us, the raiders were realising they had been breached. Hooves on stairs sounded alongside the screams of slaves as they were presumably threatened to stay still. Carrying a limping Protégé, we let Ragini and the slave armed with a battle saddle lead. Simply rushing now, we reached the stairway.

It was not unguarded. Large and wide, the stairwell to the upper floors was thick enough to take eight ponies at a time, and not your scrawny post-bombs ponies either. But barricades were set up on it, one at the halfway point up where the stairway reversed and went back on itself to the upper level, and one at the bottom. A dozen raiders were spread out, immediately rushing down to meet us coming the other way. A large set of more barricades were right in front of us, clearly a fall back point for the raiders should they have lost the guard room.

Trapped between us and them were a great mass of slaves, all cowering at the sides or below the stairs.

Throwing ourselves behind the closer barricades, the gunfire began. I found myself trapped in a small bit of cover behind an overturned refrigerator, almost pressed into Caduceus' chest to keep all our hooves behind it.

"Kill em all! KILL!"

Shots made the fridge jar and shift on the spot. Shotgun slugs thudded deeply into it, so hard that the metal surface smacked me in the face. Protégé lifted his revolver above it with magic and let off three rounds blindly, relieving some of the pressure. But he was breathing hard, a hoof on his side. Yet still, he managed to raise his voice.

"Don't get bogged down! Fire and move! *Fire and move!* We have to keep going!"

Around us, the team had clustered into what cover they could. Glimmerlight was beside the female unicorn slaver, firing a few shots with her pistol around the side of the stripped metal plates they had to stay alive behind. Ragini was actually above us, using a thick metal sign hanging from the roof as a hiding spot to fire off snapshots that were above the raiders' own cover. Boy, flying was *handy* in a fight!

But the raiders were digging in hard. Made even worse by the slaves who were struggling to stay to the side, our line of fire was restricted. The barricade on the first stairwell platform was just pumping out too many shots from five or so raiders behind it.

We were pinned. Protégé hastily reloaded his revolver to open fire again, but we couldn't aim properly to get ahead. Nearby, I heard a cry of pain that only went on and on with horror. An armour piercing round had punched right through the barricade and sheared the leg off one of the earth pony slavers with us. Flailing and panicking, he was cut down out of cover. I heard Caduceus hiss in anger, unable to move over and aid the pony. The nurse was rattling off what shots he dared with that small submachine gun of his, but he was clearly not very accurate with it.

"Anypony got any bright ideas?" Protégé shouted out, quickly snapping a shot at a raider trying to push forward and get around us. The pony went down, nursing their shoulder, but pulled themselves into cover.

I wish I had, but I was useless here, just a bystander in a firefight. I just winced every time a shot spanked off our cover, whimpering with terror that an armour piercing shot might rip through it any moment...

"I got something, give me some cover!" Glimmerlight cried out, holding the long rifle tipped with the spark battery.

The command went out. Everypony leaned up and unleashed what firepower they had. All except me. I only had a few bullets in *Rarity's Grace* for self defence, but nothing for mass firing. But between Ragini, Caduceus, Protégé, three slavers, and even Brimstone with the fallen slaver's weapon, I actually screamed at the pain in my ears. So much gunfire going off so close to my head was like a crowbar being jammed in my ear. The torrent gave

Glimmerlight an opportunity.

The Ranger Initiate leaned up, settling the rifle on the barricade with her hooves to get her eye right down and aim properly. What on Equestria was it going to—

She fired. With a loud *crack* and ping, the spark battery on the tip catapulted off, flying high and arcing down toward the barricade up ahead. Smashing into barrier itself, the spark battery flared, ignited, and exploded with a blue haze and arcing magical energies. Raiders screamed, diving away with their bodies burning and disintegrating. One in the middle I saw turned simply to ash under the full force of the explosion. She'd made an energy *grenade* to be fired from that rifle.

I wasn't sure whether to be horrified at the effect or proud of my sis' for breaking the deadlock. The slavers got their weapons back up, starting to make progress, now that the biggest source of incoming fire was down.

"Go! Get on their flanks! On their flanks, Ragini, move!"

Protégé shouted the order, falling back as the fridge lurched under a heavy rifle round to knock his likely heavily bruised side again. Caduceus caught him as he fell back, while I looked up. On their flanks? Why that? We weren't even anywhere close enough to—

Oh, right, that's what he meant. I really was *useless* at this fighting business.

Ragini swept down, her energy rifle flashing to the left. Slaves dived away from cover, trying to escape a raider who was using them as a hostage. Ragini's fire cut him down before the execution shots went in. On the other side, I saw Brimstone rush up, pulverising one piece of cover under the sheer weight of him and his armour to allow the slavers following him to move in. Protégé turned to me and Caduceus.

"You two, move up and follow Brimstone. They're going to start swinging more fire back here now that they've seen me leading them. I'll support Ragini's side while Muzzle Flare and Granite Hoof keep up fire from the centre! Go!"

But I didn't—

"GO!"

My master commanded, making me turn and gallop across the battle line towards Brimstone's cleared area. The big raider was now hiding behind a pillar until he could get a chance to push forward again. What if—

"Argh! Argh! Argh!"

Even while running, I screamed at the rushes of air. Shots were whizzing around me, pinging off the ground. *They were firing at me!* Where do I go? Where do I stop? *What cover was good!?*

Yelling, almost dancing on my hooves, a sudden weight slammed into me and pulled me to the floor. Kicking and scrambling toward a wide pillar, I found Caduceus was the one pulling me in, wrapping his hooves about me to tug me to safety. Behind me, I saw the fridge we'd been behind torn apart. If we'd stayed there...

Protégé hadn't gotten far. The ground was chewed up near where he must have run, but now he was beside Glimmerlight. Her hooves were struggling to attach another spark battery to her rifle. She was so intent, falling into a drill. I began to see the real Ranger Initiate in her, more than just the fun loving mare I knew. I often forgot she had been born into a militaristic upbringing.

"Shit!"

Caduceus swore. Turning my head, I almost joined him as I saw one raider coming down the opposite staircase on the other side of the plaza. He had a clean shot!

Caduceus sprayed his submachine gun. He was inaccurate, but dumping the entire magazine brought down the raider in a floundering, surprisingly anticlimactic heap. Breathing hard, the nurse just stared at the corpse.

“...do-no harm... do no harm! He was going to harm more...”

Breathing through clenched teeth, Caduceus hugged me for support, realising what he'd done.

This battle was escalating. Three more raiders ran down the stairwell from above. Protégé downed two, Ragini the last one, but *another* two followed, galloping to join their clan comrades. What if any more came behind us? We were too exposed, in real danger. I had two grenades. Maybe I could...

No! Any glance out showed me the slaves trapped on the edges and near the slavers. I couldn't throw explosives with them there, but I had to do something!

Reaching down, I picked up a rock in my mouth. Pushing Caduceus' hooves away, I leapt out and began sneaking along the edge of cover nearer Brimstone. Ducking down, scooting as best I could and trying to ignore the foul taste of the rock, I edged as close as I could.

“GRENADE!” I screamed, throwing the rock at them, and diving back behind the barricade.

Up ahead, the shout was echoed, before half a dozen raiders leapt out of cover, along with screaming slaves rushing away from the rock. One of the slavers, Muzzle Flare, I thought, raised her carbine in a telekinetic field and took three out with well placed snapshots. She was *good*. Ragini, swapping out for her lighter rifle, picked another one off.

Somehow, without even really meaning to, I had changed the momentum. There were only four raiders left now, after I spied the one Protégé had winged earlier now lying still. He'd bled out.

But the remaining ones were not giving out.

“Stop 'em getting higher! Come get some ya fuckers!”

I squealed as combined fire chewed at the wooden barricade I was hiding behind. Bullets flew through, spraying me with woodchips. I heard Caduceus scream for me to get back to the pillar, but I'd locked up with fear. If I left, they'd just shoot me in the open!

I heard a grinding, shrieking of metal on rock. Glancing up, I saw Protégé and Glimmerlight pushing an old metal rubbish bin, heavy and square, toward the last raider position. The pair were drawing fire, giving me time to leap back toward Caduceus. Protégé's revolver shot over the top, such close range pushing the raiders back to further away cover, but giving the others on the flanks a chance to move.

Brimstone and Ragini descended. The former charged, bellowing a warcry while hurling a stone the size of a *boulder* at one. His target's head cracked back, before Brimstone, their previous leader, crashed into a second, pulverizing the raiders head off the railing of the staircase with repeated crushing blows. Ragini swept down in a strafing run, blasting one in the rump, before descending in a dive with her rear legs outstretched. Between Brimstone and the griffon, they tore the remainder apart in close combat.

There was still a small war going on in the guardroom. Still another whole level to go, but somehow I felt a certain degree of pause and relief. Protégé set the slavers to guard the stairwell until we could properly regroup, before Ragini flew out to watch for anypony trying to come up behind us on another stairwell from the opposite side.

We gathered in the middle, Caduceus immediately running into the slaves. Protégé lay down against a barricade, breathing hard and clutching his side. I could see Glimmerlight

busy searching for Coral Eve, while Brimstone I did not want to approach just post-battle. As such, I found myself trotting over to my master.

"Are... are you alright?"

"Well, if being shot and being alive counts, I s-suppose. Ergh... but the slaves here are safe. Too late for many though, damn raiders."

He cast his eyes around, mine following them. The atrocity was clear. Many of who I thought were simply tired slaves lying at the side simply were not. We'd secured the majority, but the raiders had done so much damage to them. I saw ponies weeping over lost ones, bloodstained rugs covering bodies, and those who simply lay in corners with wide eyes, nervous of anypony coming close. Caduceus was fighting to help one pony whose mouth had been cut at either side into some sort of grim smile. But she was consistently moving away from him, screaming and pushing herself closer to other mares. I didn't want to imagine.

We couldn't pause long. They would be fortifying the area above. At the very least, we controlled the stairwell, so they couldn't send anypony to summon their guard room defence backwards, but it was only a matter of time before we were overwhelmed. We had to push on and call the relief force once we had cleared the balcony above.

"Coral! Oh Celestia! Caduceus, over here!"

I spotted the nurse galloping before I even saw Glimmer trying to help the light grey unicorn up. She was a mess. Battered, bruised, and bleeding. Her coat, just off-white to a tinge of grey, was pockmarked with all a matter of beatings; while that long blue, white, and black mane had fallen out of its braiding to hang loose. But even with her exhausted strength, she was still trying to push Glimmer away.

"Get *off* me!"

"Coral, *please*, let me help you here!"

Caduceus took over for her, gently moving Glimmerlight to the side himself. Clearly, he figured that Coral would respond better to somepony different. Drawing some bandages and a healing salve, Caduceus set to work. Coral's eyes, however, seemed to focus on me.

"Y-you... Murk, you came in to h-help?"

Gulping, I nodded. "Yes, so did Caduceus and Glimmer. She wanted to help you."

"Great. Being helped back into the same slavery her actions put me within in the first place. That and—"

She stopped, her eyes focussing behind me. Coral shivered, a look of sudden fear and blinding *hatred* all at once in her eyes. Turning slowly, I simply found Brimstone Blitz nearby behind me. His own beady eyes matched Coral's now fierce glare.

"*You!* Glimmer, don't tell me you're working with this *monster!* Don't you remember what he did to us?!"

"He's changing, Coral! He's trying to be better and make up for things, just like I am to —"

"Shut up! SHUT UP! You say you're trying to seek my forgiveness, then you work with the beast that destroyed our village? That *killed* our families and friends? The one that brought us here!?"

My mind reeled. Sat amongst them, I found myself unknowing of even who to look at. Coral was showing nothing but sheer fury right now. Glimmerlight was pleading. Brimstone was just an impassive rock that simply stared back before finally looking away. He didn't say a word.

Brimstone had been the one to do that to them? To bring them in here? Sweet Celestia, why hadn't they told me!? I just paced on the spot, looking from pony to pony.

Glimmerlight stomped a hoof. "Brimstone's saved my life over and over again, Coral! He's saved Murky too! He's changed, Coral, becoming a better—

"Glimmer, that raider destroyed our lives! Your life! Even *aside* from what *you* did, he is a blight on this world! Nothing better than Barb and his lot, they're the same clan!"

"Brimstone's trying to help us stop Barb! Trying to redeem himself—"

"Stop right there!"

Coral pulled herself up, pointing a hoof accusingly at Glimmer.

"There is *no* redeeming yourself for an entire life of being what he is! How many ponies has he killed, Glimmer? How many children left homeless and orphaned because of what he did to their parents? Ponyville would still be around. We'd still have a home! But *no*, you betrayed us! He destroyed us! It'd be a mercy for him to just be killed!"

Throughout the exchange, Brimstone merely stood solemnly, eyes closed. The big earth pony seemed to show little emotion normally, but after knowing him for a while I could see the lack of an expression. The one that stated something had penetrated that thick hide of his.

I was still trying to get around it all, decipher it all in my head. I'd thought Glimmer and Brimstone had only first met in here. It cast a whole new immediate reality on just the sort of things Brimstone had been responsible for in his life.

"There's no fixing it, huh?" Glimmerlight spoke curtly, keeping her eyes everywhere but on Coral. "Well, forgive me for trying. But I'm going to go do that now."

"What are you—"

"Barb's up there. He's done all this now. We're going to stop him. You say they're all the same. Well here's where we prove Brim isn't. Because him and I are going up there. We're going to help Protégé in killing that bastard once and for all. We'll show you things aren't the same. Then afterwards..."

Coral scoffed. "Then what?"

"I'm going to remember, Coral."

That seemed to catch the bitter mare by surprise, she actually gave ground.

"Hm? You what?"

Glimmer's eyes narrowed. "I'm going to *remember*. If that's what it takes to understand, to know what I did. I'm going to work on it, go through my orbs, remember what it was I did. I can't promise I'll be quick... or easy. But I want to know what it was I did to you. Just so I can understand. You were my best friend, Coral..."

The pale grey unicorn seemed to bite back another bitter remark, but shifted on the spot, testing her bandaged hoof on the ground before returning the look.

"I just hope that someday I can be half the pony Brimstone is. He doesn't hide from his past like I do! He *told* me when we met and you know what? I still forgave him! Perhaps it was easier because I didn't remember. That it was nothing other than an unseen fact of history. So maybe you're right that my will to forgive anypony and anything is a lie! Maybe I'm not that beautiful pony who can bury any hatchet and just smile! But I can't change that now! All I can do is keep trying to make the best of what I have! Right now? That's by showing that I'm going to take steps."

Coral seemed a little stunned, as though she had never expected Glimmer to show that amount of sudden maturity or serious thought.

“Steps?”

Glimmer’s horn lit, pulling the long rifle toward her where she wracked the bolt.

“By going up there, and bringing down one of the ponies who destroyed *our* village. Brim’s going up too. Maybe once you see him try to end this, show he’s on the other side now, you’ll know I... we... mean it.”

There was an uneasy silence after that. I could see Protégé standing nearby, clearly only a few seconds off giving the order to keep pushing. We’d been stopped for a couple minutes to reload and get our breath back, what felt like an eternity when we were still exposed in this plaza. Finally, Coral looked away, snorting.

“You’ve got a long way to go, Glimmer. If you ever hope to even want to make me see you as ever really looking to properly apologise. When you finally remember, just be ready to accept who you really are. But do *not* ask me to see that raider as anything other than that. He’s done too much to me already. I’d still have my son with me if it weren’t for you two, not have him locked away with Red Eye.”

With that, she turned, limping away to the clusters of slaves again, stopping only briefly to turn her head and speak quietly.

“If you’re looking for Barb, he’s upstairs in the old restaurant. He’s been lording it up, having mock audiences and suchlike, as though it’s his fortress now.”

Then she was out of sight, behind the staircase. Silently, under Protégé’s nod of approval, we began cantering up the stairs. Above us, I could hear the raiders shout that we were coming. The real battle was about to begin.

But as I passed the lip of the stairwell, dodging the piles of ash from Glimmer’s energy grenade, I could only hear the faint sniffs of a sound from below it that I knew all too well from a thousand times of doing it myself.

The sound of somepony crying.

Battle had been joined before I even caught up to the top of the staircase. The others had pushed ahead, leaving myself and Caduceus to follow up in our own time. The young nurse was still in a state of half shock at his self defence earlier. I wished I could understand. I’d never killed anypony.

I began to feel I might have to the moment I saw what we approached.

The sound was catastrophic. Energy flares, bullet echoes, and pings surrounded by the chip and shatter of concrete and whipping fabric. Screams, shouts, taunts, and orders rung out alongside frantic scrambling and sliding.

When I finally saw it, I almost stopped just to stare.

The raid team had run forward, pushing off the stairs with sheer speed to get out of the choke point, but they had met a wall of resistance. Up ahead, behind more scrappy barricades, raiders were ducking and diving, throwing all sorts of fire out at Protégé and his team. Smoke and mist flew into the air as either side’s cover was chewed up or blown apart. Already I saw Protégé himself running out under fire to dive and roll on his side, crying out in pain from the impact just to take better cover. Three raiders lay dead in between where they had clearly charged.

Into this madness, I ran.

Leaping up and over a fallen concrete block riddled with holes, I passed by Ragini sniping

from the back, the retort of her rifle dizzying me as we pushed onward. Three seconds of tense galloping later, I dropped beside Glimmer into heavier cover. Already, the thunderstorm was getting worse. Lightning lit the firefight, shattering the skies and the atmosphere with every thick white flare of illumination. Higher up to the skylight, the wind was even blowing down and in, carrying the burning rain inside to leak and fall upon the floor.

Between the shots, whipping dust, rain and storm, the entire thing was complete sensory overload, a madness of violence and chaos that swept across the entire second plaza level.

“Push in! Push in! We cannot stop!” Protégé’s voice carried out, followed by the pounding as I saw Brimstone charge right past us heedlessly, directly into the line of fire.

Using the chance, Glimmerlight leaned out, fired the rifle, and then charged after him. So much smoke was being kicked up from missed shots that we could almost move without being seen across the second level of the plaza. There was a rending crash up ahead, from Brimstone bucking a metal plate so hard it collided with the raiders behind it, before we all ducked behind it again. Opposite us, Protégé and the three slavers poured a huge amount of firepower ahead of them to force the raiders back.

“Murky, stay down! *Stay down!*” Glimmer shoved me to the floor rather roughly, a torrent of fire washing over our cover enough to fling shrapnel of concrete and metal all over us. Cowering upon the floor, I witnessed my friend firing and hiding, firing and hiding, over and over again. Each time racking the bolt with enough force I was afraid it’d break. To my surprise, a few more ponies rushed up behind us. More of the slaves with captured weapons charged up the stairwell, unloading everything they could into the raiders with vengeance in their eyes.

Anything above two feet from the ground became a killing ground. One of the slaves was beheaded by the heavy round before they could even scatter, but their distraction allowed the slavers to run up, whooping as they decapitated a raider in appropriate response.

Glimmerlight forced me down as Brimstone took the bulk of the barricade’s metal plate and actually lifted it, similar to how he had done in the Stable. Acting as moving cover, he pushed onward with Glimmer, taking pot shots behind him. Keeping low, I ran to the side, screaming as I heard an energy blast sizzle close enough to char my tail until I dropped alongside Protégé.

“Clear the balconies for the relief force to push in and support us. They can flank beneath us on the other stairwell. Then it’s a straight shot with a cornered Barb.” He quickly turned to me. “You holding up?”

I wasn’t. It was an effort to barely stop myself from fleeing the brutal gunfight. But only the fear of being shot down really kept me in one spot. Only from my skin tingling did I realise that a leak in the skylight was dropping down. Glancing up, through the whizzing rounds and blasts, I could see the oddly skeletal shape of a platform below the skylight. Rain dripped around it, down upon me. Already, most of us were soaking again.

Seeing me clearly speechless, Protégé pushed me down with a hoof.

“Stay here! Just shout if you hear them flanking up behind us!”

Leaning out, he took a shot with his revolver before rushing forward, disappearing into the madness. Raiders were *everywhere*. Shots came from above, on the third level of the plaza, from either side in shop cells or directly ahead behind barricades. A scream went out, before I saw Muzzle Flare fall to the side, her neck punctured. Caduceus rushed to her, pressing hard on the wound while he dug out a potion.

But if I dared peer out, crying and whimpering as my ears threatened to deaden under the cacophony of chaos, I saw what Protégé meant. The balconies that overlooked where we'd come in were swarming. No relief force could come in that way under that watch! Around me, ponies, slaver and slave, pushed into it. Another of the six remaining slave volunteers went down, dropping just in front of my cover. Brimstone's advance was all that was keeping us going, along with Ragini diving from area to area, her wings carrying the journey while she sniped at those on the third level. I saw one fall from his balcony, wailing on his way down to impact in a growing puddle upon the floor. The thunder coincided with his impact.

Then the order came. We had no other choice.

"Everypony, charge! We need to clear the balcony! CHARGE! MOVE!"

I didn't know if that meant me or not, but his voice was commanding and definite. I saw raiders beginning to flank around us from the opposite stairwell. I had to move! Now!

As one, we broke cover, galloping into the maelstrom of incoming fire out of sheer need. One suicidal rush to clear the balcony and let the relief force in! Brimstone hurled the barricade, smashing asunder two raiders blocking the way with a captured tripod machine gun. Glimmerlight fired another energy grenade to the high level, ripping away a fence and blasting the two raider snipers away. I found myself behind Protégé and Caduceus. The latter was dragging the injured Muzzle with him, spraying fire from his mouth-held weapon. My master fired precise shots to all sides, but was limping and slowing down.

Rushing up, I forced myself alongside him, helping to keep him going. Terror gripped me so hard that I tunnel visioned ahead. Blood sprayed across me; Muzzle Flare inadvertently being the only thing keeping Caduceus from losing his head as her shoulder evaporated. Dropping the corpse, he joined our charge.

Everything became a blur, but before I knew it, we were on the balcony. Brimstone threw a raider off the edge, Ragini was fighting a raider with a knife, rolling across the floor with him. She had taken a bullet to a hind leg. Glimmerlight fell. My cry of shock stopped only as I saw she wasn't shot, but simply rolling under the balcony lip to stay in cover.

We were under fire from all heights and locations. Too much to take on. Most of us were wounded, the slaves were simply firing scared, but we had done it. We had cleared the balcony. Protégé leaned over, crying out so hard his voice broke.

"Relief team! Move in! MOVE IN!"

The slaver with the carbine battle saddle blasted a raider running up with a sledgehammer, making the buck catapult head over hooves. Another followed, and another. Brimstone intercepted them, engaging in combat with multiple attackers, his armour sparking from the rounds striking it. Their efforts were barely holding off the tide, a half dozen small combats as part of one greater whole to keep this one point clear. Below us, I saw movement at the shop cell. Reinforcements!

They spread out, getting ready to charge in toward the stairwells now the balcony wouldn't simply massacre them. About time too. We could barely hold this position any longer.

But then I had to wonder, why weren't they moving?

"Relief team! Stairwells! Now!" Protégé screamed, waving his revolver toward the ends we had moved up from. A bullet chipped off the balcony ledge, sending shrapnel to dig into both of us. I cried out, falling backward toward the fence around an already wrecked hole, clutching the side of my neck. My hoof came away bloody, and shaking horribly. Looking

down, I saw the reinforcements just standing there, why were they—

Then I saw *him*.

Moving sideways through them, casually touring it and watching the brutal scene engaging the raid team above, The Master casually stepped to the leader and laid a hoof on his shoulder, before shaking his head.

Protégé gaped in astonishment.

“Shackles! Move in! Move in now!”

The Master merely turned, seeing the bleeding, wounded, and desperate Protégé trying to order the rest in... and shook his head. With that hideous grin, he simply stepped backwards, followed by the entire team that had been meant to support and reinforce us.

“SHACKLES!” Protégé’s voice barely seemed to carry now, as the reality sunk home.

We’d been abandoned... betrayed, left to die. Protégé had tried to keep him out of it, but he had come back. The slavers obeyed *him*.

“Where is the damned second team!? We can’t hold this!”

Glimmerlight ducked and swore. She was struggling to reload her rifle while dodging fire from a dozen sources. Ahead of us, emitting a blood curdling warcry, a wave of raiders, two dozen strong, erupted forth from the shop cells where they’d been hiding in the shadows, and charged us.

I flipped the mouthpiece of my battle saddle out, gripping it in my mouth. Protégé was already firing, his revolver slapping six shots toward the incoming mass. I saw Ragini blasted out of the air to crash onto the hard floor. Within seconds, she was firing with one arm on the ground with a steely look in her eyes.

Turning toward the raiders, driven by pure fear and desperation, I snapped the three shots I had off. One raider went down, the small bullet not even making him cry out before he struggled back up, nursing the dented armour plate he had stolen.

Brimstone Blitz hit them like a cannonball, crashing through them with a charge of his own. Even as he slowed under the impact, they swarmed him. Although gutted and crushed under his assault, they just kept piling on.

They had been hiding in here this whole time. They’d only left a few to defend the ‘fake assault.’ Like they’d known all along.

The slaves were torn apart, caught in the open behind us, and the snipers picked them off one by one. Screaming, I found myself chased by a raider wielding a knife. My shoulder felt cold and numb, images flickering into my mind as I saw his studded and pierced face bounding through the melee. Three shots landed beside me, making me fall on my back. The raider never got close, Glimmerlight, out of all ammo, swung her rifle into his muzzle. She swung her weapon to and fro, connecting with a couple heads, before being dragged down, screaming as a half dozen raiders piled onto her with clubs. My cry at that sight was never even heard.

Ragini tried to rise once again, but a gunshot snapped right into her chest, putting her on her back again, firing her rifle until the last shot with one hand at the oncoming raiders. Had her armour stopped the round? Oh Goddesses, was she...?

One by one, we were going down, overwhelmed and outflanked on all sides. I felt myself being picked up, thrown, and leapt upon. Yelling, begging, I lashed out and scrambled, but a hoof only slapped into my head, knocking me to the ground with a sharp pain and dizzied vision. A rifle went off near my head, almost deafening me. The battle saddle slaver was leapt upon, his throat torn apart until Brimstone’s ongoing brawl swept by him, taking the

attacker off his back. He still fell, bleeding copiously.

Then, the unthinkable.

Throwing the last pony from his back, Brimstone rounded off... only for a shot to smash right into the front of his armour and penetrate. The big raider staggered, before a mass of other shots rattled against his armour. Heedless of friendly fire, they were shooting even while others rammed and attacked him. My throat was raw from screaming as I saw him fall.

Protégé, the last of us remaining on his hooves, spun, his revolver snapping off precise shots aimed via E.F.S. Raiders fell on every side, the last two shots even going high, bringing down two of the snipers. A series of clicks announced he was empty, leading to his backup pistol being drawn and blasting at those trying to close on him. That too ran dry. His face was a mask of fear, anger, hate, guilt, and yet he moved with absolute burning determination.

Screaming to the sky above through the skylight, whipping rain and lightning in the air around him, his magic lifted a half dozen fallen weapons, unloading in all directions, even as I saw him stagger from rounds striking off his armour. Raiders fell one after another, being knocked away or forced back. All weapons empty, he even smashed raiders in the face with his empty revolver, but for every one he struck, another two leapt forward, dragging, pulling, and finally striking. Finally, A club swung, and my master dropped.

Hoisting his, I hoped, unconscious body up, they cheered, yelling and laughing at their prize.

I had two grenades. I could... I could...

A brass hoof impacted on my head, and I could do no more but fall into the darkness that awaited.

An immense pressure was across me. A force, pulling me down and down. My legs wouldn't work, my neck felt sluggish to move.

A red glow washed across me, twisting and warping in abstract shapes to slowly come together.

I was in Fillydelphia, witnessing the shape of the great Wall before me, taller than ever. Dizzy, tired, and parched; I could only lethargically shift and moan toward it as the construct got higher and higher, growing from the ground while my own place of lying only got deeper. A monumental force around my torso, tugging and striving, holding me down and pulling me deeper into the crater. Across the lip and slipping further and further in.

I couldn't even scream. I couldn't cry out. My throat was burning, the radiation from the crater affecting me. Tasting blood, it dribbled from my mouth.

But there, ahead of me I saw a light. A shining beacon of hope that held itself amongst an aura of calming magic. It grew, rising and floating into the sky toward the top of the massive wall, now reaching the clouds and bending backward over me. Choking on blood, my lungs spasming and retching, I forced one leg to wave, to shout for help.

But the light only kept ascending, flying without wings toward the lip of the Wall and disappearing into the world beyond, never to be seen again.

The glowing heart of the crater only awaited me, every part of my body beginning to ache and shiver from radiation poisoning. My chest swelled up, the tainted lungs bulging and

throbbing. I couldn't breathe. I was dro-dro... *drowning*...

The sickened last gurgling scream to leave my lips was only responded to by that one hated line, emanating from Fillydelphia as a whole.

...*she didn't save you.*

Everything began fading, a darkness beyond black creeping in at the edges of my vision, only being broken by one brief sight of somepony reaching out toward me, shining with an inner light. G-Glimmer? Coral? S-Sundial? Who was...

Every sense was brought into the horrid weight of reality by the slap across the face. My head twisted, coughing and spluttering on the taste of iron in my mouth. A sweet and sickly stench drifted into my nostrils. The back of my head felt wet.

"Wake up, filly. You've had your rest."

No. No, don't open my eyes. All a nightmare... all a nightmare... all a—

The second slap threw my head back down again. A thick lump on the back of my skull ached terribly, pounding on my brain.

"Oh no. No sleep any more for you, filly. Time to get up and face the music. Dreamland's too good for you."

I whimpered, curling my legs inward, striving to stay in the darkness, praying to wake up to somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

"I said wake up!"

My head was lifted, pulling my entire body from the floor, shaken, slapped, and thrown back again. Two hooves clasped either side of my face, squeezing hard enough until I began to whinny and murmur in pain. My cheeks were being crushed. My jaw pushed too far to one side.

Finally, I opened my eyes to see my assailant. I knew who it was by voice alone, but seeing Barb's sick grin made me want to break down in tears on the spot. We were in darkness, an enclosed room. Around me were a few other ponies lying in various states of health. Some of them had died. One had been lying right next to me with open mouth and eyes, three curved knives embedded in his sternum. The gunfire had finally stopped, but other, more messy and sickening sounds had replaced it within the immediate vicinity.

Barb, however, gradually came into clarity. Upon witnessing him, I simply screamed.

The chieftain wore the carved skins of dark-coated ponies. Small lengths of flesh lay across his torso like crude barding, blending into the darkness. Draped across his shoulders, I could see the dark blood still sticking to the back of his neck. It settled across thin leather armour that bore carved designs of barbed wire running below the still wet skins. Held on his front hoof, a long blade seemed to pulse with dark magic. In the shadowy room, amongst corpses, I felt like I was staring at some sort of horrific, leering wraith.

Seeing my gaze flicker from side to side of his new sick attire, Barb chuckled, trotting forward, making my eyes go wide when the barding of skin rippled and flowed through the shadows around him.

"There we go. All awake at last. Like my latest fashion? Helps get the frenzy going, seeing their leader get 'dressed up'."

I was released from the telekinetic field, thrown to the ground and left to curl up in this macabre place. Barb's white teeth became clearer, as his grin widened.

"Actually, I was beginning to think we might have needed your little buckfriend to keep you alive for a while. Pity he's a little busy right now."

Another fleshy crunch sounded from outside, accompanied by a shocked gasp of pain and retching. Oh Caduceus...

"It really is quite lovely, you know? That satisfaction of seeing somepony rush blindly into your trap and just *knowing* you're going to have fun with them afterwards. Welcome to the *kill room*, little filly."

Glancing from side to side, shivering as each lifeless corpse stared back or was frozen in a horrified expression. They'd all died *knowing*...

"W-What do you want with me?"

"Oh, *that* question!" Barb seemed delighted, trotting in a circle waving his head with a smile. "I do so *love* that question, it always allows one of the better answers."

Backing away, I squeaked as I accidentally nudged into another of the multiple corpses in the darkened room. I could barely see, my vision wasn't adjusting in this odd half-light. Barb moved forward, his crisp white teeth showing with a mad grin.

"Which is simply... nothing."

"N-nothing?"

"Nothing at all. You aren't special to me, not anymore. You've done your part, stayed silent when I needed you to and got those keys. Oh no. Now you're simply the next in line for me to throw to my Shades. All bets are off now that *you're* here, filly. Must feel nice, knowing your life is about to become nothing more than a plaything to keep my Shades entertained. But that's what you get when you become *our* prisoner. Now get up, the game starts soon."

My only response was a wet cough and a weak of my head.

"Please, Barb, I... I..."

"If you're going to beg. Save it for the Shades." His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Begging won't help you now, but it will entertain *them*. Feel free to cry as much as you want then. They *love* that."

Already my eyes began to tear up, the stark horror playing its way into my head. We were trapped with raiders in a place nopony could get to, or wanted to get to. Betrayed and left to be captured. Feeling disbelief and horror threaten to overwhelm me, it took Barb actually pulling me with his magic to rip me from the ground and yank me outside, crying the entire way. When the light hit me, it became clear how little I had. I'd been stripped of everything. My saddlebag was gone, my battle saddle torn off and even my fleece had disappeared. I felt horribly exposed.

But what lay out of the room was so much worse.

That same hell I saw on my way in now lay around me within an old restaurant. Raiders screamed and whooped, laughing and savagely picking on the new influx of prisoners. They staggered or lay on the ground, their malnourished slave bodies unable to cope with the 'fun' the raiders were having. Others lay lifeless, just hunks of skinned meat hung over the balconies of the plaza. The remaining slaver who had charged with us was lying in a groaning, skinned heap, bloodied and stained atop the restaurant counter like some hideous, living trophy. A hideous cry went out, followed by a ripping sound of which I didn't want to guess the origin of. It had come from another backroom behind the restaurant's kitchen where blood now seeped out of the doorway. Knowing Barb's new 'armour', I began to feel distinctly sick as to what that rip and agonised cry was.

Yet as I sought them out immediately, I felt momentary relief at seeing each friend alive.

That was about where the good news ended. My eyes first saw Caduceus, dropping across the floor, his snout broken and leaking blood. Three raiders rushed around, laughing and picking him back up again. The nurse limply let his head drift from side to side, clearly nearing unconsciousness. Glimmerlight was here, but kept contained in an old rusted cage on the other side of the room. One of her eyes was swollen, closed over as she lay on her side, breathing very thinly. Brimstone and Ragini were near her, both kept chained to the ground on thick manacles that the raiders had hammered into the concrete floor. Even as I watched, raiders were taking it in turns to rush in and strike the trapped warlord, laughing as they dodged his return attacks, constrained by the chains. His fury was clear to see.

Protégé was nowhere to be seen.

“Eurgh!”

There was another hard crack, as a raider bucked Caduceus in the stomach. The buck doubled over, blood spraying from his mouth. I tried to run to him, attempting to help him up. I felt his hooves latch onto me, shivering and desperate, turning his face to exhaustedly look at me.

“Murk... run. Run, Murk...” He tried to gasp, now trying to push me somewhere, too beaten and dazed to think straight. But magic gripped my midsection, pulling me back. Our hooves separated as I tried to keep a hold of the pony who’d kept me alive in the battle. Barb sauntered among the entire scene, absent-mindedly tugging me with him. Below us, I could hear the slaves we had secured being rounded up and herded. Across the room, some of them were cowed in the corners, the light grey of Coral between two other mares was clear to see. She was unconscious.

“Welcome to our little playhouse, filly. Course that play only goes one way, not that we exactly care. Hey, boys! Filly’s up!”

My blood chilled as the raiders, bearing bleeding piercings and crude bloodied warpaint swung up, cheering and moving forward toward me. I saw Glimmerlight’s head rise sharply at my presence, before pushing her hooves against the cage.

“Just leave him be! He doesn’t deserve anything in here!”

They didn’t care. Reaching me, I found myself being shoved from raider to raider. One of them grabbed me, pointing at me.

“Leave him? He shot me in the fuckin’ chest! Big bruise there now, ruined me favourite plate! Who’s to say I dun get my revenge, eh?”

He shoved me to the ground, teeth clamping onto a wing. Hidden from Glimmerlight by the crowd, I heard her scream for me, only louder as my own shriek of terror echoed above it, high pitched and pleading.

“Leave them alone, for now.” Barb waved his subordinate away. My wing snapped back into its deadened held state, aching from the movement. I felt the stiff ligaments grind under my skin. “Get him in a chair, we’ve got a warm up to do first. Time for a little Six-Shooter Surprise while we wait for Shackles, boys!”

The bellowing roar momentarily deafened me. I was hoofed across the face, dizzied and dragged across the floor to be pressed against a small bench. Coarse rope was wound around me, cutting off circulation and rubbing at my skin. It was soaked in rainwater from lying under a leak. The storm was still raging, with more and more water beginning to trickle through the roof and puddle on floors or the plaza. I could hear the broken frame of the skylight banging in the wind, and hear thunder smashing its way across the sky, punctuated

by lightning that gave the raiders a terrifying, demonic appearance.

“Murky! *Murky!* Are you alright? Did they do anything!?”

Glimmerlight’s voice shouted toward me; if I strained my neck I could just turn my head to see her cage. The mare was pressed against it, looking through one eye to check on me. They hadn’t, but there was another problem bubbling up inside me.

“I n-n-need my RadAway, Glimmer. It’s getting worse...”

I could feel my throat searing and aching from more than just swallowed rainwater. The cough I followed up with only helped prove it. I had two sachets in my saddlebag, but wherever that was I didn’t know.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Murky... just stay strong. I’m here, alright?”

“HAH! Not for long!” One raider hoofed her cage, before leering in, his eyes clearly not on her face.

Hissing back, she struck the cage toward him with a fiery backlash of anger. The raider only laughed, trotting on to help with their set-up. Holding a hoof over her damaged eye, my dear friend just silently pleaded with her eyes to me. The words clear: *we’ll get out somehow.*

The raiders pulled a single small table out with two hard wooden chairs either side. All the rest were removed, thrown away or over the edge until they had an area left over. Cries went out for ‘the first two!’ Chants and bellows of choosing went. I heard “The filly!” a few times, or “The traitor!” Barb, presiding at the middle, waved his hooves to take it all in.

“You all know the rules! The leader gets first pick, then we’ll let you all vote on the lucky two! First round! I say...”

His eyes cast about, from me to Glimmer, then they rested on Brimstone before looking back at Glimmerlight. He grinned, before turning to point at the one surviving slaver.

“Let’s have him! Don’t we all remember him throwing food across old Rusty Nail? Let’s bring him in to see how brave he is now he’s in our world!”

A cheer went out, the Shades dragging the struggling and shouting slaver toward the table. Immediately they began chanting.

“Next! Next! Next!”

Barb’s eyes settled on the impassive Brimstone, then again on Glimmerlight, before grinning wickedly. Oh no. *Oh no.*

Then his hoof shot to the side, away from her. “The griffon!”

But Ragini would not be taken so easily. The moment they approached her, the griffon lashed out, scything her talons across one’s face and even beating her strong wings to slap them back. Laughing, Barb hopped down from his perch to look at her.

“Still so resistant, featherbrain. What? You think you’ve got a hope? You think someone’s coming to save you?”

“Stern’s wing are going to *waste* you all. I can grin knowing you’re going to be taking an anti-machine round to the head *very* soon.”

“Oh?” Barb chuckled, accompanied by the raiders. “But you see, dear griffon, they aren’t coming. I’m sure you’ve noticed that I’m no idiot. You think I’d have started this if it were anything but a completely controlled move? Do you not remember Shackles casting you and your beloved master to us? Oh no. Right now he’ll be out there telling the griffons that all is fine! That I’ve agreed to negotiate with him and end the violence. Sure we might get a little punishment, but we’re a tough lot. Only now, there won’t be any Protégé in power, he’ll be *long* dead by then.”

Ragini struck out, her claws whizzing inches from Barb's face. The raider didn't even move.

"Really, you all played your part *so* well in our plan to get Shackles in power, where ponies like me will benefit *so* much under his protection and interests. Poor Protégé, the prodigal 'son' of Red Eye, cut down while foolishly leading a suicidal mission against me. Only for Chainlink Shackles to show his worth by ending this with *words*. He'll be praised. Really, did you all honestly think I didn't know about that side door? *Really?*"

Fury swept Ragini, and with a loud cry, she leapt forward. One of her chains broke from the wall, her outstretched talons sweeping across Barb's face. Forced to dodge, he recovered his posturing as fast as he could, but everypony had seen him have to react quickly. It broke the spell of arrogance.

I knew his anger when he was forced to have to react. A dangerous tone cut into his voice.

"Oh, big mistake, griffon. *Big* mistake. No, you're not going in the game, you get to *suffer*. To suffer the worst thing any flyer could ever have."

His eyes looked to the side, finding me. Then he grinned, getting an idea.

"...pin her down. Break her wings. This bird won't fly ever again."

Ragini struggled immediately, pulling on the chains, slashing out. From nearby, I saw raiders pulling over an old iron block along with a sledgehammer. My sides felt like they had a phantom ache, tears springing into my eyes. The imagery of a slave master holding an anvil and a hammer ready, of being dragged toward it prime in my mind. I wanted someone to stop this. Anyone.

But nothing could. We were simply their toys now.

Even as it began, I struggled helplessly, trying to hide my own wings out of fear alone. Barb only sat beside me on the bench, holding my face toward Ragini as the raiders pinned the large creature down, pulled out her first wing, and swung.

I hadn't known griffons could scream that loud.

Hideous minutes passed. Each crunching impact making me cry out and try to look away. But he held me there, looking like some haunting demon overseeing his pit; one hoof despicably caressing my wings to just remind me. The piercing cries of the griffon echoed all around the plaza, going on and on. Barb only chuckled, delighting in the 'performance' before finally signalling them to stop. Each wing, pulverised and broken beyond repair, drooped at her sides. She was controlling her expression, holding back tears and refusing to give them the satisfaction, but I knew that look, that horrible realisation of what she had now lost. Ragini had never liked me, but I quickly began to feel only I would really understand her pain right now. Very quickly, I saw her seem to pass out on the spot, the agony overwhelming her.

"Well, well, well! A nice warm up! Now back to the event. We'll need some*pony* else now! How about..."

Scanning his eyes across, I saw him clearly tempted by Brimstone. The warlord just met his gaze, as though daring him for whatever sick game this was. Barb only grinned, changing his glare to Glimmerlight. His hoof shot out to the side again, just like before, like he knew it was taunting me.

"The mare's new little boy-toy! Bring him up here!"

Caduceus, held up by two raiders, reacted with shock, trying to push backward. But they closed around him, dragging the buck over to the table where the slaver was being forced

into the seat and held at gunpoint. Glimmerlight bucked the cage, crying out to him. I did too, but all I received was a hoof to the skull. Crying out in pain, I only briefly saw them pushing Caduceus into the chair before Barb silenced them again.

“Six! Shooter! SURPRISE!”

Another resounding cheer.

“As I said, something to keep us all entertained while Shackles sorts out the talks with the griffons! So for those six-shooter virgins out there...”

A raucous laugh from the raiders.

“...the rules.”

Protégé’s revolver slammed down on the table between them. It had been horribly customised and ruined. There seemed to be a new metal sheath covering the back of the revolver itself, preventing anypony seeing the contents of the chambers. His magic, dark shadowy and whispering, picked it up before loading a single round into it.

“You may recognise the idea similar to one many gamblers play with if they’re feeling a little extreme, but we take it a step further.”

The revolver snapped shut, spinning the drum wildly. He then held it between the two. Caduceus glanced at it, nervously watching the gun. The slaver was breathing heavily, easily calmer than the nurse. Caduceus, looking toward me and Glimmer, just shook his head.

“I don’t want to play your game! Look, I can heal—”

“Tough! You stood against us, so it’s you or him now! This gun’s going to spin, right? Whoever it lands on takes the gun and pulls the trigger against their own head. End of the match, *somepony*’s going to be dead, so who will it be? Slaver or nurse? Calm or nervous? You look ready to piss yourself, healer!”

The raider’s laughed again. Caduceus was wounded, sweating and tired. I could see him shaking. Please Goddesses, pull him through this.

“Please!” Caduceus thumped a hoof on the table. “There’s no reason to do any of this!”

“Shut up! You’re playing!”

The revolver whipped him across his broken muzzle, drawing a sharp gasp, and leaving Caduceus leaning heavily to one side.

I could feel myself wanting to shout support, but my throat was raspy, and I wasn’t sure if it even felt right. Him winning meant *somepony* else dying. There was no happy end to this. It was a decided game. One death, one survivor to whatever else the raiders wanted to do. The inevitability of it was heartbreaking. We were trapped in their deluded world, abandoned by sanity.

“Round ONE!”

Now their sick games were beginning.

The gun span in Barb’s magic. The raiders began cheering, just as a roll of thunder made the room shake. The table overlooked the plaza, blowing the two duelling ponies’ manes in the wind. The revolver sped up and spun madly, before slowing... turning... aiming...

...right at Caduceus. The gathered ponies whooped, laughing as I saw Caduceus gasp in horror. The poor buck had only come to help ponies. He didn’t deserve this! Shaking, he reached out his hooves, taking the revolver so lightly he nearly dropped it.

“Look, we can—”

“DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!”

“They want you to pull that trigger! Best not upset them or it’s kneecaps for you, lad! Hahaha!”

Whipping his mane, Caduceus took the pistol. Shaking, he began holding it against the bottom of his muzzle, pointing upward through his skull. Glimmerlight was pressing her nose through the bars, soundlessly moving her lips.

Whimpering, Caduceus closed his eyes, a hoof resting on the enlarged trigger.

Click.

The gun slammed down, Caduceus gasping and breathing hard, shivering intently. The slaver met his glare harshly, staying silent and preparing should it ever land on him. I squirmed, trying to move. Caduceus needed support, somepony beside him!

“Round TWO!”

Spin, spin, spin. The revolver travelled even faster, blurring before finally slowing down. Caduceus slammed a hoof on the table.

“Please! Stop this madness, before somepon—”

His watcher behind his chair rocketed Caduceus’ head forward into the table. I screamed out loud, stopped only as my throat lurched and spat blood across the chair. It kept coming, slight spray after slight spray. Bound down, it hurt my body, unable to properly move with it. Caduceus was pushing himself up, but I could see his eyes on me.

“Somepony. Get him RadAway... he nee—”

Another hoof cracked into his skull. Recovering from my coughing fit, feeling myself flush with heat and shiver in fever, I was awestruck. Here he was in the middle of this fiendish game, still following his oath.

“Maybe if you win... hehe. We’ll say that if you win, you can get him what he needs to survive. Sound fair, everypony? Nurse wins and the filly gets his medicine! Pressure’s on now, ‘Caddy’, hehe...”

The gun was still spinning, sped up again during the distraction by Barb. But now it came to rest on the slaver. Growling, the slaver picked it up, holding the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger quickly while roaring in anger.

Click.

Slamming the gun back down, he shook out his black mane.

“Fucking game. Fucking raiders. Fucking sick *bastards!*”

The game did not stop. The gun spun. The gun stopped. Once again, it faced the slaver who swore, pounding the table with a hoof. Snarling and knocking back a raider who tried to force his hoof, he just picked up the gun and held it.

“Fuck... fuck... *fuck...*”

The gun was raised to his head.

“FUUUUU—”

Click.

“—UUCK!”

Crying out, punching a hoof up on sheer terror-filled adrenaline, the slaver celebrated in sheer relief.

“Half way down! We’re into the home run here, my friends!” Barb announced, waving a hoof in grand fashion. Lightning lit him from behind, flaring him into a mad silhouette, that skinned barding becoming beaded with raindrops that sizzled on the dead flesh. His magic pulled the gun from the slaver, leaving him to breathe out, snarling a sudden grin at his ‘opponent’.

“One in three, nurse. One in three...”

Caduceus just sat and stared at it, looking on the verge of breaking down completely. The

gun began to speed up again, but I saw him only now turning to look toward Glimmerlight. The two just stared at one another, sharing unspoken support in the middle of this hellish nightmare we had been trapped in. I kept trying to think of ways out, But there *weren't*. Nopony was coming for us until we were already dead. We had no way out... no way out.

The gun stopped facing Caduceus again. I heard his near silent whimper of fear. He was putting on as brave a face as he could, but I could see his cheeks stained with stressful tears. Turning, he saw me looking, even though my building sickness, I made sure to keep my eyes on him, trying to offer what pitiful support a coward like me could.

But his face hardened upon seeing me. I could see the look in his eyes. Barb had promised him a chance to get me RadAway if he lived. That was just the little bit of hope we needed. *Come on, Caduceus!*

Steeling himself, the buck turned, sweeping up the gun and planting it under his head again. Breathing deeply, closing his eyes, he seemed to go utterly calm. Raiders were chanting, the slaver was thumping his hoof on the table, as though getting caught up in this.

“Right. Right, do it and I can heal. Oh, forgive me for doing harm in this moment...”

He pulled the trigger. Ever so slowly I saw the gun move. react and—

Click.

The cheer was enough to make me whine in pain at the noise. Raiders were taking bets, bets of all things from caps to ‘turns’ with prisoners. One mare seemed particularly eager to get a hold of Caduceus if he won. I wasn’t sure he appreciated it much, falling to lie his head on the table, hyperventilating in shocked relief.

Suddenly, the slaver didn’t look so calm.

Glimmerlight was pressed against the bars, watching with a hurt look. We shared a glance. This was coming to its end. Caduceus had survived one more round. It felt like a fall into madness, praying that somepony else got the bullet, but he was our *friend!*

“Next round!” Barb announced, the gun spinning for an incredibly long time. Finally, it began slowing, twisting, and sometimes accelerating again to draw out more thunderous stomping from the raiders. Even the raiders below us watching the doorways were cheering as they waited to hear the bang.

Slowly, dreadfully, it pointed back at Caduceus again.

I heard Glimmerlight scream out. “You can do it! Trust! Trust in something! *You can still win this, Caddy!*”

He was shaking so much, hooves cradling the revolver, looking across at Glimmerlight. I could hear his voice stammering.

“One more... fifty percent chance. Oh no... ”

“Come on! Do it! DO IT!”

The raiders joined her, but for their own reasons.

“Go, ya coward!”

Finally, shakily, it went up to his jawline one again. His eyes looked sideways at me, before becoming determined, beginning to utter something, a healer’s oath...

“We pledge to the Princesses... to the Ministries as one... to Equestria as a whole...” He began reciting. “...we of the Ministry of Peace choose to suffer any hardship to bring healing to those who need it; who require our aid, be they pony or any creature. Kindness in all things, strength to carry through and *let those in need know we have the courage to stand in the line of fire to save them!*”

Raising his voice, shouting above the raiders, he took one last look at the slaver before

him, who was already beginning to look nervous.

"I may have been born long after a time such an oath was meant for, but I see ponies in need of my skills. I will find the courage to stand up for them! Weathervane taught me that much; to go through fear to find the chance to heal!"

Glimmerlight could hardly look prouder, smiling, crying, nodding her support to him. He could do this. Come on, one last chance! One last—

BLAM!

Every sound ceased, other than the echo of the revolver going off slamming back and forth between the plaza walls.

Slumping forward and to the side, his body fell off the chair and collapsed lifelessly upon the ground.

Glimmer's voice reached my ears before I could even take a breath, a drawn out wail of horror and loss. My own cry strangled itself on my rough throat, the effort forcing me almost to unconsciousness and feverish fainting. My eyes were just locked on him on the floor. Just... b-but no warning or... or goodbye...

The raiders whooped, laughing and stomping. Bets changed hooves. The slaver cheered out, throwing his hooves in the air, slamming the table in jubilation. Brimstone merely lowered his head, snarling with barely repressed fury. Barb took centre stage, recovering the gun.

"And just like that it's over! What a round! What a surprise for the good doctor, eh?"

I'd lost a friend before I even got to properly know him, through the most unfair and random chance possible. The wastes claiming another good pony without regret or reason. He was gone.

Just... like... that.

"NEXT! ROUND!" Barb, loud and proud, was demonstrating all the presence of the leader now, the shadow left to lie silent. My tears wouldn't stop coming. I kept remembering the scant day or so around Caduceus, another pony who had been kind to me, torn away by some *stupid reason*! I'd been starting to really like him, with that polite and professional attitude, the way he wasn't afraid to just give me a hug or take care of me even when he knew he shouldn't be away from the hospital...

He'd risked his life to save us...

Now Fillyldelphia had left him as just another corpse. That same body that was now being heaved over the balcony to fall into the half flooded plaza below. Glimmerlight was calling them every name under the sun, banging the cage. Even Brimstone took a swipe at one raider who got too close, sending him smashing back into the others. They just *laughed*. *They didn't care about anypony!* Feral and sadistic, they just danced in the mania of their hellish world.

He couldn't be just gone like that. It wasn't right, it was too early! He was meant to survive! To escape with us!

"No..."

"Now *who's next?* How about I let you lot choose this time, eh?"

Immediately, the crowd began chanting. I saw Ragini wake up from the noise, moaning in pain as her ruined wings spasmed or tried to move. The raiders threw hooves in all directions, calling for who they wanted. Some pointed at slavers they hated, others at slaves who they thought would be funny. Many crowded to get Brimstone in there.

But there was one or two names meaning the same pony above all of it.

"FILLY! FILLY! FILLY!"

"PEGASUS! PEGASUS!"

Barb pretended not to hear them, amping them up like some troupe leader, before he finally rounded and pointed at me, his flesh cloak wavering around him.

"The little runt it is!"

Their cheer almost drowned out the thunder itself. The rain had only gotten harder, the ongoing thumping of it hitting the ground merging with my shivering and matching the sudden increase in terror I felt. Under the hiss of rainfall, I felt hooves clasp over me, tearing my bonds free. I heard Glimmerlight scream for them to let go of me and heard Brimstone bellow. They were not kind, not respectful, and filled with a frenzied mob mentality. I screamed again, feeling myself being born aloft by them and carried to the now bloodstained table and chair. Hooves grabbed or pushed me all over as they massed around to force me in. My wounds were grasped, making me shrilly plead and push back. Many of them imitated my high voice. One even spanked me with a hoof, getting a big laugh for my reaction. I felt so powerless.

My rump landed on the sticky seat. I tried to push away, but they were insistent. Then the barrel of a rifle was pointed against my cheek.

"You try to run, we *don't* kill you, filly." Barb spoke from behind the riflepony. "We'll only stop ya running. Trust me, we can do *so much worse* if entertainment isn't our business. I'm sure there's a few ponies in here would just *love* a pegasus. You know what they call wings? Handlebars!"

The sick joke made them roar in laughter Whining and curling up on the seat, trying to cover every part of myself I could, I could see Glimmerlight trying to buck open her cage again, with little luck. Brimstone was striving, pushing against the wall with all his might, but the chains were in deep. He fell to the ground, panting and trying to build his strength into aching muscles.

"Our next challenger! Now who shall we get to face him?" Barb swung around, brandishing the revolver. "I said I'd let you choose, but may I offer a recommendation?"

The raiders went quiet. They were too excited, too hyped up to worry about who got what now. This was their pay off, for weeks of waiting without opportunity to really cut loose, and I was in their sights. But who would they—

"What about... his *master*?"

My heart skipped a beat. Amongst a *colossal* cheer that shook the very roof with their stomping, one of the doors leading out of the restaurant onto the second floor of the plaza was knocked open, a sorry sight being dragged in. Protégé had been horrendously beaten, barely able to even trot as they shoved and pushed the normally so proud unicorn in. Seeing me sitting opposite the table, he just scowled at them.

"You won't achieve anything with this!"

Barb chuckled. "On the contrary. I don't want to. We just want a good time! Win or lose, one of you are not going back to your bed tonight! Now, get in the seat and we'll begin..."

"We can— URGH!"

One of the raiders, a sickly yellow mare with an old grenade pin through her nostrils, slammed a pipe into his back legs. My master went down, before they began pulling him across to the table. I wanted to run around it, to help him, but the rifle's cold muzzle still pressed against my neck.

"Now! Master or slave, which will survive Six Shooter Surprise?" Barb announced to the

rest of the raiders. Protégé and I just looked at one another. This was... oh Goddesses lift me from this hell, this wasn't right.

Me or him. There was no way out of it.

One of us was going to die.

Barb spent some time building the raiders up into another frenzy of excitement. Many of the slaves were being forgotten, thrown in locked rooms or held down with chains and shackles. A huge portion of the gang had come up to view this match. Surrounding us on all sides, we were alone in a sea of raiders against the balcony of the plaza. Behind us, rain poured through the skylight, the wind making the Ministry Mare posters billow and whip around. Only through a small gap could I see Glimmerlight, Coral, and Brimstone at the back.

I couldn't stop crying, trying to not look at the gun, not wanting to imagine what we were going to actually do.

But Protégé would not be cowed so easily. He was unsteady on his hooves, but he still managed to summon a little strength to sit up straight and point a hoof.

"You're only allowing yourself time to end up dead, Barb! Talk with me. We can end this without any more blood!"

Barb simply leaned against the balcony, tossing his long dark blue mane out. Then he sneered.

"I've put up with this idealistic shit since the moment you woke up, kid. I'm a little *sick* of it by now. I *know* what you are. Shackles told me pretty clearly. I'm thinking that I can't stand to see one of Red Eye's nonces through this entire game. I'd rather look at the real pony behind the mask."

He nodded to four raiders.

"Strip him."

Without hesitation, they bounded forward, grabbing and pulling Protégé off the seat. He fought back, but the big burly earth ponies were far too strong. The eyepiece, something I was surprised he even still had on, was tossed aside, being taken by Barb. Then they began pulling, ripping at buckles, and forcefully tugging at his barding and clothing. Over the course of a minute, they pulled everything that signified his uniform I'd come to know from the poor unicorn, leaving me to watch in horror.

"I got it! I got it! Off ya come!"

There was a tear of fabric, and finally, the barding was torn away, ripping the last of his clothing off my master. Even the clasp for his ponytail was taken, letting his mane fall loose around his head. Shoving him over, Protégé landed in a puddle, wincing from the acidic liquid.

But he was no longer a slaver.

Before me, battered, dirtied, sleep deprived, and kept away from food by a combination of duty and captivity... I saw nothing but a slave. Those two deep red eyes just found mine, seeing my open mouth. He really was just like me.

Whipscars covered his body, even one old gunshot wound somewhere along his stomach line. Patches where his coat hadn't regrown properly were a lighter shade of black; the legacy of Fillydelphia's diseases. The large swelling from the sniper shot earlier was there too. He'd

been through a life just like me. But one thing caught my eye, something I'd never seen before.

His cutie mark.

I saw a symbol that both hurt and inspired, that was both a dream and a trap. He bore upon his flank a brass coloured and simplified version of the symbol of Equestria itself, two arched shapes circling one another, while the red eye glowed at the centre between them.

To save Equestria. Under Red Eye. It was everything that he was, everything he dreamed, and everything that was controlling his life.

It was beautiful and yet covered in tragedy.

There was something off about it, though. That red eye in the middle didn't look like a normal cutie mark, it overlapped the circular shape, not quite in line with it.

I wasn't given time to think on why that was. What was now a slave before me was picked up, and hurled back into his seat. We were only a foot or two away from each other at this small table, almost like a staring contest. Barb chuckled, spinning the revolver absent-mindedly.

"There, there. Now isn't that better? Nothing between the two of you now. The one who hid his wings, and the one who hid his past, both out of shame. You can look right into their eyes, or even reach out for comfort if you aren't afraid to show it to all of us. We won't laugh... much. Now let's get to business. But, how about we up the stakes?"

The revolver's drum slid open, Barb inserting two bullets, one beside the other, before respinning.

"Two rounds, less free slots before *somepony* gets it. GAME ON!"

The revolver slammed down before us, before lifting and beginning to spin. I was quaking, looking to Protégé for help or advice or... or anything, really!

But he sat there, silent and as withdrawn as he could be. Stripped of his uniform and eyepiece, reduced back to a rougher and more hurt pony, he just didn't cast that same easy confidence anymore. Even so, he met my eyes, eventually speaking quietly.

"I'm sorry, Murk."

I gulped, nodding that I understood.

"I... I think it's... it's not you. The Master w-was going to d-do something anyway."

Barb rolled his eyes. "Oh... gag..."

The revolver started to slow. Protégé looked up at me, shivering in pain from the multitude of large bruising wounds on his side. "He what?"

Tears dripping, I fought to muster the courage. This could well be my last few minutes. I had to say, come clean at last, let Protégé know that he'd been assailed from every direction, not just by Shackles! To say that Grindstone was—

The revolver stopped spinning, pointed at me. My train of thought derailed immediately, making me shriek and fall backwards from the weapon. My watcher caught me, shoving me back toward it.

"No turning away! It's your turn, pick it up!" The raider forced my hoof forward, until I felt the heavy weapon pressed into my grip. How Protégé's magic fired this so reliably I'd never know. I held it, crying over it, feeling every wound throb and my sickness grow from the added stress. But Protégé kept staring at me, as though silently trying to offer any courage he could. No. He was still the pony I could look up to.

Slowly, I raised the gun, pushing the barrel into my mouth to help support its weight. I looked to Barb.

"P-please... d-don't do all this."

"Either beg louder so we can all hear and ignore or just get on with it, filly."

There was no negotiation. Whimpering, closing my eyes, my hooves graced the trigger, the feeling making me whimper. Around me, some raiders chuckled, beginning to exchange more bets. The intensity of the moment was making me sweat, an odd heavy heat in the air even amongst the storm whirling outside.

Please. Please Goddesses, please... please let me—

Click.

Dropping the weapon, I cried out, my hooves waving and holding my own face in shock. I hadn't even realised I'd pulled it! Oh Goddesses. Oh no... oh boy... I... I...

"The game begins! Round TWO! Five cylinders remaining, two of them loaded!"

"Murk!" Protégé spoke sharply as I lay my head on the table, crying profusely. My eyes actually hurt from tearing up so much in such a short time. My gasps were just raspy coughs. "Murk! Stay. Strong. The griffons might—"

"The griffons will do *nothing*, colt-cuddler. I told you when *you* woke up in the kill room! Shackles is having a little chat with them as we speak."

Protégé glared up, anger crossing his face, his surprisingly long mane waving around his head. "You *trust* Shackles? He saw fit to betray me, to betray somepony on the same side as him! What makes you think he won't just *let* Stern and her griffons go ahead with their raid to remove a troublesome lying raider as well!?"

"He fears me, boy. They can't catch me. He fears what I'd do if he tried. *Everypony* does —"

"Chainlink Shackles fears nopony! You don't ever consider yourself above him! That's his *thing*! He believes nopony is ever more controlling than he is! Your arrogance is blinding you to the— ARGH!"

The yellow raider mare made her presence known again, the pipe cracking against Protégé's damaged ribs. Barb nodded thankfully to her, before returning his gaze to the revolver. Slowly, it kept spinning, before finally settling on Protégé. My mas... or whatever he was to me, *I didn't know*, looked at it, before snatching it up in his own magic field. He took long breaths, hissing on each one, sucking the air in deeply. Simmering with frustration and nerves, he drew it up, turning the barrel against his own head before taking a breath.

"This will come to hurt you in the end, Barb."

I saw the trigger begin to pull... tightening... tightening. I didn't want him to die, he didn't deserve it! But-but I didn't want to either...

His face screwed up, gritting his teeth. The raiders cheered at seeing any sort of tension or fear on his face. Seeing the proud master they'd laboured under so worked up and working to stay strong at all. I hated this so much, this was wrong, twisted, humiliating and sick and wrong and terrible and... and—

Click.

Breathing out, sinking into the chair, Protégé let the revolver rest again, dropping it the last foot from his telekinesis. The crowd jeered the second round's failure to fire. Even Protégé was shaking on the spot, I could tell how much courage it took him to do that. The atmosphere was mentally straining on him as much as I, what with us backed against this wet and exposed balcony by a mass of raiders.

"One more down! Round THREE! Four cylinders left with two bullets! Half and half

time until off it goes!”

It immediately began spinning again, making me shiver every time the barrel passed by me. I just tried to look at Protégé, to find the courage to speak up. But seeing that defeated look in his eyes, knowing he'd been abandoned to this with me. It hurt so badly. My own terror wasn't helping, of course. It was all I could do to not become a mewling heap on the ground.

The revolver began spinning harder. I heard the raiders pick up their bets, larger sums of cash or ponies being promised and exchanged. One wanted my wings when I died. It was going to happen even if I survived. The gut wrenching sickness of that was only held back as I saw Protégé's face staring at me.

“I'm really s-sorry, Protégé...” I began stammering. A feeling was building in me, one last thing I could do before we died.

“...Murk?” He seemed surprised, looking up.

“I lied to y-you.”

Barb's eyes met mine sharply before grinning. He knew it as much as I. We were both dead anyway, it wouldn't harm anything now.

“It... it was The Master who hurt me. I'm so sorry! I was just scared! Scared like I always am!” My head fell into my hooves upon the table, sobbing. “I... I knew this might happen... but he told me not to say! He threatened me! Scared me! I couldn't resist him! I could have made this not happen!”

It all came out, even as the revolver began to slow down, arcing past my eyes with its barrel, I just kept telling it all. About the Stable, about Grindstone, and about what The Master did to me. I saw Protégé just stare back, unable to tell if he was hurt or feeling pity.

Then finally, the revolver stopped moving... pointed at me. I broke down further, only to feel a hoof stretch out and rest upon the side of my head. Glancing up, I saw it was Protégé.

“You have nothing to apologise for, Murk.” His voice was quiet, soft, and shaky through the tension of the moment. “You know what I am now... what I was. To not know choice or a will of your own. I *know* that... I...”

His eyes closed, before I saw one single tear form.

“I've been through the same before I earned my freedom. Murk, do not feel guilty. I understand.”

Those two words, those two beautiful words that for the first time in my *life* really meant something. Friends had said it, masters had implied it, many had believed it. But for the absolute first time *ever* did I now see a pony, a born slave, who could truly *know*. I wanted to ask so many questions, to spend time and just... just share in that understanding.

But Barb's hoof slammed down, separating us and his magic tossing us both back into our seats.

“All well and disgusting to my eyes, doesn't matter now! Filly? It's your turn! Careful with that trigger this time.” He sneered, bringing me crashing back to the horrific reality we were stuck in. Fifty-fifty chance with this one, the same chances Caduceus had had. Oh Goddesses, if it were to happen now...

“Pick it up!”

“Please, I—”

“I said pick it up!”

“PLEASE! Don't do this! *I don't want to d—*”

“*Pick it up!*” The revolver slammed into my hooves, hard and stinging, tossed by his

magic. Almost falling off my chair, my head twisting to avoid the impact; I saw Glimmer staring over, her eyes wet and a look of absolute horror on her face. She'd lost somepony already, we both had, but now she was watching another of her friends go through it.

"Do it!" Barb's hoof impacted on the table, making me shriek in shock, turning back to look at the gun. Crying openly, I began to pick it up properly, hearing the raiders chant to 'DO IT!' over and over. Protégé just looked on in despair, clearly frustrated and hurt beyond measure at the inability to escape this.

Slowly, tasting the metallic tang and residue from the last shot that killed Caduceus, I placed the barrel in my mouth. My heartbeat seemed to grow louder, thumping, growing faster as the panic set in. Whimpering, whining, I just sat and shook with my eyes closed. Part of me began to hope that I was even holding this right. The thought of not actually being killed outright made my entire body shiver in horror.

My hoof closed upon the trigger, the chant and beat of my heart only growing louder each time. Be brave. Be brave like Caduceus. My teeth chattered on the barrel, that loose one stinging even as I cried out and pulled the trigger, hoping it-

BLAM!

My head exploded into agony. My entire body fell away from the chair, and I landed surrounded by blood. Screaming, wailing, and thrashing at the immense searing *pain* that had blown through my head, as I clutched my hooves to my mouth and howled into them. The sound reverberated in the air, echoing and making my ears hurt even... even...

Quaking on the ground, the pain started to fade quickly, replaced with the harsh sound of my ears being assaulted by raider laughter. Above me, Barb stood with a *second* revolver that had gone off just behind my ears. The blood below me was from Caduceus.

He winked.

"Always gets them, every time!"

They simply laughed.

I broke down on the spot, the horror of the cruel joke and fake execution stretching my courage far past the breaking point. I didn't care if they even laughed at me any more. They would not let me lie however. Two raiders picked me up. I fought, trying to pull away. I cracked one in the shin, trying to pull myself nearer the balcony, but their magic gripped my mid-section tightly, pulling me back to the seat and returning the revolver to the table. My face felt sticky with Caduceus' blood from the floor. I could barely sit upright, crying and falling forward, my nose running and throat hiccuping painfully. Like a foal begging for something from their mother, I couldn't stop the simple wish from crying forth.

"Please just let me go!"

"Guess what? NO! HAHA!" The raider to my right knocked me in the head. Immediately before me, the revolver began spinning again. The game was *still on*.

"Round FOUR! *Three* cylinders left with two bullets! More bullets than not now, my friends! Get your intense bets in now for which one's gonna buy it first!"

"MURK!" Brimstone's voice bellowed above *all* of the raiders. "You can pull through this. Remember what I first said to you!"

The shout felt so rare, for Brimstone to offer any sort of cry amongst his old peers. But my memory, in a moment of strange accuracy, did remember the first line. I'd been a mess in the Pit, quivering on the spot in the presence of my icon herself. Terrified to die, in an inescapable position. What was it he had said?

"Put on a braver face there. Don't let them have the pleasure."

It wasn't the words that meant so much, it was the reminder. That one moment when I had been inspired beyond all others at the sight of the Stable Dweller escaping Fillydelphia before my eyes. A sobering thought, to face it with better dignity.

I could be braver... I could... I—

A knife descended into the table, narrowly missing my hoof. Broken from any recovery, I screamed, clutching my shoulder out of habit.

"Stop spacing out there, filly." Barb whispered into my ear, "I don't want my lot to have anything but you at your most terrified and pathetic. I know who you really are inside, so just let it out."

Whimpering, seeing Brimstone growl and stomp at his chains again, to absolutely no avail, I could sense his frustration. But Barb had me where *he* wanted me. The knife slid up my leg as he drew it away, causing another filly-like whine to emanate from my mouth. His audience was getting what they wanted, the absolute humiliation of two ponies. One of shattered pride, one of sadistic breaking.

The revolver was still spinning. Wavering in that shadowy grip. Finally, hauntingly, it came to rest upon Protégé. Breathing heavily and quickly, he just stared at it, his chest panting hard. Gripping it in his telekinesis again, the barrel raised.

"Barb. This won't end well for you. Shackles and Grindstone don't care for anypony but themselves! Even then they'll be in it for their *individual* benefit, I'll bet. You'll gain nothing from this in the end, that I—"

"Oh, get on with it!" Barb wickedly laughed, slapping the table. "Pull the trigger! Let's see how much of that big brain really can come out!"

Scowling, frustrated beyond measure, I saw his eyes return to me. Protégé still breathed quickly and harshly. Fighting to stop himself shaking, sweating enough that his mane was becoming bedraggled. He fixed me with a sad stare.

"If... if this is it, please, just one thing."

"...y-yes?"

He hesitated, his eyes momentarily avoiding mine.

"Then I... I hope my impression upon you was not that of a tyrant, Murk..."

It took me a few attempts to muster any words, my throat beginning to clam up. My vision was hazy, but I could still see those two pale red eyes sadly staring at me. Slowly, I shook my head, and I meant it.

"It wasn't."

Something softened in his expression. A sense of bittersweet relief.

"Then, perhaps that's one regret I can rest easy upon, should this be..."

Closing his eyes, gritting his teeth, the revolver pressed firmly on his temple, Protégé hissed deeply and took one great last breath.

"Don't lose sight. You *can* be free, Murk. I've never said it, but I know you can do it. My way or your own..."

I wanted to rush over, to grab hold of that gun and move it so badly, but a rifle barrel touched the back of my neck. I could only watch him, watch as he began seething at the mouth and pulling the trigger *hard*.

Click.

The entire gathering of raiders went stock still, before exploding in sheer excitement. Protégé simply sat, stunned. Every odd had been against the last empty chamber being next, but it had been. That meant... oh no... that meant—

"ROUND FIVE! SUDDEN DEATH! Two cylinders and two bullets! All bets up!"

This... this was it.

Behind me, knowing the stakes, I heard Brimstone lash at his chains. His legs were bleeding from the effort, harming himself in every effort to get free. Waving his raiders away, Barb gazed over at the massive figure.

"Oh don't even try, traitor. You couldn't break that metal in your prime fifteen years ago when we all had that big laugh, never mind as the washed up, old, and declining bastard you are now. What are you? Fifty five? Sixty? Hah, I made *sure* it's the same stuff we scavenged out of the yards. It goes right through the wall to hold on the other side too. You are *not* moving. Besides..."

He nodded to a nearby raider carrying a sledgehammer, the same they had used on the virtually unmoving Ragini. With a sick grin, the hammer swung around, impacting directly over the still bleeding bullet wound on his chest. Roaring loudly in anger more than pain, Brimstone still fell to the floor.

"Can't pull anything with a wound like *that* on your chest. Now, back to our game."

Barb grinned at me, seeing my look of horror.

"What? Oh, I'm sorry, was he your last hope here? That the big old Brim would swing into action? Forget it. Nopony's coming to help you. Now, time to *spin the gun!*"

Slamming it down again, the drama of thumping it before us never getting old with the raiders, I just gazed across at Protégé with tear filled eyes. I knew I was giving that pleading look to end this, to stop it all somehow, but I couldn't help it. It was the Pit all over again, the inevitable inescapability of it all crashing down on my emotions, turning me into a blubbing wreck.

For his part, my master just continued to stare at me, breathing hard from his wounded ribs and trying to keep my eyes focused on him rather than the gun as it moved achingly irregularly... side to side... spinning... spinning...

It began slowing.

"Murk, look at me."

I couldn't, the gun was—

"Look at me!" His authoritative tone returned, briefly.

My eyes snapped upwards to see Protégé with an intense look, ignoring all the raiders stomping around him, each trying to pry through for a better look.

"Pro-Protégé, I... I..."

"Just keep looking at me. Don't look at them. Don't let them get to you, Murk. Look at *me*."

The gun began to wind down, moving deathly slow in arcs to face either way. But my eyes avoided it at last, focussing on Protégé.

"You're a stronger pony than you know. You've come this far, Murk. Even if... even if something ends today, you can be proud. *I'm* proud of you."

"Please, I don't want to—"

The revolver barrel slowly moved just a bit further, achingly slow as it faced me...

...then Protégé.

...then back to me.

I didn't even move, I just stared at the inevitable conclusion. Murky Number Seven, that unlucky corruption of the number and victim to the life that had been nothing but toil and pain the entire way, all to end tonight at the barrel of a gun in my mouth.

To be born a slave, you know of only two endings. The quick execution that brings your life to a close, or the long sickness and exhaustion until you finally keel over on the job. I now knew which was to be mine. A life of slavery, given a flash of hope at the end, but finishing today.

Strangely, a form of clarity overcame me that... that I was somewhat okay with it. I'd screamed, wailing that I didn't want to die.

But the idea of a quick bullet to the brain, one flare and it all being finally over... all the pain, the starvation and sickness... finally peace...

My hooves lifted the gun. Slowly, I placed it in my mouth. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Glimmerlight crying openly, battering the cage door in sheer despair. It hurt to leave her behind. Protégé too seemed pained that it was me and not him. Brimstone merely looked lost, like a part of what was helping him was about to disappear forever.

My hoof found the trigger. I didn't really want to go. Hope was still there, screaming in my breast to keep fighting, to look for some way out! I could escape still! I had... I had my friends all here! I couldn't leave them, I couldn't. *I couldn't...* but I had no say any more.

My wet eyes turned across all of my friends, imagining them all as much as seeing them. "...I'm sorry."

The barrel was pushed into my mouth more fully. I had to do this right.

'The mare, alone and searching for the one close to her, or hopefully having found him. They'd promised to come for me, they would be searching for the already dead...'

Slipping around the trigger, I began to push.

'Glimmerlight and Brimstone, the most unlikely pair of friends to ever grace the wasteland, their efforts to get out losing one of their number forever...'

With one last effort, screaming out as I did so, all the pain coming out, I pulled harder.

'Protégé, witnessing the one born slave who understood him killing himself before his eyes.'

Goodbye... goodbye all...

...and let it end.

Click.

Three seconds. That was how long it took my brain to process what had happened, but they lasted longer in my mind than I could bear to stand.

Nothing. It... it hadn't fired.

My scream faded, the gun dropping limply in my hooves. Protégé was awestruck, the raiders silent.

Then Barb revealed a bullet in his hoof, and grinned.

"Oops. Old habits die hard, hoofed the round when I last held the revolver, dumb filly. So..."

He narrowed his eyes, that mad grin spreading.

"How's it feel to have committed suicide and know you did it?"

I... there were no words. I just started shaking, realisation and horror beginning to take shape. My mouth quivered, eyes widening, unable to cry any more than I already was. Small, strangled sounds escaped my throat. I heard the revolver clatter to the floor from my shaking hooves.

I'd just... *Oh Goddesses forgive me!* I'd actually pulled the trigger.

It was the control tower all over again, only I'd gone over the edge. *What had I just done?* I felt anger bubble inside, at myself for knowing I'd been *ok* with it. To know that a part of me still saw that sort of thing as a nice, easy way out that I'd ever consider. Oh Celestia, that

thought terrified me more than any raider.

What had I done?

Still shaking terribly, sniffing, and whimpering ever louder, I eventually just cried out, feeling a wash of self-hatred and shame come over me. I wanted to find somepony, to grab them and hold them, and just cry and cry. To curl up with Glimmerlight, or feel Caduceus' comforting grip or even just fall into Protégé's shoulder again, *anypony*.

"Aww, look at 'em! I think we upset the little thing, lads! Oh, I'm a bad pony." Barb cackled, relishing in the opportunity to just completely screw with my head and emotions. "But the game isn't over. We've still got one more cylinder, and I *know* there's still one in this time! You've got to keep playing little Murk. You don't get to cry and run away now!"

"I don't want to—"

"You *will*! Spin the gun!"

Following his own instruction, the shadowy magic began to pick up over the revolver again. Building speed, faster than ever before, the modified firearm began to whirl and blur on the spot.

"Round and round the revolver goes..." Barb chanted, the raiders joining in. "...who it'll kill, no pony knows! Last round! There's no tricks or jokes here. Just one bullet and a chosen pony!"

Even Protégé couldn't keep his eyes off the weapon, glancing up to me occasionally. From the look on his face, watching me pull that trigger had drawn harsh emotions from him too. But both of us were simply silent now, both knowing that the weapon would pick one of us.

Back and forth... round and round... barrel... grip... barrel... grip... barrel... grip...

Eventually, it began to slow. The barrel drifted more lazily, flying on the momentum of the spin and slowing after every turn. Heart in my mouth, tears and sweat dripping off my face onto the table, my eyes just stared unblinking at it. I couldn't do it again. If it picked me I knew I couldn't.

It was time, the barrel was stopping...

...pointed directly at me.

...before shifting, slowly, the last bits of energy to creep around one more half turn to point directly at my master.

I would have looked up, to gaze with apologies and words, fighting to know what I should say to him, whether I should thank him or just stay silent, or tell him that I was glad to have met him in here. That I'd try to remember him or do something for him.

But the barrel had one last tiny eek of momentum still. So slowly that it stretched every emotion to just see it gradually moving and juddering, before coming back to me and *finally* stopping.

It was me.

The raiders erupted into cheering and screaming. Bets were thrown back and forward already with the end result chosen. Arguments started, whooping and promises drifting between them. But I just sat and stared at the revolver. That same revolver that had stopped the closest bid for freedom I'd ever made.

Would *ever* make.

I felt myself shaken by the raider behind me, pointing a hoof at the gun. Shivering, I picked it up under duress of punishment, holding the weighty revolver in my hooves. This... this wasn't... no, it wasn't *fair*. I was supposed to escape...

Glancing upwards and unsteadily holding the gun, I saw Protégé only look sad; trying to

maintain his posture under the oppressive atmosphere. The storm's wind circling in through the skylight whipped that mane across his face, sometimes hiding those pained eyes. He was a born slave, the one who sought freedom in, if anything, a differing story to my own. A grander story of the slave who rose out of the pits to be somepony more.

One I may have to now accept would go on while my own ended here, after finally having made a decision to come here to try and help ponies.

"We're all *waiting*, filly. Not going to show you're just a complete coward? Come on, you did it once. Let's see that brain matter fly! Probably the only flying *you'll* ever do!"

My master glanced angrily to Barb, taking the raider chieftain's glare without so much as flinching.

"You're nothing but a blight to all ponies, Barb. You think this is going to help Equestria at all? That there's some purpose?"

"On the contrary, I don't *care*. Equestria's dead and gone. Might as well get on board the fucked-up-train of the future, boy! I'm the conductor here and I say it ends here for him."

I had never seen my master scowl quite so much. Real, proper anger.

"I swear to you, raider, give me half a chance, and I wouldn't even care what your cronies did. That bullet would be for *you*."

Barb merely chuckled, patting Protégé's shoulder dismissively. "I think not."

He nodded to the clan, from where a dozen weapons pointed at Protégé immediately. Oddly, my master looked more to me than them, frowning.

"You so much as raise the gun to me, you'll be gone before you know it. We're rough and ready, but we aren't without our skill, y'see. Oh and filly?"

My hooves were still holding the gun, not wanting to move it to my mouth. I couldn't... but on the mention of his nickname, I looked up, quivering.

"Don't think about trying to hoof the bullet or something either. I can feel the weight of the round in it, or lack of, should you even try to remove it. Oh, that bullet's only going one place. Now come on kiddo. *Get it done!*"

The raider behind me began forcing my hooves upwards, ramming the barrel into my mouth and jarring against my loose tooth and swollen gums from their previous beating. Mumbling in pain through the heavy metal barrel almost choking me, I felt my hoof raised to the trigger and left to do the pushing on the strange, inverted customised grip. I was terrified my shaking would set it off, unwilling to apply pressure.

I didn't want to die.

I didn't want to die.

The well of emotion began surging up, hatred and shame that I'd pulled that trigger once, it only reminded me of that horrible voice deep down that always whispered, telling me about the one choice every slave always had to make it all end at last. To cast yourself into the oblivion and the embrace of the Goddesses and *pray* they'll forgive you for doing it. To even think it was still in there made me want to be... to be...

I did. Falling to the side, convulsing as my sickness crept up and left me in a fit of coughing and retching, my blood mixing with Caduceus'. I landed upon the floor, the revolver falling beneath me and clattering into the granite ground. Spitting red, struggling to breathe, my kicking hooves caught those trying to force me back up on the shins or knees. A wave of fresh terror approached as I felt myself almost go blind, eyes rolling back as the pain and tightness in my lungs and chest flared up. It lasted for some time, almost half a minute, before finally the convulsions passed, leaving me exhausted, bloody and dying.

was pulled up, my hooves fumbling below me with the revolver to keep it with me. They left me lying against the balcony, my back to the long drop and the storm above.

"I can't do it."

"Oh you will."

"I can't do it!" I screamed aloud. *"I..."*

Looking up with blood dripping from my lips, still shaking violently inside and liable to expire any minute without my RadAway, I caught Protégé's eye. I couldn't do this myself. I...

"I want... I want Protégé to do it. It's only one shot, he'd..." I sobbed. "He'll do it right..."

My master's mouth dropped open. "Murk, you—"

"Please!" I half shouted. "I... I can't do it. They'll only make it worse if... if I don't take the bullet. Please, just make it quick..."

The last words were nought but a whisper. But I saw him finally look at me, sigh, and nod. Barb chuckled again, trotting to grab the revolver from me. The raiders raised their guns the moment Protégé took it, guarding him.

"I think we'd all like to see this. The master forced to execute the one slave he really began to like? How *wonderful!* I almost wish I'd thought of it, filly. Now get to work my dear 'master.'"

Stepping aside, he waved a hoof for Protégé to approach me. Gripping the revolver in his telekinesis with a steady familiarity, the unicorn glared at the raider leader, before standing up. His eyes travelled to every raider there was, silently seeming to voice his disgust of them. Pointing their weapons back, they just grinned around the mouth grips. Slowly, keeping his head high, Protégé trotted toward me, and knelt down.

Everything other than the storm had gone silent. Each sharp sound of his hooves closing toward me like an individual movement closer to the end.

"Murk, I... I just don't know what to say."

Trying to calm my own shivering, I stared back toward him. The rain was dripping around us, itching and stinging, but that didn't matter now.

"S-sorry. I j-just couldn't do this... too scared of it... of it hurting. I never wanted to die badly."

"Nopony does. I... I'll make sure it won't hurt, I *promise*."

He pushed over, beside me. Without really knowing why, I felt myself leaning into him, and felt one of his hooves wrap around my shoulders tightly. I was so scared about what was going to happen, but it felt a little better knowing he was there when I couldn't even see my other friends through the crush of raiders, eagerly awaiting the sight they would be entertained by.

"Never wanted it to go like this. I regret I couldn't have, no... I wish I could have let you go, Murk. But, Master Red Eye—"

"I know."

Opening my eyes briefly, I saw him looking down, rainwater dripping from his mane.

"Born slave, remember?"

His mouth seemed to lightly curl up at my words. We were even... understanding. Slowly, I felt the barrel press lightly against my temple at a certain angle. Oh, so that was the better way then. I trusted him.

"I didn't want it to end this way, Murk. M-Master Red Eye gave me a chance. Stuck by

me, kept me alive, and guided me to the freedom at the end. To make the choice for myself to go or stay. I... I wanted..."

Oh Goddesses. To see the pain in his eyes.

"...I wanted to do the same for you. I saw so much of myself from the moment we first met; when I told you that you needed to know freedom. I tried to give you what I could of it, give you choices. Allow you those reckless moments to roam free into the crater or the hospital because I knew it was teaching you the one thing that mattered. You impressed me so many times, more than anypony else. I won't forget you..."

Clutching tightly, I heard the trigger begin to move, shivering as the moment approached. I felt so sorry to put him through this. Oh, Protégé, but it just has to be you... I couldn't do this part myself.

The revolver's chamber began to move.

I closed my eyes, and clenched my teeth, gripping him tightly. And then...

Click.

Silence. Absolute silence. My eyes crept open, seeing the stunned look on Protégé's face as the gun did not fire. But even more was the look of abject shock from Barb. The leader stood among his raiders, where their jaws had dropped, some with their weapons drooping to the floor. They turned, looking away or between themselves as the reality of the moment finally landed home.

"...what?"

Barb looked from side to side, his dumbfounded slaves shaking their heads or murmuring. The guards were chattering to each other, did it misfire? A bad bullet?

"...WHAT!?"

Barb stormed forward two steps, fury overtaking his expression. Then he found my eyes, he *saw* my look. That cheeky look that meant *I'd done something to the gun.*

"You... you little! You did something when you had that gun below you on the ground! But the bullet was still in it! *I felt the weight myself!*"

Coughing once, I just glared back up, with a brief intense stare to Protégé.

"I didn't take it out..."

Barb's eyebrow raised, my eyes moving back to him.

"...I just moved it one chamber along."

Picking up on the momentum faster than any of the raiders, Protégé swept up, the confused guards rifles not immediately pointed at us. The barrel swept around, aiming as he spoke.

"Lucky number seven you sadistic son of a bitch!"

The revolver finally went off in an angry roar, lighting the entire darkened restaurant with the huge muzzle flare. Barb dove to the side. The bullet slapped into his shoulder, and hurled the chieftain back into the guard who had watched me. Dropping his rifle, Protégé's magic swept it up, dumping half the rounds into the ground with a painfully loud burst of echoing gunfire, sweeping just in front of the raiders on the floor. The sparking rounds made them lurch backward, clearing away from us. He began pointing it back and forward at them before they got their own ones up from their confusion.

"Don't move! Anyone wants a shot, you'll get one to the face before it kills me!"

Finally, their weapons were re-aimed, the wounded Barb hissing for them to keep us guarded. Protégé backed off to the balcony barrier, pulling me behind him. His eyes left none of the raiders, swinging the rifle back and forth rapidly.

"You stupid buck. *You stupid, idiot colt-fondling little fucker!*" Barb bellowed, limping forward, his shoulder bleeding rapidly. "You think you can pull something? We've got you covered! You two are fucking dead for this! You've got nowhere to go! Nothing but half a mag left and no plan worth a damn that won't have you caught and tortured till I make you scream like the *filly!*"

We were backed in, the raiders advancing till we were completely surrounded. Our backs to the wall, Protégé keeping me guarded behind him. I felt the wind behind us off the plaza balcony, the long drop, swirling banners, and lashing leaks of rain to our rear providing a violent backdrop to our shaky position from the perspective of the raider gang keeping us trapped. Protégé ground his teeth, valiantly keeping me defended before the thirty or so weapons aimed directly at our precarious little position.

My master's eyes glanced from side to side, the rifle following them, held close even in his magic field. Barb only sneered, but Protégé remained steadfast, working through with nothing but desperation. Then I caught him out of the corner of his eye, a little glance and curl of his mouth.

"Maybe you're right."

To my horror, he raised the gun upwards, the wind blowing at his mane ever more violently, as though giving up. But before Barb could even shout the command to take us, Protégé pulled the trigger. Half a magazine's rifle rounds soared upwards, shattering the skylight and punching toward the roof.

"Maybe we have nothing..." he began to speak softly, "...but maybe neither do you. I told you, Shackles isn't going to fear you like anypony sane would. You're wearing my eyepiece. I'm surprised you haven't been wondering what that little counter at the top is. The one that started counting down from sixty about fifty minutes ago when I set the timer."

I saw Barb's eye flick up, before scowling.

"What of it!?"

"Sixty minutes to end this before the griffons came in. I'd hoped we'd last the full sixty before now, so you've sort of forced my hoof a little."

Then he smiled.

"I'll bet those griffons are up there right now around the skylight, preparing to raid. And I just gave them a good reason to go ten minutes early."

Barb's mouth opened to bellow a command, but it was lost amongst the explosive chaos that Protégé had lit the fuse to.

A great roar of detonation bellowed through the plaza from above. One whole section of the skylight blasted in, sending millions of shards of glass cascading down amidst the rain and smoke. As one, a dozen griffons dropped in, firing as they came into the mass of raiders that had so conveniently gathered in such a tight cluster around Protégé and I.

We dived to the ground, Protégé dragging me below him as the massive anti-machine rounds tore through the raiders, two or even three in a line. Barb had disappeared almost instantly, his raiders falling to the ground in droves. The griffons whirled in the air, rounding off and dodging the little incoming fire to let their second wave divebomb in after them under the cover of the first.

Protégé grabbed a broken and fallen rifle, tugging the magazine off for his own before opening fire, knocking one raider off her feet while she galloped for us. Firing in short bursts, he held the raiders off me, keeping me safe behind the cover of the balcony. Even so,

I still managed to turn and buck one raider *really* hard (by my standards) in the only place I properly knew how. My little hooves got right in between the legs to deliver a satisfying crunch, the raider going down, his voice as high as mine. (Karma, for once!)

The incoming griffon fire was less now that the raiders had rushed off in all directions to take cover. Many griffons had landed on the opposite balconies to snipe across. Heavy rounds rocketed above us, decapitating raiders and chewing the restaurant to pieces. I hoped they knew to watch for us.

“Murk, careful!”

Two raiders turned their guns on me, hiding low themselves. One snapped back from Protégé’s last round, the second snapped away, before re-aiming, snarling.

An azure light overtook his weapon. Every pin, nut, bolt, and part coming apart in his mouth until he was left with nothing but a trigger (that he still pulled, in dejection). The barrel upturned, smacking him in the face. Behind him, Glimmerlight’s horn glowed from the cage, before she began screaming at me to get to cover. Both Ragini and Brimstone had grabbed whoever was nearest, talons or massive hooves ending their lives quickly.

Three others attempted to rush together. But a magical spark and crackling sounded out, before a blast of overpressure blew across the room. The three were sent spiralling through the air, along with multiple chairs, clean off the balcony edge to tumble to the ground. Coral Eve, exhausted, her horn blackened around the tip and barely able to stand, snarled at the results of her telekinetic wave blast.

The combination of griffon fire and our efforts within the restaurant had mostly cleared it of raiders in less than a minute. Most had fled or died in the initial barrage, but it was almost ours! One sniper shot missed a raider, making him duck down and scramble to two of his comrades behind a table. Continuing on its path, the shot snapped one of Brimstone’s chains. Free to bring more weight and strength to bear, the warlord began tugging, making the concrete crack behind him on the remaining chain across his foreleg. Pent up rage, anger and frenzy was oozing off him, so much so the big pony seemed able to ignore the wound upon his chest. It quickly became clear how he’d stayed at the top of the pack so damn long.

“Get him!”

Three raiders, dodging under the incoming fire that made everything above the thick balcony wall a killzone, took aim at the escaping Brimstone. Then, with a mighty roar, the last chain sprung free, swirling around as he pulled the entire thing from the wall, a massive chunk of concrete with it. The large rock pulverised the raiders, smashing one’s head and cannonballing through the other two. Bellowing his warcry, their old leader stormed into them, wielding the two chains in his forehooves like flails that snapped bones and tore at flesh.

With Brimstone free, even wounded, the battle swung so hard in our direction that it lasted little more than a few more seconds. Protégé signalled to the griffons, who raised their rifles in recognition before soaring off to hunt down the remaining raiders.

The restaurant was clear.

“We... we did it... we *did it!*” I fell to the floor, gasping from exhaustion before rampantly coughing. Springing free when Brimstone shattered the lock, Glimmerlight immediately galloped to the restaurant serving window. Throwing bags and satchels to the side, she seemed to know where they had kept their loot. Feeling my chest tighten, I only caught a brief glimpse of her charging across, her magic already ripping open a sachet. Grabbing and hugging me tightly, pushing the opening to my mouth, I grabbed it and let

the rank orange taste fill my mouth. Faster than I'd ever done, I downed the liquid, simply leaning in and holding Glimmerlight in return.

Up close, I could see the marks, swellings, and bruises brought back fresh since the healing potions we'd found. Around us, Brimstone and Protégé began to scavenge our weapons back, while other griffons arrived to secure Ragini and free her. I could hear them gasp in horror, swearing revenge upon her attacker.

But Glimmerlight and I just held one another, unable to really say anything. We both knew the reason, who we were mourning together. Blinking open one eye, I saw Coral Eve watching us, seeming surprised, startled even at the way Glimmerlight was acting. But seeing me look back, she simply turned away, looking ready to collapse.

A streaked white griffon landed beside Protégé, scanning the doorways with his rifle.

"The slaves have moved further into the plaza. We'll take it from here, sir. They won't get out of here alive."

"No! The *raiders* have moved in, but they have taken slaves as living shields. Remember the difference! Your assault will only—"

Protégé argument was cut short. Gunfire broke out out on the plaza again, further back and around the corner, an area only used for simple slave living space. I hadn't even really been there before. I'd only seen it briefly from the stairs. But it was a dead end, a last stand the raiders had retreated to.

"No survivors! That's the orders from the top, Protégé! Stern's up on the roof if you want to check with her! They ruined a sister's wings. They will die for this!"

"Not every slave is—"

The griffon took off, leaving Protégé stamping in frustration.

"DAMN YOU!"

My master, bleeding, tired, and still shaking on sheer adrenaline, swung away from the griffon's as he began to grab what ammunition for his revolver as he could.

"Not on my watch. *Nopony* else innocent will die today! If Barb is taken down, the rest will likely surrender, right Brimstone?"

The gruff raider nodded curtly, fishing around the loot the raiders had acquired. His brass hooves were returned to him for now, as was my pack, fleece and battle saddle (Thank the Goddesses!). He also located a few healing potions, just enough to get everyone stabilised. Brimstone himself took one for his chest wound, stamping the ground as his strength returned.

"Not if. **When**. I'm going to crush that little upstart."

The name earned him an odd glance from Protégé. Somehow, I felt he had chosen it on purpose to wind up the slaver. But they nodded to one another, knowing that at least the two of them would go this extra mile.

No, not alone.

We both knew we had to. Slipping my fleece, weapon, and saddlebag back on, I joined Glimmerlight as we trotted forward as well. The unicorn was retrieving her rifle and some scavenged ammunition. A green magic energy pistol lying on the ground was added to her hoof holster in replacement of the sidearm she'd carried in and lost.

Barb had done too much, hurt too many. I wasn't any good in a fight, but I wasn't going to abandon my friends. If the most I did was simply listen for anypony flanking or distract them a little, it would be enough.

The slaves still trapped deserved it be done.

Caduceus deserved it to be finished for all he had given.

Together, the four of us galloped out and toward the end of the plaza. Behind us, I saw Coral Eve watching once more, before turning back to start helping the slaves fortify their position and wait for healers.

The griffons had been stalled. The dead end was a perfect defensive point from the main plaza, all the way at the back of the slave area. Raiders had left dozens of barricades across it, strewing the way in with sharpened metal shapes on the floor to prevent wild assault charges. It was no obstacle to griffons, but if they took to the air, they also lost all their cover and became bigger targets with extended wings. We found them ducked behind pillars and higher balconies, fighting on all levels in a vertical battle to push forward.

The raiders clearly had stockpiled the ammo they had stolen, most of it being down there. One large tripod gun (*why* had that been in the guardroom to be stolen?) had been set up and surrounded by thick plates to lay misery upon any who strayed into the middle. Its heavy death-rattle coincided with solid flooring and pillars being torn up and decimated. I could see two or three griffons lying mangled upon the floor, their armour buckled and shredded. One was being pulled back in, after a couple of Talons courageously rushed out and grabbed their wounded 'sister.'

We approached up the side, Protégé taking in their tactics at a glance.

"The griffons will be readying up a firestorm of heavy rounds to batter through those barricades, explosives, and everything. It'll kill every hostage and raider without care! Likely the heavy weapons are being brought up as we speak. We don't have much time."

The unicorn looked around, before settling on one of the shop cells on the side.

"In there!"

We followed his orders, respect as much as rank. The shop cell was dank, stinking of waste and filled with muddy looking mattresses. Suddenly I was very glad for the couch we had.

"The wall in here is cracked, probably weak."

Protégé tapped the wall closest to the direction of the raiders, looking up and down it.

"How do you know that in such detail? There's a hundred cells in here." Glimmerlight asked as we moved in. Indeed, it was cracked, just as he had said.

Protégé just turned, glancing at the mattresses with an oddly familiar gaze.

"Two years is a long time to remember every detail. Now, if we can get some explosives or some large metal object to wedge in we could—"

"COMING THROUGH!"

We dived aside, landing on the musty beds as Brimstone clattered past, charging the wall at full pelt. It didn't even slightly stop him. Only one cinderblock thick, and coated in the cracked plaster, the wall simply disappeared in a big, Brim-shaped, hole.

"...that works too." Protégé seemed a little bewildered, his elaborate plan suddenly becoming a little pointless.

"Don't worry, he does that a lot. You should see him and terminals." Glimmerlight winked to the unicorn as she cantered after Brim. I followed with a rather perplexed Protégé in tow.

Rarity's Grace felt snug at my side. With great effort, I'd reloaded it on the way, springing

the top of the shielded three-shot drum open to carefully hoof the small rounds in. Flicking my front left hoof, the mouthpiece sprang out and around to the right position. The rooms beyond the shop cell were not open to the plaza, perhaps the back of another storage area that merely shared the same walls. Large crates and small cubicle offices passed us on all sides on the final run to find a way in behind the raider position.

Eventually, we found a doorway made of thick steel and heavily locked. Brimstone hammered on it, bucking with brass hooves and all. At most, it dented slightly. But by the side lay a terminal. Glimmerlight leapt to work, tip-tapping away madly. While she worked, Protégé turned back to us.

“Right. Barb will be in there somewhere. The sooner we kill him, the sooner this battle is over. I know we all want a shot at him, but remember those slaves need somepony to protect them.”

He dumped a small sack he’d been carrying. It had a dozen looted weapons from the restaurant.

“We get these to the slaves and do what we can to protect them while we get Barb, whoever spots and gets to him first. But no agendas. Who gets the chance takes it, but the slaves *need* protecting. Understood?”

The door clicked, the locks retracted. Glimmerlight spun off of it, leaning on her hind legs against the terminal. You’d never have thought she had just been through what we had been. I was still shaking at the mere thought of *any* gun right now. I didn’t want to see one up close for a long, long time.

“Gotcha. Now, we doin’ this?”

Pausing for only a second, almost seeming to regard himself for a second, looking at his own cutie mark, Protégé nodded.

“We are.” He approached the door, took a breath...

...and went for it.

Piling through the doorway, we emerged behind the raiders. The door had been a staff entrance, exiting directly onto the plaza itself. The raiders were but ten feet away to our right, nestled at the very back of the plaza. Our first shots took a good half dozen off their feet. Or rather, Glimmer and Protégé’s shots. Brimstone leapt immediately into them from the rear, charging from barricade to barricade.

But I hung back, watching and waiting from the shadows. After a second, I realised I wasn’t alone. Where we’d emerged couldn’t have been luckier. The slaves were right here! Just off to the other side of the door I saw the vast majority of them cowering under gunfire. Some had been hit bad.

I galloped up to them, dragging Protégé’s bag while hoping against hope my three friends could hold off the raiders. I began tossing out pistols and sawn off shotguns to the ponies willing to take them. The injured I pointed to the doorway. Many of them were terrified, but they obeyed my hurried pointing and shouting, too afraid and hurt to argue. I couldn’t blame them. Without the others, I’d have been among them.

They were all that gave me the courage to go on.

Behind me, Brimstone’s warcry echoed amongst the plaza. He dove over the last barricade, charging directly for one pony.

Barb.

Amongst the confusion, the raiders’ position had shattered. Those on the balconies above were still holding the griffons back, and I could see more slaves being held around the

barricades as cover. We'd gotten a large amount of them here, but Barb *had* to go down. It would be a massacre of innocents if not. The raiders on this level were too busy keeping the griffons at check to bring every gun to bear back on our flank attack, so Brimstone had a clear shot at their chieftain. The thin unicorn had been guiding them from the front, but upon seeing the rival raider rush him, drew a knife and leapt forward. He must have had healing too. The revolver wound had disappeared.

Tearing across their lines, Brimstone reared, swinging the chained blade upon his brass hoof to whip out. His opponent leapt, but had to duck from a griffon bullet whipping overhead. Feeling my hopes leap, Brimstone's chain snapped around Barb and slammed the side of the blade into his neck. I saw him yanked toward Brimstone with enough force I thought his spine would just snap! Half way into the air, Barb seemed to glide out of the chains with unnatural grace, sliding through the strong shadows and dust of battle to instead leap, knives bared, at my friend.

This was a whole new kind of fight. I'd seen Brim take on brute strength, but here I saw a clash between vastly differing raiders. Under the harsh light and strong shadows, Brimstone fought an enemy who was elusive and wily. His massive hooves swung fast and strong, but only ever seemed to catch Barb's faded edges as his shadow spells took effect. In return, the brass hooves deflected wicked knife strikes that launched from behind or the sides. It was taking all of Brimstone's experience and often forgotten intelligence to predict and react to Barb's sneak attacks. Clearly, Brimstone had long kept combating this menace in mind as the target for any leadership challenge.

But while he fought, Glimmerlight and Protégé were being pinned down. Protégé waved over to me.

"Murk! We need those grenades you've got! Try to get to me!"

The slaves behind me seemed to be able to hold their position, ranking way lower than the griffons for the attention of the raiders remaining on this level. I began trying to sneak as best I could, sticking to behind barricades and scooting along the back wall. Protégé wasn't far, but griffon anti-machine fire was slapping across this same area above my head. Eventually, rolling painfully across my wings, I came to be beside the unicorn. Digging in my saddlebag, I found the two apple shaped grenades we could—

The moment I even reached for them, Glimmer screamed.

"INCOMING! DOWN! GET DOWN!"

We hit the deck hard, the eerie whistle of a rocket tearing down the plaza. I saw it whip between Barb and Brimstone, separating them with the concussive blast that knocked both of them back and took out the heavy machine gun position. Shrapnel flew everywhere, savagely laying low both raiders and slaves.

Everyone, slave, slaver and raider, staggered to their hooves again. In the wide plaza, I saw various groups stare at one another, grabbing their weapons again, trying to find cover amongst the battlefield.

"Bloodletters! Shades! To me and kill the traitor!" Barb's voice hissed through the air, calling a dozen ponies from the shadows that flowed across the battleground, his elite core of the warband that now assailed Brimstone. Whirling the chains around his hooves, he took them head on, their melee half obscured at the far side of the plaza. Glimmerlight was pushed back, hiding behind a pillar at the side and trying to shove more clips into her rifle while snapping off flaring green shots with the pistol to keep the raiders not going at the griffons away from her.

Ahead of Protégé and I, Barb began galloping for the stairwell. He was getting away!

"Come on, Murk! We have to end this *now*! Too many ponies are dying from that assault.

He needs to go down *right now*!"

With me tagging behind, we galloped across the plaza, dodging fire that kicked up concrete below our hooves. Protégé shot down two raiders trying to block our path, while I slid underneath a fallen pillar to dodge one that aimed to chase me. He couldn't follow through such a space. The moment he went over, a griffon's shot took his head off. Part of me wanted to be sickened. So much blood and death would normally horrify me, but the stakes were too high, the violence too constant. If I stopped to worry, I'd be dead.

Barb turned, seeing Protégé and I gunning for him. The chieftain snarled, heading upstairs again the moment we reached the bottom of stairwell. Fear gripped me of following this deathly raider, but there was no turning back now. I'd just listen for him and let Protégé know. He could take Barb, right?

I hoped so.

The stairway led up much further than the one higher level I had expected. What was this? Some sort of maintenance staircase? The sound of the battle below, so painful to my hypersensitive ears, was beginning to dull the higher we went. The echoes of it beginning to become audible alongside the ongoing crashes of thunder. But even more worrying, the higher we went, the darker things got.

Finally, we emerged into a room. Barb was nowhere to be seen.

The entire room was in darkness. No lights were active here. Terror shot through me. This was Barb's ideal area. Looking like some sort of old ventilation room, large banks of machinery made the entire place a criss cross of hiding places. Normally I would have felt right at home and able to hide here, but now every shadow felt threatening. Even the small war below had become a distant thumping in this isolated and contained place.

"Come out, Barb! It's all over now!" Protégé shouted into the darkness, his revolver training around, watching piles of work tools, boxes of sand for spills, mops, small crates of wires, and a thousand other small hiding places while we trotted further in. Above us, the roof seemed to clatter with the wind beating at the building. We must have been right below the rooftop itself.

Slowly, a deliberate and dragging laugh emanated from the darkness.

"Ha... ha... ha... over? I believe differently, 'master.' You really think I couldn't just slip out of here? Start anew? Fillydelphia isn't a cage to me. The moment you two are dry on the floor, then I'll make my way from here. They won't even know I'm gone."

The voice came from *everywhere*. His magic was throwing the voice, no doubt. Protégé swung the revolver on every side, peering as best he could to see into the dark.

"You're in my world now. Not even your precious little E.F.S. to help you hunt me down. You won't leave this room alive. Dear filly? Take a seat. Watch the master of shadows at work."

A thud came from behind us. Protégé spun, firing a shot. The flare of the gun lit the entire room for a fraction of a second, showing nothing more than a crate that had tipped being blown to splinters. The laughter came again.

"So we're playing again then, hm? One shot down, five to go."

The door we had come through slammed shut, locking hard. Sticking side to side and facing opposite directions, I strove to let my eyesight work in here; but even with a vague idea of where we were, Barb was utterly impossible to locate. Small sounds came from every

side, confusing us, misleading us.

Within the sounds I heard that of something hissing, spinning in the air.

“Knife!” I screamed, more of fear than warning; dropping and dodging frantically. Protégé dove to the side, rolling back to his hooves as the thin blade pinged off the large fan assembly we’d passed. Aiming quickly, two heavy shots battered into the darkness, the flares revealing a dark shadow flickering over the top of a conditioning unit and flowing away. He’d missed by *miles*.

“Oooohohoho... getting panicky now, are we? Two hasty shots? I thought you were Red Eye’s *apprentice*, boy! Trained by the pony who created a superpower with nothing but charisma and smarts! I must say I’m disappointed.”

Pausing on the spot, Protégé seemed to dial down any anger, before his horn lit up more than the usual telekinesis. A red aura sprang around us, lighting the area within twenty or so feet. I could see the reason. It gave us something, but Barb no doubt could have seen us anyway no matter how dark it was. I drew my PipBuck from my back, strapping it to my now healed leg and activating the light too. My vision began to settle, now that I had something to work as ambient light. But shadows danced in the room. Everywhere I looked, I saw small bits of movement. Circling around in our lonely island of light, we stuck together against the darkness that threatened to bring us low.

Then Protégé took the initiative. His magic grabbed two boxes of wires, the ease he had with multi-tasking sending bunches of them hurtling into the darkness at any slight sounds we heard. Then the crates went flying, and the tools; anything to try and gauge an impact.

Beep!

I glanced down at my PipBuck. Now!? *Really!?*

Another hissing sound, another knife. I heard Protégé grunt in pain as it skiffed him, drawing blood along his side before clattering into the floor. Not wanting to lose any momentum, he charged forward, trusting me to follow without distracting words. I dialled down the PipBuck volume. Oh Sundial, not now.

But I could still hear it.

Beep!

Click...

“I... hi... geez... oh Luna, sorry. Exhausted, want to get this before sleep.”

“Watch out, Murk!”

The warning came for a huge string of wires across the floor. We jumped over them, trying to chase him down and catch him in our aura of light around the maintenance room. Charging from corner to corner, I tried to keep up with the taller unicorn.

“Those zebras, they came back! They asked me again about the plans, about how I could make money, I don’t know who I should tell or what I should do! They just appeared from nowhere in the dark alleyway with those cloaks! Hidden in the darkness.”

Barb had been silent for a while now, the waiting was only making things worse. Our lights weren’t strong enough to properly cast across the room, he could be simply following us.

I spun, expecting to see a knife, but there was nothing.

“Getting to you, filly?”

“They scare me so much, just not knowing when they’ll pop out of hiding. No wonder the Ministry of Morale’s been so active. I tried to run from them, but they followed me, cornered me, asked the question again. To give up plans. What if their offer turns nasty?”

It was so scary, seeing the snow landing on something that isn't there and form a shape."

Wait...

"Protégé!"

My master spun around. I quickly flicked my eyes to the boxes of sand. Nodding briefly back to me, Protégé began backing us toward the boxes. He let out another shot into the darkness, lighting up a darting shape *atop* the machinery. Then he was gone again.

"Oh, come now, really? I thought you'd realised how pointless that was to waste a bullet? Well well... are you even sure that *was* me?"

We waited. Closing my eyes, I concentrated everything I could on my hearing. Sight was no use here. I crouched to the ground, trying to ignore the danger, ignore the fact my friends were fighting for their lives below me.

"But they're offering so much... it's tempting. But I saw a spritebot floating around my apartment a few times today. Are the Ministry onto me? Watching to see if I would slip up? I just need a sleep, but Sky needs something to help her live if this all goes bad! I feel paranoid, like any small sound at night makes me wake up and lock myself in the bathroom. Any small sound."

I heard the slide of a knife from a pocket.

"Now!"

Protégé's horn flared, launching the boxes of sand into the air and spinning wildly. The sand erupted into the air, coating everything, including us. But I heard a splutter amongst the darkness and immediately pointed my hoof. Two shots from Protégé's revolver rang out at the direction. Each flare revealed a freeze-frame of Barb charging us, dodging around the bullets. A knife flashed between us, both of us dodging to either side.

"The zebras are watching, I just know it! They knew who I was. What if they kill me?"

"A child's trick with sand? Oh my, but you've used up all your bullets my dear Protégé! Time for this to end!"

Rolling away, I turned to see Barb within our sphere of light, slashing and stabbing at Protégé. The unicorn was backing off furiously, throwing everything he could at the raider while he struggled to reload individual bullets. Box after bucket after tool kept Barb just out of knife range. After three bullets loaded he aimed, taking another shot that Barb ducked around a workbench to avoid. I tried to see if he came out the other side, but by the time we rushed him, he was gone. The sand wasn't staying on him. It had only bought us that one shot!

"They might get somepony else as their helper, if I only give them non-critical bits. I don't think I have a choice anymore. It's like they're always behind me. Just waiting..."

"Behind you!"

I saw Barb launch off the workbench and into our aura of light, two knives in his magic. A telekinetic duel began of sorts, as Protégé struggled to keep those knives away from him. I watched in horror as the pony I felt like I was only now beginning to understand fought for his life with the raider. The revolver fired, with Barb's own magic knocking the aim of, much the same as Protégé's telekinesis was grasping and wrestling with the knives.

Changing the stakes, Barb launched forward, going physical on Protégé as the two tussled, fighting both hoof to hoof and magic to magic, and Protégé was clearly losing. Barb was impossible to keep a grip of, sliding and slithering in ways no pony should be able to move, or letting Protégé's attempts to grapple him down slide off that sickeningly damp skin-armour. Already, my master had a half dozen knife slashes from near misses.

"All I know is, I need to make a decision. Take action."

I bit down on the mouthpiece, aiming *Rarity's Grace*. My one shot went wild, but the distraction made Barb break off and away. A knife hurtled toward me, making me scream and fall from the hissing metal passing so close overhead. I heard it embed into sheet metal beside my head. How many did he *have*?

But the distraction cost him dear. Unable to fight him head on, Protégé's magic changed purpose. Ripping the eyepiece from Barb's face, he aimed the revolver. Caught in front of the barrel, Barb threw himself Protégé, and dropped back into the shadows at a moment's notice.

Only now, Protégé had his E.F.S.

The revolver and its single shot tracked him, following the raider all around. I fell back again, the ferocity of their brutal duel becoming far too much for me. They weren't speaking, taunting, or boasting now. This was a fight. A life or death event that both of them had to win. Protégé sent spanners and hammers hurling after Barb, tracking him on the eyepiece. He ducked and dove, crying out as another knife sliced through his ear, almost taking it entirely off. Blood stained the side of his head. He staggered back, wincing and muttering in pain, the revolver drooping... no!

"But first, sleep, so tired. Goodnight..."

Click.

Barb launched from the shadows, almost stretching out amongst them as the knife descended.

Protégé was bluffing.

The wires spun up, his strong multi-tasking telekinetic skills sending dozen of them whipping around Barb on all sides. Wrapping up the raider, they tangled him roughly, before a box of heavy sand smashed against his head. Barb landed heavily on his back, face bleeding from the impact. The knives all dropped, falling as his spell broke, bringing his full body into sharp relief. Spinning, Protégé brought the last round he had on him to bear, pointing directly at his head. Barb glanced up, sudden immediate fear in his eyes.

The look on Protégé's face was stern, authoritative and confident. I'd only seen such a look on one pony before.

Red Eye.

"This is for Caduceus and everypony else you murdered."

Barb's hooves came up, but it was too late. Protégé's revolver blew his head clean apart... into a dark mist, as the rest of his body faded.

I gasped. I'd seen this!

"PROTÉGÉ, BEHIND YOU!"

Looking up in shock, he tried to spin, but the shadowed knife slammed home into his shoulder, diagonally lancing to pierce right through and out from his chest. Barb had dropped onto his back from above, before twisting it horribly and drawing a loud scream of pain from the unicorn.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Barb whispered into his ear, another sick twist only giving another drawn out cry from his prey. I felt rooted to the spot, my mouth gaping.

They fell to the ground, the knife ripping free. leaving Barb straddled over the prone slave master. It was a wickedly black dagger, seeming to drift with shadows on the blade. Protégé fell limp with Barb on his back. The raider's magic grabbed Protégé's mane, yanking his head back to expose his neck, keeping Protégé head between him and I as cover. The blood

soaked blade curled around it and began to pull *slowly*. I even saw the blood began to dribble forth to mix with the copious bleeding of his shoulder. He was slitting his neck wide open!

"Born slave to loyal slaver. Never truly your own pony, pathetic! Now... bye-bye!"

I saw him tense to pull Protégé's head right back, to rip the cut throat apart.

Without even really knowing what I was doing, I charged forward, galloping with all the force I could gather and hurling myself at Barb with a loud cry. Even my weight was enough, slamming the raider off of Protégé and beating at him with my hooves with every pent up feeling of frustration and anger I had at him for involving himself in my life!

The shadowblade flew away into the darkness. Rolling one over the other, I was picked up and hurled into the metal machinery like a rag doll. Trying to stand, I flipped the mouthpiece out again, the shot firing upward as his magic yanked *Rarity's Grace* away from aiming at him. Spinning around it, Barb bucked me again, knocking me another seven feet away with a crunching, sharp impact to my breast.

"Now what do we have here? The little filly got some spine, eh? Thought he could take on a raider chieftain at his own game before he got his kill? Gotta hand it to you, kid, didn't expect it."

He darted forward, blinking through my vision and appearing before me, his front hoof smashing me across the jawline. Falling to the side, I spat blood, my gums burst. But he wasn't done, his magic lifted me up to telekinetically throw me even further. Clattering off the ground, I felt my ribs jar and the wind crushed out of me on impact. Unable to even scream, I simply rolled over, moaning loudly as I clutched at myself.

"But he's dead one way or the other. Why, just take a look!"

Drawing my head up, he forced my glance back to Protégé, where I felt my eyes widen in horror. He was jittering on the ground, trying to hold his neck shut; bleeding out, unable to move at all.

"No. It's just you and I, filly. You... and I..."

I lashed out in desperation, my hoof trying to catch him by surprise. No such luck. I felt my hoof battered away, before I was thrown through a doorway.

Suddenly, light and sound.

The battle below us raged. A sense of vertigo overtook me as I realised what I'd been thrown onto.

The platform above the plaza I had seen, that skeletal frame that hung below the skylight. This had all led upward to it, above the long drop. The bottom was nothing but hard mesh to trot on, no solid floor at all. I could see right down. Struggling to stand, my body aching, I found myself crying in sheer terror. I couldn't win!

I screamed even more as I felt the terrible sensation of a knife slit across my back. Crawling away, I felt another slice, and dared to look back. But I yelled, feeling my back sear in pain. They weren't deep. He was taunting me, torturing me. My hooves scrambled, trying to crawl across the platform, away from him.

"You know, filly. You and I are pretty alike. Small amongst our peers. I couldn't do what they did, had to get my own way. But with you, oh, it all changes..."

I was kicked again, flung farther out onto the platform. The entire thing swung on its cords, wavering beneath the thunderstorm above. Rain lashed at us through the skylight, wind almost threatening to blow me off the edge. His long mane was whipping around as he strode toward me. Lit by a flare of lightning, that grin turned demonic, and those eyes

predatory. Water dripped all around him from the storm around us.

I tried to turn, to shoot out the glass above his head and drop it all on him, but my mouthpiece was broken. That grin widened. He sensed easy blood.

“See, with *you*, I don’t need all that. I can, for once, enjoy a little physical superiority! You can’t hide or sneak better than I can, your peer. So it’s all useless to you! No, all you can do is lie there and *cry* while I do all the things I never could to anypony else!”

The thunder clashed above us, the skylight’s remaining fixtures shaking and making the entire platform unsteady. Seeing my blood on the ground behind me, I just tried to stay away from that knife. But his magic could reach me, flipping me over onto my front.

“Don’t think I don’t know your fears, filly. The terrors you hold from one of my crew.”

I felt the tip of a blade draw across my back, before resting above my shoulder and beginning to press.

“No... please!”

He licked his lips.

“Welcome back to hell.”

The piercing pain shot through me and pinned me to the ground, feeling a foot long blade punch through my body. The *same* shoulder.

Against the thundercrash above, almost lost in the sound, I screamed.

Kneeling down beside me, he pushed my head against the grated bottom of the platform, making me see the battle below through tear-stained eyes and a throat struggling to be able to scream as much as I wanted for help.

“You *need* your allies. Without them you’re nothing, filly. *Nothing!* You think they’re gonna save you now? Poor master’s bleeding out. The mare and the traitor are still down there, see them?”

I could. They didn’t even see me. They were just fighting for their lives, unable to move from bad cover for fear of the griffons hitting them. The slaves were backed into a corner, desperately struggling to survive from both raiders and griffon incoming fire.

“No, for once you’re all alone and there’s *nothing* you can do, filly! Nothing but scream and cry while you watch your friends *die!*”

My body was faltering from the stab wound. Barb withdrew the knife, making me cry out and curl up.

Everything seemed slow, the wind becoming lethargic and lazy, the gunshots taking longer.

“Only by sticking together can we truly save lives. Do not be afraid to fight if in defence of a better world. You will find your courage, Murky.”

Those voices in my memory, in my mind. They were what had inspired me to come here. To do all this, to this absolute end of all effort. To finish this and save lives, to help everypony make something better!

Just... just you watch, all of you. I’ll fail, but I won’t destroy everything you’ve given me!

It hurt. It hurt so badly, but remembering the faces of everypony who had been hurt more to get here, I began to push myself up, facing Barb. I had two grenades left. I began trying to dig for them, watching him, and—

His hoof caught me across the face.

“Applause for effort, filly! But you’re outmatched here! I’m stronger, faster, smarter, bigger, and stealthier than you’ll ever be!”

His other hoof slapped me again the other way. Dizzied, feeling a stinging after every

slap, I staggered back again toward the edge.

“Every plan, every idea, *every trick* I’ve seen before! You’re nothing but the little pony nopony actually believes will do anything in the end! You wanted to *escape*? *You!*? You’ll *never* get out of here, kid!”

Pulling myself together, my body protesting, I readied up. My shoulder and front leg were useless. But one last effort... I just had to try!

Screaming, I charged him head on again, wrestling with the raider atop the platform, trying to hit him with my PipBuck like a club. He threw me everywhere, his knife drawing blood from slits and cuts. His hooves battered my face until I was swinging and missing entirely, but I pushed into him, hooves grabbing his disgusting clothing to tug and pull at his pockets, before he simply threw me off him.

Gravity disappeared. My hoof jarred as it caught around a pole at the edge, the rest of my body being flung over the edge of platform to now hang above the drop. The entire platform shuddered, leaning down to drop my weight. Panicking, I pedalled my hindlegs in the open air, feeling the sense of a long drop beneath me. From above, the rain was cascading down even harder across us, the stinging making my hoof go weak. I tried to grab with my other one, but all the efforts had made the stab wound become much worse, I couldn’t move it at all.

“Guess this is it, filly. You’ve been fun! But I told you. *Nothing* you can do, not one thing you can pull out on me that I don’t know better.”

Struggling, trying to keep attached, I propped my head back on the platform. Leaning up, I fixed him with a look before I spat out blood...

...along with two grenade pins.

“E-every trick? Ever heard of the reverse pickpocket?”

If I weren’t bleeding to death and hanging off such a ledge, the look on his face would have been satisfying. The raider stepped back, as though wondering if I were joking before frantically beginning to search his many pockets and hidden sections of clothing, realising the mistake he’d made; falling into the pride and rush of being a physically stronger pony.

“You... no, you couldn’t have! A reverse— NO! Not *you!* Damn you! DAMN YOU!”

My leg gave way. I couldn’t hold on any longer. Feeling darkness creep over me, I saw the horrified look on Barb’s face move farther and farther away as he felt the two bumps in his clothing even while I fell.

“NO! Not to a... stupid... *fucking...filly!* *IT WON’T HELP! YOU’RE STUCK HERE! YOU’LL NEVER GET OU—*”

The sharp crack and echoing boom rocked through the air, the blinding flash atop the platform throwing the broken and shredded form of Barb off the opposite side from myself. The concussive blast slapped across me. Then, seconds later, after everypony below looked skyward, the second explosion of the other grenade blasted the remains into ashes within the sight of his entire clan.

Barb was gone, and I simply fell to my death. A strange calm overtook me as I fell through the rain from on high. Only unlike before, this wasn’t from resignation. It was satisfaction. It was a sense of worth. I had... I had done *something*.

If that had to be—

Then I hit something, not the ground, but a heavy fabric. A vast pink face enveloped me, slowing my descend as my light weight was caught in the billowing banner that had blown out horizontally to catch me. But even so, I rolled down it, tumbling, grasping, spinning

speeding up again for the last single storey yet to fall. I closed my eyes, the impact eventually coming amongst a rush of colour and wind in my ears.

Everything went out.

A warm light. That inner glow from before. It fell around me, fell across my broken and tired body. Slowly, I was lifted up. Helped to my hooves once again.

A... a pony! It was a pony! It turned that shimmering head with mine, ahead of us lying the Wall, as grand and imposing as ever.

Slowly, I felt a hoof clutch mine, as we began moving toward it, bolstered, braver, reminded of our potential...

"Together..."

Other words, another four drifting words that seemed so far... far... away...

I couldn't hear them. There was too much noise, too many other words, not beautiful... not as wondrous... they were foul... they were crude... they were-

"—before I push it there myself! Come on you *fucking bunghole pipe experiment!* There's too many casualties for you to sit around dicktickling some buck with a sprained leg all day!"

My eyes wouldn't see anything but vague blurs, but I was lying on cold ground. The rotten shape of a ghoul over me. Weathervane...

"—and while you're there get me some Celestia-damned Med-X! I don't give two fucks if the guard says it isn't for slaves!" A pause. "No I don't give a *single* fuck either! BLOODY MOVE! I can't move him till we know if his back's gone or not!"

Then the yellowed face turned back to me, seeing my hazed eyes drifting open. He gained in clarity as I slowly began to realise I was still alive. But I couldn't move. My shoulder was a mess of twisted pain, the feeling making me want to shiver.

"Fuck the eighteen generations of your ancestors, kid, you're lucky to be alive." Weathervane began re-strapping a thick wad of bandage around my shoulder, being careful to keep my back from moving. Behind him I could see dozens of healers galloping around the Mall's plaza floor, tending to so many ponies.

"I had to, the... the grenade..."

"Lucky about the grenade? Fuck the *grenade*, kid! You landed on *Stern!* Just hope she doesn't want compensation for the piece of armour you dented on your fall. Leastways she broke your impact a little. Better than can be said for some of the slaves those bastards got their hooves on."

My mind raced, sudden panic fighting through. Apparently, my back worked just fine, as I launched up, grabbing the ghoul.

"*Protégé!* Is he..."

Doctor Weathervane pressed me firmly back down, as the pain only then hit me from my sudden movement. Nearby, I saw ponies being wheeled out to the hospital, Glimmerlight, Coral... they both watched me as they passed, Glimmer offering a thin smile, clutching a bullet wound. But I could only await the answer.

"We found him upstairs..."

Oh no.

“...living, but in critical condition. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“But you can help him! Potions and spells and—”

“Normally, yes. But we’re not sure what Barb did to that blade because those wounds just aren’t healing no matter how many potions we throw into him. We’ve got doctors keeping him alive by the thinnest of threads right now but, well, it’s not looking good. Even at the most optimistic, he’s out of the game for a while.”

Behind him, I saw one more stretcher pass out, surrounded by crowding healers, all of their horns flaring. I caught a few glances of a black coat. Please Celestia, please Luna, bring him through this arduous time and give him the strength to live.

Weathervane glanced at them, before sighing.

“They say Red Eye’s personal physician will take to him. They don’t like ‘outsiders’ like me working on Red Eye’s little prodigy there. Despite the fact I’m more from this city than any of those fuckers, Fillydelphia’s my fucking *home*. Now, we’re getting you to Hearts and Hooves, Murk. You’ve got a pass. Before he went under, Protégé muttered something about getting you all the care you needed. We’ll see that happens.”

It was over. The Mall was devastated, ruined, destroyed. Blood ran everywhere. Balconies had collapsed and there was enough battle damage to render it useless for a little while. But I could see the slaves cowering at the side. We’d saved them. Even now, healers moved among them, tending to them in their hour of need.

I’d known one who had done so *before* then. Even as I watched, for a second I thought I witnessed a blonde mane looking up quickly, smiling as he helped other ponies. Then he was gone, just another face to the memories.

The first chance I got, I was going to draw him. He deserved it.

I was wheeled out soon after, doped up on Med-X and lifted upon the stretchers as they returned for more. Weathervane returned with me, staying silent en-route. But as we left the Mall, I looked back into the war-torn destruction left behind and saw one pony standing among it.

The Master.

He looked up and around, casting his eyes over the Mall, over every cell and barrier with keen eyes, like somepony viewing a new home for the first time...

...and smiled.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Sleight of Hoof (Rank 2!) – Giving and taking, it’s all the same to you now. That little bit of damning evidence or unfortunate item may now mysteriously end up in your enemy’s possession without them even realising. Reverse pickpocketing is now significantly easier to achieve with heavier objects!



ACT TWO
MASTER AND SLAVE

The Mare in the Mirror



“Quite pleased to make your acquaintance actually. Let’s get the other bit of politeness taken care of, shall we? What the bloody, bloody, bloody hell are you doing here!?”

“What’s it like to look back on how far you’d come?”

You know, I guess I’d never even thought about it that way. Barb’s death was something of an end to one of the larger parts of my new life in Fillydelphia. Since I had made that first fateful escape attempt, he had been there in the background and somewhat involved in almost every facet of my struggles since.

But it’s more than that, isn’t it? This was the first time I’d ever really *done* something that mattered. That really changed everything. Sure there had been helping Protégé to get the sani-sanitoo...

“Sanitiser.”

Yeah, that. But that was almost all just a test, a ploy by him to get me to think outside the box and try making choices for myself. But taking on Barb was an *event*. Something big that I was involved with which ended in our success.

Well, if you could call it a success. We’d lost many innocent ponies in the battle, along with one who had been fast becoming somepony we’d expected to stick with us. We were all injured. Protégé was seriously hurt and taken from us into the machine of Red Eye’s city. We might have stopped Barb, but it had all just been part of a greater plan by somepony else... The Master. He wasn’t officially in command, but he was chosen to oversee the repairs. Protégé’s efforts to bring down Barb were likely the only thing that had stopped his absolute success. Even so, if Protégé didn’t return to service soon.

S-sorry, I’m getting off the question, aren’t I?

“Huh? Oh, look, don’t worry about it, we’re not in any rush. We’re going to be around one another a long time now, remember? Plenty of opportunity to go at your own pace.”

Yeah, true... ok, I’ll try.

So, I suppose that it's more than just since I tried to escape. It goes all the way back to when I first remember struggling to pull a sled weighed down with rocks near Shattered Hoof. That little skinny-legged colt with the mismatching ears, straining to move it even one inch. He'd never have thought he'd someday wrestle a raider chieftain atop a platform in a thunderstorm to save innocent ponies fighting for their lives below. He didn't see anything but just a future full of toil and sweat till eventually it all ended.

But now I was involved in the secret planning of a grand escape from the most inescapable slave fortress in the wastes. I had others around me, ponies who I had earned the trust and friendship of, ending over a decade of loneliness. Every good pony I had met had changed me, helped me move one step closer to true freedom of the mind. Really, it's their success more than mine. To think how short a time it had been, how much I'd been through, culminating on the battle against Barb's raiders. It's easy to forget, well, just how many of those small steps I'd taken amidst the mad rush.

But the game had changed. As much as we'd done our part, the true winner in the end had been The Master. His ambition, it... just terrifying. So much hate and sadistic will in one pony.

The stakes were growing, the need for escape becoming ever more important. That we had to just keep bounding forward, doing every little thing we could to swing the odds back in our favour. Every scrap of food, every drop of water, and every trinket, tool or tactic we could gather had to be taken in.

But as I said, even though I'd come so far so soon, there were still some things that I had to go back to. Some ponies that had been there in the very beginning. Before any of this, before even the Stable Dweller. Somepony who was still out there in Fillydelphia that mattered deeply to me and deserved escape. Somepony who didn't even know I was still alive.

But it all hinged on one fact. If Protégé didn't return to power soon, anypony I tried to help might simply end up being led into the clutches of The Master in the same way I was. I had to just trust he'd be alright. That the pony I had only just begun to see *as* a pony had not been taken from me forever.

It was still raining.

In this long neglected wing of Heart and Hooves Hospital, the windows had gone completely without repair since they were blown in by the Balefire megaspell. Allowing the rain to continue its foul lashing and spraying from a dark sky, and cast a chill wind through the empty frames. Alone in my hospital bed, I curled up with the meagre blanket and tried to keep as much of the cold away as possible.

At least the storm had passed over. I'd heard the slavers on guard inside the hospital saying that the rain should go soon as well. But until then I was stuck here, one of the last to leave. Glimmerlight and Brimstone had been returned to the Mall long ago, their less serious wounds 'permitting' them to return to work sooner. Given what Brimstone had endured, that thought was awe inspiring. He'd healed far faster than even Weathervane had predicted with the healing potions' magic.

I, however, had the privilege of getting to rest a while longer.

I'd been waking up multiple times screaming, leaving me hazy and heavy-eyed when

awake. The pain of the wound when I tossed or turned only skewing my nightmares to remind me of the sick puncturing feeling that I'd had now felt twice. I'd heard others say you were meant to get used to hardship and become weathered to it. If only. I just felt more scared of knives than ever. The sick looks of that raider or Barb as they let the weapon plunge into my flesh simply left me a shivering wreck now. Weathervane had called it 'psychological scarring', a wound that persists in pain even if the body has entirely healed. Something that could easily flare up when in fear of the initial attack happening again. Likely another thing to live with throughout my life.

But after the fear and adrenaline, my body was beginning to 'remember' the other ailments. My eye infection was worse, itching and making my right eye swell all the more. Blackened rings surrounded them still from the torture Barb's raiders had given me after running from Slit, leaving my face sore and aching. My nose felt blocked, no doubt having caught something in the storm and due to my immunity to illness being so low, which made it all the harder to have to breathe through my mouth. This was never easy, given the raspy burning that I got in my throat from overuse. Weathervane had dropped off my one remaining RadAway with a promise to try and find more spare, but the stocks were being carefully monitored now. I was trying to let it last till I *really* needed it. As such, more than once I'd endured the spasm-inducing coughing fits while recovering. Clutching a thin pillow to my empty stomach, I'd simply squeezed it as tightly as I could, trying to put all the pain and fear of radiation and taint away, trying to forget about the clock that was slowly ticking down the seconds of my life.

It hadn't worked too well. I needed out of this city.

The wind blew in again from the craterside window, lifting the tails of my blanket until I could clamp it down and roll up, but I lost my page in my journal. I'd been drawing, gently easing the lines out upon parchment to uphold a promise and attempt to distract myself. This wasn't going to be just another picture though. This had to matter. Caduceus... he had barely gotten to know us, but in even just a short, almost criminally forgettable time, he had proven himself a brave and kind buck. Now I'd never know his quirks, likes, or thoughts on various things. Never get to go to him for help or do him a favour like friends did. But he'd risked himself for us in the hope of being our friend. In the end, he deserved that place in our hearts.

I hoofed the pages back against the wind, coming to the growing piece of art that I knew he had to be in. Myself and Glimmerlight were upon it already, me in the bottom middle left, her just across from me to the right of the middle. It brought a little grin to my face, seeing the extravagant and beaming face I'd drawn her with, cheekily lowering her eyebrows in *that* look only she could really do. I decided to place him beside her, where he'd have wanted to be. Just to her left and slightly behind her with that gentlecolt-like polite stance and warm smile he'd had.

Struggling to remember, I let my subconscious do the work for me, gently swishing the charcoal in little tight curves for his body as I imagined it would have been had he not been stuck here. Bold flicks, like those confident little motions he would exude to me, formed his mane. Big and fluffy, not trodden down from months without cleaning. In honour of his dedication, I gave his saddlebag the symbol of Fluttershy's medical teams. Were they a Ministry again? My memory wasn't too great on that.

But his eyes... the moment I finished them, the charcoal dipped in my mouth. Seeing that happy look from the paper, knowing the this drawing would be the *only* way I'd ever

truly see him again forever, that felt harsh. Glimmerlight could bring up memories, but those were hers, not mine. Even if she extracted some of my own for me, it was still just the past. What lay before me in my style was the end.

Another blast of wind scattered the pages again, making me mutter in annoyance when the charcoal got messed up on a correction of his mane. Leaning down to correct it, the page only flew up in my face, flicking madly back to earlier images. I almost froze as I saw one of my first pictures I could remember, one of the mare. I'd drawn her as reality showed her that time, with that long mane, ruined and straggled into a mess by slavery, the cut tail and hard worked body. She was looking up at the Wall, as though wishing to leave herself. If only I could get to her. I'd spent less than ten minutes around her, never knowing her name or anything. I hadn't even seen her cutie mark. I couldn't just leave her behind, could I? In such a short time, she had helped change my life. She had stood up to The Master for me. I dearly hoped she was still safe, somewhere out there.

Whistling, the wind once again threw the page over, ruining the moment of reflection.

"Oh f... f... *fairycakes*." I slammed the journal shut. Sitting alone in this room while the healing magic slowly finalised its work wasn't doing me any favours. I felt lonely, miserable in the wet weather, and with only my own worried thoughts to really keep me company. As strange as it felt to a pony like me, who not long ago would have simply hidden and cried, I wanted somepony around. Anypony, just to feel a little safer. Even just a little trot through the corridors where others were might help better than dwelling in misery.

I wrapped the blanket loosely around my body, and carefully hopped off the bed. Keeping the hoof of my injured leg off the ground, I hobbled out of the ward; part of the blanket dragging behind me on the floor. Upon stepping into the busy corridors I saw ponies cantering to and fro on errands for chems, medicine or to find somepony who knew a certain spell. I stuck to the sides, avoiding any rush or hurrying doctor. I could hear the rasping voice of Weathervane far off, clearly fighting to save somepony's life. The hospital was dark, the unreliable lighting and magic power inside having gone offline from the storm earlier. Candles were lit or curtains pulled back to let the little light Fillydelphia had back in. Right now, it all just felt like the deepest, harshest hole in the world that I was stuck in, surrounded by all the others who now cried or moaned in pain from its tortures. Nothing but one little hurt pony wrapped in a once white blanket, limping past the horrors.

Backing into a room to avoid a stretcher bearing a lifeless and scrawny mare past, I saw the nurse from, when I had last visited. She glanced at me, nodding briefly, before sadly continuing to carry the body around back. I'd smelled smoke earlier. A proper burial wasn't something any slave could expect. Already, no doubt Caduceus had been-

"Murky?"

I squeaked, jumping on the spot and stumbling against the doorframe. Spinning to inside the room, there were three beds. Two had bucks out cold, while the third contained a mare sitting up and looking at me. Coral Eve.

Her horn seemed to carry an irregular magical haze in the gloom, an unhealthy pale version of the full light I'd seen it carry before. Seeing my glance, she raised a tired looking wasted hoof to it, rubbing her own horn gently.

"Old case of horn rot years ago, dear. The wastes isn't without its own diseases compared to Fillydelphia. Been unreliable and prone to sporadic power surges since. Hey, you don't need to stand in the doorway. Come closer, it's alright."

She patted the rather too large bed beside her, leading me to obey and wander forward.

She definitely used a somewhat maternal tone to her, probably because I was a lot younger. Hopping up, she grabbed my good hoof to help me sit in my blanket beside her.

“Now, how’re you doing?” Her voice was tender, mature, and pleasant; a far cry from the bitter mare I’d seen in the Mall. Was this what she was normally like?

I held my shoulder.

“It’s sore. Doctor Weathervane says it shouldn’t hurt since he healed it, but it still hurts... be-because my mind thinks it should.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of that. You’ve been stabbed there before, dear?” Her hoof carefully moved the blanket aside to look at my shoulder, seeing the healed cut when I lifted the bandage up. It bore a tender red line, but otherwise was fine now.

A little bit of my coat had yet to regrow from where Weathervane had been doing his work. After glancing at it myself, I nodded, and motioned to the underside of my shoulder.

“One of Barb’s raiders outside the Stable. Just pinned me down and...”

The feelings washed over me all again. I tried to look away, instead looking toward the rainfall outside the (surprisingly intact) window in this room. Even so, the thought of that lashing shower out there made me shiver. My skin still tingled from the exposure while playing Barb’s sick games. It was nothing more than a constant battle now that the adrenaline was over. A battle to not remember the spinning revolver and nerve-crushing tension on each dead click.

In a word, I felt simply traumatised. Part of me doubted I’d ever be truly able to ‘get over’ the twisted experience Barb put me through.

Much to my surprise, I felt Coral’s hoof pass over me, tucking the blanket back around me. I guessed she had on account of me still shaking so much. The older mare tried to smile, but just sighed instead.

“You shouldn’t have been caught up in that. Not you. I’ve raised a colt, Murky. I know that look of innocence when I see it. That’s why I forgave you for that day in here when we first saw one another. I could see the look my son once had when I caught him trying to steal medicine off a trader, to help an injury one of his little friends had. The look of somepony who doesn’t deserve to be in such a place.”

Regardless, I still felt guilty, but I sensed an opportunity. She clearly didn’t mind me individually. Perhaps if it came from me.

“We’re all trying to get out, Coral. We’re gathering what we can, we’ve got a plan, and Glimmer *really* wants you and your son to come with us. She doesn’t care how you see her, but she just wants to save you.”

The mood swung, Coral’s face screwing up as she fought to control her emotions and clearly short temper.

“That mare doesn’t see anything past short-term satisfaction. A stiff drink, a quick rut or a splendidly overenthusiastic plan that’ll end up hurting us all by the end of this. Look at how her working with Barb turned out, hm? He told us how you three were involved. Now I don’t blame you. I *know* he’d have done it anyway, but she still agreed to it, believed in it. She never truly *thinks* about the consequences of her actions. She doesn’t know how to commit, how to choose and stick to something. Give it a few days. She’ll try something else with this ‘plan’, hell she’s already wanting it to go from you three, to including swiping a colt from under Red Eye’s nose and getting him and I out too?”

Coral snorted, tossing her ponytailed and braided mane, before wincing. Apparently some muscles along her back remaining injured.

"She's smart, brave and yes, even caring. But Glimmerlight isn't somepony you want to ever rely on for too long. It'll come down and hurt you in the end."

The question was far too simple. It felt almost wrong to ask, but I couldn't stop it. The query had been burning in my head for too long.

"Coral, what did she *do*?"

Her pale grey face glanced back at me, as though trying to spot if this were some sort of ploy. I quickly spoke again.

"I won't tell her. I don't think she wants to find out like that anyway. I promise?" My voice died away as I spoke, but Coral Eve only sighed, shifting her weight to lie on her side.

"You know we're both from Creaky Hollow village. Middle of nowhere, a little spot that had just enough to sustain a small population. Safe, secluded; about as good as you can get out in the wastes if you don't have the caps to live in the big towns. We had our occasional problems with the wildlife, but we lived in relative peace. Never so much as had seen a raider if you'd been born there. Sometimes we took ponies in if they had something to offer. Glimmerlight did."

The generator and other technical aspects. That I remembered from her projected memory.

"But she outed us, gave up where we were to Brimstone Blitz's clan. They'd been crawling around the dead forest we were in, so we just kept our heads down and covered any trails leading back. But it was no good. They came in the night. With fire and blade they sacked Creaky Hollow just like they'd done to the small resettlement in Ponyville. Turned out she'd snuck out in the night to meet one of them, led them right back to our village."

"No!"

"I watched our elder get cut down as she pleaded with them. Saw friends and ponies I considered my family torn apart. Some of us fought back, maybe held off their vanguard for a few minutes. But then *he* arrived. The Dragon, your 'Brim'. They fought like they were possessed the moment he was around, tore anyone who resisted down and put them to horrible deaths. The rest of us? Sold to Red Eye."

Coral sniffed sharply, just keeping a hard glare on my shocked face.

"She got what she deserved. They turned on her the moment they had what they wanted. Look at what just happened in the Mall. There's your proof of what I'm saying. If she feels she needs something, Glimmer won't think about the consequences. The only silver lining to it was the third betrayal, when Red Eye took in the raiders as well after trapping them in a minefield with snipers and alicorns. Serves them all right to be here."

There were no words, none at all. But... I knew with all my heart that Glimmerlight wouldn't do that. There had to be a reason, *there had to be*! I curled up, resting my chin on my front hooves through the blanket. Really, I wasn't sure if I felt comforted by Coral's hoof stroking the back of my neck as though to calm me down.

"Look, maybe... maybe she's right and being in here's made her want to change or face up to her past, Murky. But her rash thinking has already helped one more raider hurt ponies again, and I'll bet she'll be back at the Mall right now stripping out the worst bits from her mind."

Coral hesitated, then looked guilty, as though feeling bad for offloading so much on me. She gently squeezed around my shoulders.

"You can always come to me, I saw you fighting to save us, Murk. You're a good pony. But just be careful around Glimmerlight. You don't deserve to be hurt any more than you

clearly already have been from Barb.”

It wasn't really helping. Glimmerlight was the best thing that had kept me going and staying happy. My big sister best friend forever. She'd been the first pony since I was a colt to hug me, one who had made me able to smile and laugh with her and helped make me more confident. To think that she'd... no, even if it were exactly how Coral said, that wasn't who she was now. I was *sure* of it.

“Murk!? Murk, where the bloody hell did you scamper off to?”

Weathervane's rasping tone shouted down the corridor, before his head poked in the door and saw us.

“There you are. They saw that eternal fucking rain's starting to let up out there. You're good enough to head back now, Mall's only on light duties, so they tell me you should be fine. Now come on, we'll need this room soon, so get back to your ward. We've got an accident from the FunFarm coming in within the hour. One of the old scaffolds fell. I told them they needed that ass-backward design tightened up *two hundred and fifteen fucking years ago* when I took Sundial there as a colt. I guess they didn't think *this* far ahead, but still. Tight-wadded cockwaffles.”

The ghoul wandered off, ranting and raving to anypony nearby that seemed willing to listen.

Biting my lip and trying to force down the feelings from even hearing the poor ghoul mention his son's name, I turned back to Coral and reluctantly pulled myself out of the blanket. I saw her eyes stare at my wings, bound up from Weathervane's attention. Clearly, the unicorn wasn't too used to the fact that I was a pegasus yet.

“S-sorry. I'll be careful, but I trust her, I really do. She's saved my life more than once, Coral. I wouldn't have been able to do what I did in there without her. She wants to make things better for you, so... will you come with us?”

It felt almost childish. To ‘make up’ for all this. But Coral Eve's eyes only remained hard, before losing the anger and just being replaced with exhaustion. She slumped back into the bed.

“Glimmerlight's actions put me, my son, and many of my friends in here, Murk. I'm sorry, but she's going to have to accept that I can't simply let that slide by easily or forgive her by words alone.”

I saw her wipe an eye.

“To have her be around the very pony I saw behead my friend. The one who dragged poor Jotter Note out and just pulled her head off, with her screaming, right in front of me. I'm surrounded by ponies that hurt me, betrayed me or punish me, Murky. I don't have a life any more.”

Her front hooves curled up her own blanket, clutching it as though it were a small foal inside it, almost out of habit.

“I was a mother. I had friends and family and a son and... a best friend. I had safety, and a peaceful life before I came here but now I... I don't have *any* of that. Now, I'm only surrounded by pain and bad memories. Everypony's been taken from me, even my best friend. Even my son.”

Not for the first time, I found myself at a complete loss as to what to do, what to say, or how to act in this circumstance. I'd seen the bitter and angry side of Coral but here, amidst the rain and darkness of a covered Fillydelphia, in the wake of barely getting away with our lives, I was seeing the pain that drove such a temper.

"I gave up on hope a long time ago, Murky. There's nothing left for me out there. My son is in *here*. He's all I care about seeing, my little boy... so I'm sorry if I don't seem more eager about you and Glimmer gathering an escape attempt. Especially with that raider. I want nothing to do with that beast."

Standing beside the bed, I hopped up on my front hooves, pushing one forward to rest on hers. It was all I could really offer, a little show that, well... I felt sorry for her. A few tears dripped from my eyes. Coral glanced down at my hoof, before forcing a smile on her pained face, albeit a thin one, and rested her other front hoof above mine.

"Thank you, Murky. Please, don't feel shy to come by and say hello sometimes, alright? I'd like that. And... and when you see Glimmer, I... tell her, um..."

She seemed to sigh again, clenching my hoof tightly.

"Tell her that for all that's happened, I-I'm thankful for what she did there in the Mall. To help us. I can't forgive her, not yet, but it's... it's a step."

"I will."

"Thank you."

I left the room slowly, dragging my blanket around me to make the journey back to my cold and lonely own ward. Casting one last look across to her, I just saw a forced small smile toward me. With a timid wave, I trotted into the corridor, feeling more than a little wretched as it began to hit home that virtually every slave in here would have a similar story.

To my elation, I saw my fleece still had the thin and light battle saddle strapped to it, albeit devoid of actual weaponry, back at my own bed. Weathervane must have dropped them off when he was trying to find me. Gently, I hobbled to the window and stared out at Fillydelphia. Two floors up in the hospital, I had a view of an absolutely hellish landscape, a skyline being drowned under the rain that was only slowly beginning to lighten off. I pulled the blanket tighter as the wind whipped through the empty window pane.

As such, I didn't even hear Weathervane enter over the sound of so many ponies outside.

"You're back here? Good, get into your things, Murk. It's time for you to go."

The order weighed heavy on me. To have to leave this place of rest. I wasn't in any mood for more bad news. I just wanted to go and think after meeting poor Coral.

But I couldn't *not* ask.

"D-Doctor, is there any word on Protégé?" I played with my fleece in my hooves nervously.

He seemed to bite his rotting lips briefly, exhaling for a long time. Then he just shook his head and stamped forward, his magic pulling the blanket from around me.

"Everything I've heard down the line's not been good, kid. Poison, magical damage, nerve cluster severance, slit windpipe. You name it, it's pretty much happened. That slippery raider bastard knew his work like a Celestia-damned surgeon. Now come on, get into your fleece."

I silently offered up a prayer for his recovery to Celestia, and Luna as well to see him through the nights. But the doctor's insistence was unnerving me. Surely they didn't need this place that urgently? Weathervane seemed to pace on the spot, as though eager to get going, before glancing out the window.

"I didn't call you back here for no reason, Murk. You need to be on your way, before he comes looking for you."

"H-he?"

Weathervane's eyes closed, amidst a gurgling raspy sigh. He led me away from the window, quickly as though in a hurry, directing me toward the bed as his magic firmly

slammed the ward door shut. Sitting beside the bed as though about to doctor for me again, the old ghoul just dropped his file on the surface before leaning on a hoof.

“You were with young Caduceus in there. He spoke highly of you and your friends. Naïve little boy, far as I was concerned, but he had talent. Kind of buck I used to have a dozen of in the old Ministry. Now he’s gone, and fuck me if I don’t feel it in what remains of my heart. Paternal instinct or some shit, I don’t know.”

He was stroking his stringy beard, before glancing across to me.

“You were with him when he died, Murk. Glimmerlight told me about how you’d stepped up to help them at the last moment. Now it isn’t my place to blame her for what Caduceus wanted to do or not. But she said you and Caduceus stuck together through most of the fighting.”

Well, technically that was true. It was mostly him pulling me along or keeping me in cover.

“So I guess, as a means of thanks, I feel I ought to tell you the hard truth here ahead of time.”

Weathervane seemed unwilling to meet my face. I shifted forward on the bed, trying to get his attention back.

“H-hard truth? Who do you mean by ‘he?’ N-not...”

The ghoul finally turned back, groaning and seeming rather internally angry. His eyes kept glancing to the door.

“I’m sorry, Murk. It goes against *everything* I am as a doctor to knowingly send somepony to harm. But since you’ve been here, Chainlink Shackles has assumed command of the Mall and its entire stock.”

I bit my lip, feeling a chill shoot down my spine.

“...including you.”

Weathervane’s magic caught me before I fell off the bed, my limbs locking up and growing stiff under the pain of the drop. I’d imagined it, worried about it, had nightmares about it. But here was the confirmation that I’d dreaded since I saw that ambitious looking sick grin come across The Master’s face after the battle. Feeling myself being held upright and slowly pushed to sit again, I let my head fall into my hooves. Those chains around my heart, upon my flank, embedded in my very *soul* felt like they were tightening ever more.

“The jury is out on Protégé back at Red Eye’s headquarters, where they’re keeping him in an unstable condition. Trying to decide if he’s fit to continue after all of this. But until then, it’s Shackles’ call, and he’s making the most of his time already. We’ve had reports already coming back from his work teams repairing the Mall. He’s changing things, adding mesh fencing, digging isolation pits... turning it into a real nightmare.”

Oh Goddesses. Glimmer and Brimstone were already there.

“But he made it very clear to me last time I went to check the wounded. He wanted *you* back the moment you could walk or he’d come collect you himself soon once the rain stopped.”

He had me. He really had me now. I could tell it was hurting Weathervane to tell me this, but it was a warning. I felt him trot over, pulling bandages around my wings tightly, enough to make me squirm and squeak in pain. Any crying I had was cut off by his attentions and muttering. The damp bandages held firmly around my restored feathers.

“These are soaked in an old potion type we used to give pegasi with muscle problems in their wings. It’s part of the first few stages to trying to see if you’ve not permanently lost

movement in them.”

Oh! I turned my head to look at one, as though expecting to try to move it any instant, but I felt Weathervane’s clipboard tap me on the head.

“Don’t go bloody trying! Let the medicine do its work and stay off of them if you can! No fucking rolling, no fucking falling, and most fucking definitely no fucking squeezing around! The ligaments on your bones still need a lot of work, but if this medicine does its job after being a hundred years out of date... well, maybe it’ll help reduce the pain in your muscles. Can’t promise anything, of course. They won’t flap, but we’ll see. Now get your damned fleece on, the weather’s easing off, you don’t have long to get going.”

He was already throwing my sodden fleece to me. I hopped and struggled to get myself into it as fast as possible, feeling my body ache from the movements. It was still disgustingly damp and thick from soaked up rainwater, making me shiver and groan from the horrible feeling.

“Please, is there *any* way I can get away?! H-he’ll...”

“I don’t think you heard me, Murk.” Weathervane’s voice was stern, gurgling away in his ruined throat. “I said you don’t have long to *get going*.”

Outside, I could hear slavers wandering past the door before I caught Weathervane’s milky eyes. Oh, that... that’s what he meant...

But another sound broke through the thin wooden walls in this older part of the hospital. The sound of the main door being thrown open, coinciding almost freakishly with a roll of thunder from far in the distance away from Fillydelphia. Hopping to my hooves, both Weathervane and I stared at the ward’s door, located almost right above the main entrance.

“You! The nurse, yes, you! Where’s the little pegasus?”

“Who? Um... y-you mean-”

“The only wretched winged pony in the city! Number. Seven. Take me to him!”

“Yes! Yes, sorry! I will!”

Slowly backing away toward the window, I caught myself filled with terror. He was here! Oh Goddesses, I could hear his hooves on the wooden flooring! Could I do this? Defying The Master, at least until Protégé was back to keep myself safe? If he caught me...

The sound of Fillydelphia’s balefire siren wailing amidst my last attempt to evade him was still too fresh. The feeling of pursuit brimmed with terror and a lack of real confidence in myself. All the same, what choice did I have? I couldn’t let him get me. I couldn’t.

He’d almost broken me forever in under an hour before. He’d brought a strong mare like Sunny Days to terror. I couldn’t last till Protégé got back, not under him.

Weathervane spun to me, shoving my saddlebag over me.

“Come on, kid! They won’t dare take him somewhere else, we’ve got to fucking move!”

I had to get going. He was right. This was my only chance to stay away from The Master. Grabbing everything I could, finishing putting on my fleece and strapping on the saddlebag, throwing my journal and goggles into the bag quickly, I hopped from the bed and almost fell from my shoulder aching terribly on the spot.

The Master’s heavy tread thumped within the creaky building.

“Hurry, you cretin! You think I have all day? Take me to my property.”

His hooves were coming upstairs! Pulled up by Weathervane, we moved into the corridor. The stairs were on the right, a large shadow forming around them. Quickly, Weathervane pushed me to go back down the corridor out of the ward. I couldn’t move like him. Limping, feeling my leg seize up and the cuts across my back sting under the damp fleece, I

trailed badly. One large cough sent me staggering. Weathervane moved back to try and pull me, but every heaving step felt slow. I... I couldn't properly stand.

"Come on, Murky!" He rasped, "I told you, it's psychosomatic! It's just in your head, your leg works fine!"

I wasn't going to make it. I could hear him coming up! I had to do something, our line away had been cut.

Dropping, I tugged myself behind a filing cabinet in the hallway, pressing my back to it before The Master entered the ward's corridor. I could barely fit behind it, and waved Weathervane away.

"T-this is his ward, Master."

The door was slammed open again. I heard Weathervane trot into the ward three doors down. The Master would surely know to come to him if seen, so the Doctor wisely stayed hidden.

"Rest's over, Number Seven! Time to come play."

The horrid waiting that followed was punctuated only by a wretched silence. The Master was brutal, loud, and imposing. But when he was silent. Slowly, I only heard the growing, bubbling, and throaty scowl under his breath. He was in the room. I had a chance! Moving as quiet as I could, using everything I knew to stay unheard, I began to creep toward where Weathervane waited. If he came out now...

"Heard me coming, eh? Oh, I know you can hear me, Number Seven! You can't run forever, not from me! Now come out, your Master demands you come out!"

The words slapped across my mind, a life of instinctive response kicking in that led me to stop on the spot. The everlasting chain and the born slaver for the born slave. He *was* my rightful Master by birth and... and...

Weathervane grabbed me, dragging me with all his magical might down the corridor, a flare of his horn dulling much of the pain. I almost skidded my hooves before reality caught up. The Master's spell of mental trickery broken, I began to panic and run after the doctor. No time to sneak!

"I HEAR you!"

The horrid thumping of those massive hooves pervaded the crunch of the nurse being knocked aside. The chase was on! We tore down the wards, the sound of dragging chains and bellowed commands following in our wake. Weathervane threw a supply door open with his magic, pulling me inside and locking the door behind us.

"Come on! There's a back stairwell to the lower operating room below! Fuck sake he's determined... but no more. I'm not letting one more fucking pony get taken by him if I can help it!"

We were halfway down the thin stairwell when the door was smashed asunder. The ponies within the operating theatre were already in the middle of something, prompting many complaints and curses as their senior surgeon and myself galloped past. I fought to not let the edges of my vision blur from terrified and panicked tears, simply following Weathervane. Bursting out into the main corridor, he led me to a back supply room for the bedsheets. Knocking open the window, Weathervane began throwing piles of musty bedding out of it and down the large drop into the courtyard. We could hear The Master screaming and demanding the ponies tell him where we'd gone. I doubted they'd lie. Pushing me to the window, Weathervane knelt down, looking me eye to eye.

"Find who you can to help. Keep away till Protégé's back and this cuntknuckle's gone. I'll

leave my basement open if you ever need me. Stay low, kid."

Hope was falling, but there was one little thing to hold onto for now. Weathervane was foul, rude, aggressive, and lacking in pleasant nature, but he'd done nothing but help since the day I'd met him. Even after everything he'd gone through over two hundred years of hell, after everypony he'd lost. A little spirit of goodwill emerged in me, potentially the last for a while. I hopped to all fours, facing him and trying to put on a smile, my mane flopping over my face.

"Th-thank you! For everything, I mean-you're... I mean, I really appreciate all you've done for me!"

A little look in his eye stood out to me, like he'd been shocked ever so briefly. Curious, I tilted my head. The doctor just shook his head and then nodded it toward the window.

"Nothing. Just a little *deja fuckin'vu*. Now scram, son. Stay off those wings and keep away from any trouble. Just hope your best that Protégé will be back soon. Stay safe till then."

Even as I clambered onto the windowsill and saw the looming drop, I glanced back at him. I could see a small photo clipped to the top of his patient records clamped to his decaying uniform.

Clearly Coral wasn't alone with that kind of pain.

"Number Seven! You know it's pointless!"

"Go!" Weathervane pushed me.

Yelping, I fell, tumbling the twenty feet until feeling the breathtaking slap of the mattresses under me. Saved by the cushioned landing, and fighting to try and gallop off the bouncy surface, I flopped my way to the gravel. I heard the sound of a doorway being thrown open above me.

"What are you fucking doing here? Have you no respect for a hos-"

The sound of somepony being smacked across the face *hard* echoed from the room. I galloped away, running through the hospital gates. Diving into the nearest old crater, I curled up, ignoring even the small puddle that stung and burned my coat.

"You can't run forever, Number Seven! You know who is meant to own you! It's all you're meant for! I'll find you! Oh, I'll find you!"

I whimpered, covering my ears, but bellowing from the window, knowing I was out here, close by but having escaped for now. But he *knew*...

"Leaving your friends with me now, eh? What a proud pony you must be, galloping off and *leaving* them! You'll be begging me to take you in someday, Number Seven! BEGGING!"

Crying loudly, sticking to the shadows, I simply ran away. Scared, guilty, and unable to even deny it, I just ran, alone, into the growing darkness of a storm-tossed Fillydelphia, The Master's cackling laughter at my back.

The area around me, although within a hundred feet of the refinery I'd worked so many days in, felt like an entirely different city.

Trotting on three legs, hobbling my way slowly on tired muscles, I stuck to the shadows as best I could in the darker areas of Fillydelphia, sweating and praying that I didn't hear the shout behind me. I needed somewhere quiet to go to ground.

The storm had passed, but the thick black clouds seemed to dominate the sky, leaving Fillydelphia in an almost perpetual night. I passed factories pulsing internally with an orange glow, pits that cast light around their mesh tops, and saw the burning barrels around where the guards stood in their roosts.

What now? I had ran into the night, but soon the hunt would be on. I needed *somewhere* to go.

No, not somewhere to go. Some*pony* to go to. Loneliness began to eat at me, the same I'd felt every time I'd been separated and left to fend on my own. But I had no-one. They were trapped, all of them within The Master's clutches. Guilt churned in my stomach, even though I knew they would want me to do this.

The area was deserted, likely due to the threat of continued rain, leaving me alone in a small park amongst blackened, long-dead trees. Shadows stretched like crooked fingers across the ground, enveloping and twisting upon the irregular breezes. I didn't want to linger in this strange, darkened side of Fillydelphia too long. Barb was gone, but the shadows still seemed to promise vengeance. The horrid wonder if I'd even killed the *right* Barb still taunted me. He'd cheated death at least twice before my eyes.

Hooves quaking, I picked up the pace, clattering back onto old roads that would, if I followed it, lead me back behind the pegasus airport I'd visited so long ago in a quest for my journal. I'd been alone then as well.

Eventually, feeling my shoulder aching, I stopped and dropped into hiding behind a series of large rubbish tips. I felt tired, but I couldn't stay here. The slavers would be looking for me. I was now a runaway trapped inside the Walls! I needed some place to stay! To be able to sleep, and to find food! Even in my hiding spot here, I could hear slavers galloping in the distance. Slavers always ran around, but how was I to know what they'd be hunting for? Was it me? Would every slaver know my face? Would *slaves* be offered a reward to turn me in?

Kneeling down, I did the only thing I knew I could to wish for help. Taking off my weighty saddlebag and calmly sitting my journal safely atop it, I gently set my front hooves before me. Lowering my head to them, I simply asked Luna for aid in this dark night, sniffing and having to repeat words lost as my voice began to heave amongst tears. To seek the strength from above that I could stand this rampantly lonely path I'd been set until Protégé was well again.

"Please. I just need somepony."

The wind picked up, just like in the hospital. Following a squeak of shock from me, the journal blew open, flickering madly from beginning to end. Reaching out a hoof, I stamped it down, stopping the pages, only to find the one pony I did have left staring back.

The mare, smiling so kindly off the page. The first pony I'd met in here who had been nice to me. Who had been there even before Littlepip. She was still out there. I didn't even remember doing this picture! Likely from my maddened rush of drawings from just before the Pit. At a loss for all direction or hope, about to be hunted by the entire city if they had to, I had been shown the *one* pony I could go to!

Picking up my materials, I immediately made tracks toward the place this had all began.

I had to return to the FunFarm, hopefully before The Master figured it out too.

There was a horrible suspicion in my mind that I wasn't the first one to think of it.

It took some degree of courage. I knew the way, the exact place to go to, and even remembered who to look for. But to actually take step after step and return to where it had all started held enough emotion for me that as I came closer, my mind ran with conflicting fears and apprehension.

To go back to the place I'd spent the most time in during my stay here. Whiplash had been the first I really remembered being around. Before that it had just become a blur. I didn't even remember where I'd been before that. Only that eventually I ended up in the pigsty so quickly that it had shocked me to wake up there after my first night under him.

I took the only route I remembered to that side of Fillydelphia. The same one The Master had dragged me down in humiliation after my grand failure. Trotting it in reverse, sticking in the darkness by the side of the better lit main roads, it felt painfully lonely. There were others, there always were. But compared to the crowds that had galloped from their places of rest, work, or defence to watch a *pegasus* be displayed as a prisoner, the few huddled groups still around made it feel empty. Clustered around burning barrels in the ruins of mills and shops, slaves shivered in the wind, or stared with lost and hopeless eyes at anypony passing by. A mare followed me with a deathly gaze, one eye long lost to a large and clearly infected scald across her face and muzzle. Whimpering and tearing my eyes away, I maintained my advance across Fillydelphia to find my destination. Not once while travelling this city did I ever fail to be stunned by the sheer scale of the suffering in here.

It was easy to believe. I was part of it.

The FunFarm was not particularly difficult to locate once in the area I recognised. Even at night, I spotted certain signs or buildings to guide me. I passed the last workshop the mare had been chained to, where she had stood up to The Master. Wicked Slit's factory loomed on the next street over, smoke belching from the one hastily patched chimney to join the thick black clouds above. After that it was easy. The road I had walked a hundred times to and from the places of work felt all too achingly familiar under my hooves. Even that one guard on the gantry above that ran from factory to housing where slavers stayed seemed to watch me as he always had. Staring at him, I almost blundered into an advancing caged wagon carrying a dozen ponies looking terrified beyond measure. Newly acquired ponies about to learn what it was to become slaves.

I tried to look neutral, not to look in a hurry or guilty of anything. I dearly hoped they hadn't been informed to look for me yet.

But then I was past, the guard turning away, and there it was. The giant barn, the helter-skelter's multi coloured top, a wrecked rollercoaster... the landmarks stood out above the houses as a clear direction. Soon enough, I found myself at the busy main entrance to the fenced FunFarm. Looking in from the main road, my eyes couldn't help but spot the Petting Zoo den near the entrance over the scrap wall. I wouldn't have to head there. If Moose or Lemon saw me I doubted they would welcome me all too well.

That thought was odd. I'd faced down a raider chieftain, why did they still scare me? Why was that feeling still in my breast and making my heart pump faster?

The answer, it seemed, was familiarity. I could feel my body falling into the same routines, the same consistent obedience. Even as I trotted forward, I found myself headed for the barrier gateway that made it easier to go right to the Petting Zoo, even though I had to head the other way.

Of course... *it* was still there. The one mocking imagery that had repeatedly unnerved me

that sat near the mirror I had once gazed at my own body in. The waving form of Pinkie Pie was still going. Still noisily creaking that arm to wave its endless goodbye to anypony passing by the front of the FunFarm.

Shivering at the odd standee, I pushed into the FunFarm. This place had grown since I was last here, with slaves now taking cover under most of the carnival stands in groups of four or five. A wealth of accents gave rise to the very clear notion that Red Eye's reach was indeed expanding. But I had only one objective. I knew where she resided, and where I would find her. I even still knew the shifts for the FunFarm dens off by heart, back when I'd never dared miss a single one. The bumper plough den would be in a rest period right now.

Unable to stop myself, after testing my hoof on the ground and finding the confidence to use my shoulder again, I began to move at a canter toward it. Passing the Hall of Mirrors where I had once prepared my daring escape, I simply tunnel visioned myself to find her. Yet as I passed the Hall, a faint sound of crying began to eek into my ears from it. Some slave had run off to cry. I knew the feeling.

Trying my hoof on the ground a little more, I found that my shoulder didn't hurt *that* much now if I really thought about who I was going to see! Just remember, psy... cocolocorian scars, or whatever the fancy word he'd used was! Up ahead, the sheltered area began to appear. A simple shallow pit covered by a wooden roof lined with mesh. To think she'd been *this* close the whole time I'd been in the Petting Zoo!

Cantering up, I stuck to the side and ducked behind the game stands lining the wall toward the den. Sticking to shadows, passing by the half sleeping overseer was no problem provided I stick behind the stands, close to the outer wall of the FunFarm. I didn't dare allow anypony else to see me right now. With trepidation, I leaned forward, poking my head around. Oh please let her be here!

I saw the slaves lying upon pathetically thin rugs on the concrete floor, perhaps a couple dozen at most. Carefully, I scrutinised each one, not knowing how she might have changed since. Every boil-infested and half-choking slave I cast my eye across held no resemblance, a buck there, a mare too tall afterwards. Disappointment after disappointment. A group were mingled at the back, talking quietly in the far corner, leaving me unable to see them all. Well, one thing for it.

I advanced, slipping into the slave den as though I was one of them and limping (all too realistically) between those suffering nightmares in their sleep. Worry began to cross my mind. If the overseer woke up, I might end up trapped as one of his crew, simply for The Master to come pick me up.

Taking a sharp breath, I spotted someone. A cream mare! She looked up as I passed, but under the oil that stained her mane I saw a bright green. Backing away, apologising for staring profusely, I set another slave off swearing madly when I tripped over his slumbering form.

"Shit! Watch it, pal!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so-no, no!"

Despite my waving hooves, I was bucked off him, landing just short of the far group and clutching my shoulder. Okay... that was *definitely* real pain that time. Why was it *always* my poor shoulders and hooves? The group turned to me, revealing two ponies that had been hidden to my sight. The view of a light-orange mane grabbed my eyes, forcing me to stagger up. The wide, gentle, and hurt eyes stared from behind a mask of burns that had torn the features from their face.

Oh *please* no...

"Hey-uh-buddy, you alright? Never seen-uh, you before."

It was a *stallion*. The burns were so severe that I hadn't been able to tell by facial features alone. That meant she wasn't here.

But if she wasn't here that meant she'd been moved or somepony had got here first.

I remembered the ponies I'd heard running quickly by me.

"We often will meet people only briefly, know so little about them and never know the truth.

Fleeting glimpses and random luck to bring two ponies together, never to meet again."

Some of the last words she'd said to me after saving my life in this very FunFarm from that very rollercoaster were of how unlikely we were to ever meet again. The nameless mare, the first kind face I'd ever seen in Fillydelphia.

Gone...

Dropping into a small heap upon the floor of the Bumper Plough pit, I just curled up, feeling unable to avoid simply falling back into my old familiar emotional reaction I'd spent weeks in this very FunFarm doing. That same feeling of helpless loss and inability to change something that my masters had done, exuded through a few sobbing tears. Even as other slaves scoffed or offered confused queries, I just ignored them before eventually galloping off past the bewildered overseer, my eyes tightly closed.

She wasn't here.

I was still alone.

I'd hidden in an old food tent, ducking behind the counter until the moment had passed, simply staring at her picture before me, feeling like a piece of my newfound heart had simply been lost. A certain hope, just gone. I'd run away from my Master, seeking to avoid him for as long as possible within Fillydelphia until Protégé could protect me again. I'd had *one* pony that mattered I could go to! *One* pony I could take with me and hide with together! Once Protégé was around we could join him to keep her safe too!

But no... even as I drifted from the food tent, drained and feeling my hopes crushed, I just aimlessly wandered. Not wanting to just give up and retreat to whatever dark hole I could find to make my home, I kept trying to pretend that maybe she was just on an odd shift! Maybe she'd be back soon? Passing the helter-skelter, where I had learned to laugh and imagine better days, I eventually began to slowly and vaguely return to the gates; my eyes still wet. Even so, I took the long way, trotting in the slim hope she would return any minute.

Every mare I passed my eyes darted to, uncaring if they felt weirded out by me staring carefully for any familiar sign. Who was I kidding, I didn't know her name or even her cutie mark! I'd never looked or hadn't remembered. Even my drawings were just blank. With Glimmerlight, Brimstone, and soon to be even Coral out of reach; with the loss of Protégé and with the failure of my trip, I felt desperately lonely. The thought of going back to being on my own to deal with all of Fillydelphia's problems in a constant running battle to avoid *everypony* terrified me beyond compare.

Every so often I would spy a certain mane or hear a chime of a voice, prompting me to gallop backwards and try to find her. I even crept near the Petting Zoo once, before quickly departing the moment I heard Whiplash's commands start up. He wouldn't let a sighting of

me go unknown.

I had travelled here for one reason and one reason only. To meet her. I couldn't just leave. I *needed* this to be true! She couldn't be gone! Not after Caduceus had just been taken like he was! Not somepony else! It wasn't fair! From place to place, den to den, and all the way from the ice rink in the Pit to the House of Mirrors beside me now, nothing but constant heartbreak as I began to gradually realise that Fillydelphia had claimed another victim.

The scream caught me so off guard that I felt myself join in.

Frozen on the spot in shock, I quickly pieced together the location of the sound; from the place of crying earlier.

The Hall of Mirrors.

But it had been a female scream! What if some slavers were trying to... oh dear. Somepony must have found that poor pony in there trying to hide! I felt my hooves wanting to flee, but in the wake of what I had been through, what I had seen other ponies give their *lives* to do, I could not run in shame, not now. That and one little hope still pervaded in my mind.

I couldn't fight. Even after Barb I knew I couldn't. But if I could maybe distract them and let somepony get away it would be enough. It had to be.

Steeling my heart and hopping into the main entrance, I found myself immediately surrounded by fractured shards of glass displaying twisted and broken sights of myself. Wooden ponies, carved to be like Pinkie Pie, giggled on the walls. The paint was peeling from her face, leaving a horrific, almost clown-like look... I trotted quietly on, advancing into the darkness that swelled within the abandoned building. Hearing loud crying, gasping, and a fading whimper; I began to highly regret not having *Rarity's Grace* any longer. What if I was too late? What had the attacker done? I had to speak, I reasoned, I had to startle them to stopping, then creep around them.

"H-hello?"

The whimpering ceased on the spot. Instead, I heard somepony breathing quietly, trying to stay quiet. Hooves began to fall as quietly as they could. They were trying to ambush me as well! Just hold on, whoever you are.

Around me, my reflected self expanded or shrunk to skeletal sizes (more than usual) while I crept across the broken glass that surrounded my hooves. The darkness seemed to warp with the strange mirrored surfaces everywhere, giving the distinctly odd feeling I'd found when Barb had stalked me.

What if a Shade had escaped? It might be one of them! I could still hear the crying near the centre, the hooves having stopped. Soon after, the crying stopped the moment my hoof scuffed a shard, making a small tinkle. I imagined a knife being held to their throat. No, they couldn't! I was going to help them. If I couldn't get the mare back I was going to help somepony! Be it her or *not!*

Emerging to the one spot I had once sat and prepared for the bravest act I had ever made in my life until then, I now couldn't even dare poke my head around. Instead, pulling my little mirror on a stick out, I lay it gently around to use the wall mirrors and try to spot any movements in the shadows.

Nothing. Nothing in the main room at all.

What had I gotten into? They weren't in the centre. That meant they were creeping around the corridors somewhere, hidden behind a mask of reflections. Stepping gently back, I turned to face out, moving past a wall of mirrors and-

The shape of a pony in shadows came directly at me from behind. I screamed, high-pitched and shocked as I kicked up glass in my rush to run from the shadowy figure. A great cry pierced my ears as I saw it suddenly move too. Charging backward, another pony ran directly at me. Immediately, we both skidded to a halt and dove to the left in perfect sync. Stopping to try and spot them again, I simply felt dizzy amongst this maze. Suddenly, another scrawny figure galloped across three surfaces around me, their hooves sounding from somewhere *completely different*.

I moved again, squealing in shock as that pony from before re-appeared beside me and dove away at the same moment I did. Which was the attacker? Wait, which was my reflection? Confusion and fear drove me to simply buck the glass until it broke and put my back to it. That other figure zipped past once more, a ghost shown only in the mirrors about me, leading me to head in the other direction to avoid whoever it was hunting me.

Galloping, I ran-

Directly into them behind me. Colliding heads, we both fell over. My vision whirled, seeing stars as my scar ached at the collision. Falling, I even felt shards of glass nip at my side through the thick fleece. But the pony dropped atop me, prompting me to thrash when their hooves pushed and struggled to pin me. Rolling end over end, we fell back into the main room before throwing one another apart. They weren't very strong, I realised! They had to be another-

-slave.

Eyes adjusting to the darkness quickly, I caught the whirling sight of somepony staggering backwards and tripping into the broken mirrors of a far wall, holding their head while they got up.

While *she* got up.

A dirty mane whipping round to reveal her eyes locked around at me, squinting to see me in the darkness.

"Who-who's there!? Who is that!? *Leave me alone!*"

It was her!

Oil-stained and ash-marked, I still recognised the long mane, light-orange and tinged with faint red streaks above a cream coat that had been soiled and dirtied by a life of slavery. Her golden-hazel eyes were wide, filled with terror, staring across the room without blinking from where she now leaned against the wall.

"It's alright! It's-it's me..."

Feeling my mouth gape and my heart both freeze and lift at the same time, with nerves and a desire of absolute elation and relief, I stepped out of the shadows that I had blended in with. Across the room, amongst mirrors that threw our reflections onto both floor and walls amongst the shards, I saw her simply stare in disbelief.

"*Murky?*"

A few hesitant trots and rubbing of eyelids took place, both of us almost unwilling to believe in the good fortune of another meeting, of us finally finding one another again after so long. After both believing the other had been gone for good.

Five seconds felt like five days in Fillydelphia, for how long it took our minds to catch up and realise.

Before we both simply ran forward, staggering and desperate for mutual comfort amongst the darkness, falling into one another's thankful and relieved embrace.

As much as I would have wanted to simply hold this moment and lose track of all the pain and nightmares the outside world held, we split soon after. Moreso for I could feel her shivers. She was terrified of something. Settling back, the mare gathered herself, holding a hoof across her opposite front leg.

"Are we safe? I heard you scream and-and I thought somepony was-"

"No, no I'm alone. Murky, I-what are you doing here? I thought you were... I mean I heard about the riot in the Mall and executions and..."

She stopped, wiping away the long mane from her face. The mare had shrunk since I last saw her, starvation beginning to set in as it did with everypony in here. We were just two weakened ponies together now.

"I got away from The Master. I had to find you, let you know I'm still here and-and to get you out of here. He'll be coming soon! I had to know you're still safe."

She smiled, apparently out of relief, reaching forward to take one of my hooves, as though seeking physical proof that it was indeed me before her. It quickly occurred to me that everything I'd learned about sneaking about to stay safe could frighten somepony who saw my vague shape creeping around. She must have seen my reflection too and run from it. In a weird way, it was almost funny. We'd both been scared of the others reflection. Now, settled with her proof, the mare sighed.

"It's so simple to say and easy to understate but, I'm so glad you're alive. Why are-what did you-oh, sorry I'm..."

Flustered was the word. Even without me saying anything she shivered, drawn and pale while her eyes kept glancing to the sides at the mirrors. Looking around, I moved closer and held her hoof. She'd helped me enough, I wasn't going to let this be one-sided any longer. She looked like absolute hell, her eyes drawn from lack of sleep and overwork. But more than any they had that same look I'd seen in a mirror so many times. The one I gave when I had been shocked or frightened more than normal.

"What happened to scare you? I heard you crying earlier I think, then a scream and just galloped in and I thought somepony had caught somepony else or something."

The mare felt quiet, eyes looking to the floor. We were absolutely alone in the empty halls, my ears would hear anypony on this messy floor. What *had* scared her?

"I come in here sometimes to get away sometimes, just to avoid the others who steal my food. I can't stop them so I just stay away from the fighting by creeping off here to let it out sometimes. Or to think about, well, you know. How I'm going to go about finding him"

It was clear who she meant, her lover. I even saw the sad look in her eyes that told all. She still hadn't been reunited with her special somepony, the one who meant so much to her.

"I'm sorry."

"They told me I'd see him again, Murky. The slave master who organised those of us being sent to the Pit even told me he'd make sure he was sent back to me afterwards! But... but that's not what scared me. I came in here to get away and I think I bumped one of the mirrors and..."

I'd never seen her this unsteady. She had always been so gentle and carefully held. But I followed her eyes to the side and felt a cold stab through my heart.

She was looking directly at the mirror that I had long tried to forget. The one that my tired and terrified mind had once seen something other than myself in. Hidden in here,

preparing to make my escape, I had touched the same mirror she undoubtedly had now. It had shown me my own image as a little colt, wings outstretched and looking with naïve eyes yet to be burdened by the life he would lead.

“That mirror, Murky! *That mirror!* It shows us at our worst! Something unnatural that gets into your very soul; I can *feel* it! I saw myself with him, only he wasn’t there.”

The mare turned, a brief flare of a temper arising to scowl at the dark glass. Slowly, she began to trot toward it.

“It was just me, acting as though I had somepony I dearly cared about right beside me without any image of them there at all! Leaving me with just the horrid realisation that after so long in this city it’s all starting to blur together! I’ve forgotten so much, Murky, like they’re just *beating* it out of my mind through illness, starvation and-and just being locked into the same thing day after *day* after *day!*”

Stamping a hoof on each repeated term, she finally raised up, smacking a hoof against the mirror hard. The fragile looking glass shimmered but remained solid, knocking the mare back a foot. Gasping, like she’d just come up from drowning in cold water, her eyes returned to it, seeing herself standing to one side. While I didn’t know if she saw something I didn’t, the space to her left was utterly empty, as though somepony else could have been standing *with* her.

“But it’s starting to do that to my memories of him as well, Murky. It’s like everything I know about him is just fading and blurring before my eyes! What he looked like or his name, like my memories are just falling apart and getting harder to remember!”

Standing off to the side, I saw her face in the mirror, lines down her face where the tears had moved through the ash below her eyes. Her eyes were lit with anger, frustration, and outright heartbreak. Heedless of the cursed mirror, staring right at it, pacing on the spot, the mare continued letting out all the pain and anguish Fillydelphia had brought to her. One hoof on the frame, her face came to within inches of the surface, glaring as though in hatred at her own mirrored image.

“What have they done to me, Murky? Is it the work in here? Or has somepony taken my only memories of the buck I loved and made it so I don’t know it? Have I just forgotten? The mare I saw in that thing wasn’t who I am anymore, maybe a long time ago. Why can’t I just have him back? Why can’t I remember!?”

Almost resting her face on the mirror, I saw her shoulders quake. One mare, alone with her reflection, one she had apparently shared with somepony else dear to her long ago. Goddesses, how long had she been in Fillydelphia?

Meek and nervous, I stood nearby, out of the gaze of that mirror. But seeing her like this, every instinct led me to wander forward, trotting up, out of the shadows, to be by her left hand side and place a hoof on her shoulder before looking at ourselves in the mirror. Myself as the wasted slave in a threadbare fleece with a light utility saddle; and her, clad only in a thin short rag, beside me. Two slaves reflected upon the reality of themselves. We’d both been hurt, but at least I could understand what she saw. The mirror had shown the same thing for me. A pony I no longer was.

“Y-you’re not alone. I’m still here. I know what it’s like. I don’t remember my mother. They made me forget her too, long ago.”

I was shocked internally, to admit that to somepony I’d known so briefly. But it was the mare. Somehow I just knew she needed to hear it. Glancing to one another, we simply moved closer again, hugging lightly until she could stem her tears. Before, I had felt cared

for by her. Now after knowing what friendship really was, I knew I had to care in return, give my share of comfort.

Share and care... okay, you win this round, Pinkie.

But I had not come here without reason. The Master knew about her, understood she was a way to force my hoof. We had to go, escape into the night together, and hide until somepony better was back in charge! I couldn't leave her to be just another victim in The Master's rampage to find me. Stepping back, I drew myself up, finding her not actually more than an inch or two taller than myself.

"Look, I've found other ponies, good ponies. I'm so sorry I failed and scared you but..."

I looked from side to side, before returning, conspiratorially to her tearstained face, placing a hardened look as best I could on mine.

"We're getting out of here. We have a plan! There's a nicer master. He'll take better care of all of us until we can do it! I want you to come with me. *Please*. I can't leave you behind. I don't think I'd be able to escape to safety and know you're still in here, but we need to get you away from the FunFarm. You. You and I. We'll go hide in the ruins!"

She seemed stunned, looking at me as though she was seeing an entirely new pony than the terrified wretch she'd met not so long ago, being dragged by The Master through the streets. But she still shook her head.

"I can't. Not without him. We were both going to escape, or neither of us was. That's what we said to one another. I'm so sorry, Murky. I need to learn who he was, and why I feel like he meant so much to me. He was strong, and dedicated to finding freedom before I lost him. We always looked out for one another, stole food together, or shared the punishments. I can't abandon him. I know you're trying but..."

"Then..." I felt awful interrupting her, trying to fight down that she had done the one thing I had been unable to less than an hour ago. "Then, we'll go get him first!"

The mare just blinked, silently repeating my words as though confused by the very meaning of them. I stood my ground, trying to keep what courage I had been lent by proving myself against Barb from faltering. I'd run through an underground ghoulish bunker, two Ministries and a Stable. I could do *this*... right?

"The big Fun Barn, the slaver headquarters. It's got all the details of slaves involved in stuff like the Pit, right? It has to! They're still repairing it since the Stable Dweller wrecked a whole bunch of it so we... we get in and find out where he is! And..."

Another thought crossed my mind. Her buck wasn't the *only* pony we could look for in there. One more I knew myself was inside.

"...and somepony that matters to me is inside there too, badly hurt. I need to see him."

"Another slave?"

I paused for a second, before nodding.

"Yes... yes he is. We can go together and find them both, then escape! Wait for a better time and get back to the others, and get ready to break out of Fillydelphia!"

Lightly stomping a hoof on the floor, carefully avoiding the glass, I felt the saddle's mouthpiece whip out rather by accident. My eyes glanced down at it, before retracting it slowly. Well, didn't that just ruin the grandeur of the moment.

But the mare seemed to not care for it. She simply stood before me. Finally, that wonderfully caring and kind smile drifted across her features, if a little weak. The hope returned to her expression.

"I don't know where you came from, Murky, but I'm so glad I met you. Remember what

I said? That good attracts good in places of great evil? Well, you met me when you were at your worst and now here you are when I was in despair. They say that's harmony at its greatest; that there'll always be a friend willing to help you, no matter how dark it seems. Are-are we really going to try and do this?"

I had asked myself the same question a thousand times since I had first met her, in regards to everything. But here, now, back at the start with the mare that I hadn't stopped thinking about in some way to meet again. I knew I wouldn't abandon her to her plight. We were going to go in, find her lover, find Protégé to let him know that I was avoiding Shackles, and then see if he had anypony he knew who could help us. Yes! I had a direction again. A goal to chase after until we could get back on track! Oh yes, we *were* doing this...

"Yes... I guess we are... oh and-"

She glanced back at me properly, rather than just through the mirror's reflection.

"T-thank you. It's been so hard and I've been so scared since I saw you. Below the ground in the dark or having my dreams crushed but you helped me be able to do any of it. Things you said stayed with me. So, thank you."

She smiled gently, clearly trying to force her own fears back.

"It's not been easy for me either, Murky. I don't think I could have kept going on my own if you taking a run at that wall hadn't inspired me to want to show that same courage. The little brave pegasus who risked it all for just one impossible chance. But we're back together now, ready to help each other. Each the other's little light in the darkness right now, huh? Filly doesn't feel natural under this storm. It's like some dreamworld. A nightmare. Sometimes I just get this feeling like this city has something very wrong with it at its core."

That was true. Times had changed now. Amidst my new threat to stay away from the Mall as much as I could, the entire city suddenly felt lethal. For a second, the idea of going right into the lion's den simply felt insane. But both of us needed something in there, something *bad*. Without Protégé's protection, I was done for in the long term. Without closure on those she had lost, I doubted she would last much longer either.

"Y-yeah, it is. I think we should go, before anypony else comes looking. I'm not meant to be here, The Master wants me back."

"Oh, Murky. I'm so sorry. So yes, let's get moving and get this done. We'll properly catch up when we're all together and safe."

She began to move toward the exit, but I hesitated, casting one more look at the mirror as though expecting to see something else within it. But I only saw the mare trotting away from me. She was limping, clearly nursing some strain or wound, but despite all the terror knowing of the monster that would come pursuing me, knowing she was *here* with me just helped settle me enough to not break down again. I tried to smile, managing a thin grimace as I saw her briefly stop to look at another mirror.

I almost felt guilty, but I couldn't exactly not wonder how she might have looked had she not been in here. I could almost see it, past the tangled mane that would have been long and wavy, seeing past the shrunken stomach, or to mentally remove those red shackle marks and the filth of living in this city from her body. I wondered just how bright the cream, orange and red that made up her coat and mane might be. Trying to picture it made me wonder just how *I* could have looked had I not been trapped in slavery all my *life*...

But then my eyes caught something else, just as she turned, I saw it. I witnessed her cutie mark.

Three basic shapes, three golden yellow ponies. An earth pony, a unicorn... and a

pegasus.

"W-wait!" I stammered out, turning to canter after her, stretching my hoof forward as the mare made to leave the building. We had planning to do, but the question couldn't wait any longer. I built all my courage, wondered for too long. Now that I saw her mark, the trio of ponies there as one image, I couldn't lose the chance this time. 'The Mare' wouldn't escape unknown this time.

Seeing those golden eyes turn around, raising an eyebrow in confusion, I stopped; shuffling a hoof and trying to fight the embarrassment that I even had to ask.

"What, um, what's your name? We never got a chance to..."

"Oh? Didn't I say?" She seemed shocked, that gentle and warm look passing through the hurt body of a poor slave to remind me of how she *could* look. Not awaiting a response other than a dull shake of my head, she smiled and gathered herself. Then, she spoke one word. One simple word that suddenly made so much sense between how she had been so important in my life and the imagery of her cutie mark. Of how she hadn't discriminated or hated me because I had wings, of how she saw such harmony filled potential in ponies as one great whole.

That one word... one *beautiful* word.

Unity.

Her name... was Unity.

The moment we exited the Hall of Mirrors, my heart nearly stopped on the spot.

"Gone!? What do you mean, *gone*?"

I didn't even look. I simply grabbed Unity and dragged her as fast as I could over the road and back into the food court opposite. There were dozens of tents, stalls, wagons, and small buildings crammed around one large eating area. The benched area had been turned into one of the worst slave dens in the FunFarm, utterly exposed to the elements. But beside it, amongst the slew of small food dispensaries, was a veritable maze of hiding spots I had used before.

"Murky? What is it-oh no!"

Poking our heads around, I could clearly see her overseer quivering in fear below the massive form of The Master. He was surrounded by half a dozen of his loyalists, twisted-looking slavers of all shapes and sizes. Stomping his hoof upon the tarmac, The Master leaned right over the slaver.

"So you're saying that you let a little pegasus come in and *take* her? Is that right?"

"No, no! I didn't!"

"So then you're saying you didn't let them. So you *failed* at your job, eh? It's one way or the other."

"She sometimes goes off! Old... Old Grizzly gets her jobs! Please, I don't know where she is right now!"

I could feel Unity's hoof tightening around my own, the immediacy of my warning clearly sinking in that The Master was after her as a link to me.

"Then I guess I better go pay him a visit. You stay here. I'll be back once I've decided what your punishment shall be."

"Please! I..."

“Quiet! A slaver who allows his stock to run wild and *knows* about it does not deserve to be a slaver at all! Report to the Mall tonight. Bring four of your stock that you... hehe... don’t mind missing. Maybe I’ll even let you have a chance to not become one yourself”

“Y-yes... Master...”

Seeing him turning, we dove backwards, hiding behind the food tent, clutching one another as The Master stomped not five feet from us. Suddenly, he stopped. Biting my lip, I just held my head down, feeling Unity quiver in fear just as much as I. The Master sniffed, before growling. Oh Goddesses, could he *smell* me?

“Hmph... stinking FunFarm. Land of the hopeless. Get the griffons to look for those two. They’re now officially runaways. Just make sure they’re brought to *me*.”

Allowing him time to put some distance between us and them, we hid and only moved when things had gone silent, finally daring to even breathe out. The hunt was on, but I hoped that our journey toward the FunBarn would be the last place The Master would expect.

Unity had proven apt at staying low and quiet, as any slave smaller or weaker than the average no doubt did. Sticking close, she followed me silently. All the way I found myself looking back, not because I lost track of her, but simply to remind me that she was there. That I had found her in time. It almost felt strange, knowing her name. ‘The Mare’ had been such a figure of my wishes and dreams to meet the mysterious pony again, but to now know her on a name-to-name basis felt almost bizarre. Sort of how it had felt to learn the Stable Dweller’s name from Protégé.

“So, how are we going to get in anyway, Murky? This *is* Red Eye’s fortress after all. Not exactly open for visitors.”

Stopping short of a main bypass toward the FunFarm’s children’s area, I hid behind a cardboard cutout of a giant toothless alligator and cast my eyes to the Barn. Still under repair, I saw ponies hanging from some sections on utility saddles similar to my own (In my mind it was still a *battle* saddle. No matter what anypony told me!) with grapple hooks and tools, mid-construction. I highly doubted they’d be getting slavers to do that. Maybe there was a way in.

Once again, Littlepip’s rampant destruction of Fillydelphia in her grand escape to the wastes was about to aid me. I just hoped news of a runaway slave wouldn’t be sent to the FunBarn yet.

“They’re taking slaves in to repair it with tool saddles. I’ve got one. Maybe we can just pose as workers once we get by the guards and sneak off?”

“Sounds like a plan. Safer to try it than just barging in, right?”

I nodded, feeling a little better. Just knowing she was *safe* and still alive made it all just feel... worth it. Unable to really know what to say to the unexpected compliment, I nodded to the far side of the road, leading us to begin trotting onwards again. Crawling beneath a wooden fence, we entered a section I’d once heard the others call ‘Foal Land.’

Masses of mouldy stuffed ponies and animals had fallen from overhanging wires or been burned into twisted hunks of nylon. This area was deserted. Slavers never came inside here past the outskirts like that one before. It was too small to do anything with and long stripped bare of worthwhile materials. ‘Foal Land’ had simply been left to rot. Beyond it, the colossal rollercoaster rose above the children’s play areas. Glancing back, Unity seemed to stop and gather an idea in her head.

“Hey! I just thought. I’ve been doing some jobs on the side for a slave master, the one

that monster mentioned? Old Grizzly! Getting him stuff from the factories, running errands, that sort of thing. It's still slavery but, well I sometimes get a few perks for it. A healing potion for my ribs, extra food, stuff like that. I was hoping to save up enough offers to maybe get a transfer to someplace better than the FunFarm. It was Grizzly who promised to get us back together after the Pit. He's got an office in there!"

We stopped. I turned to her suddenly, looking around and perking my ears up.

"If he has a terminal or something, he'll have records. He seems like that sort of slaver. I think I heard him complaining once that they didn't get him an office in the more protected areas. We may not have to go too deep."

It felt wonderful to be impressed and reassured by the information she could provide. A sense of teamwork began to emerge as we continued trotting. She seemed to have let the hope get to her, that we could indeed find him.

"Funny how little things like that just matter, huh?" She grinned to me. "So I guess it's not all been a waste of time. Maybe that's how you have to think about it in places like this. That everything still matters. Hah. Sorry, I know I'm bad for running off on little rambling tangents when I talk..."

It took me a second to catch up with that she was apologising for talking to me. The thought surprised me.

"It's, well, okay. I kinda like them. I wish I was good with words too."

"And I wish I was as good with artwork as you are. Done anything nice lately?"

I caught that look in her eye below the nicer question. I'd seen it on Glimmerlight's face occasionally. Unity knew *precisely* what artwork she had asked about. I simply blushed, my ears drooping and my eyes taking a great interest in an immolated figure of a cow beside an old play park instead. She giggled a little, her eyes lying on my Fluttershy saddlebag as though hoping to see it. I wished we had time. Gathering a little courage, thinking of how Glimmerlight would want me to be more self confident, I turned back to face her rather than just avoiding her eyes like even more of a coward than I already was.

"Yeah. Yeah I guess so-um, nice stuff too!" Oh *why* did I say it like that? "Lots of things that mean a lot to me. I just draw whatever I feel... like what I choose on the spot. I don't really think about it ahead of time."

"You draw from the heart, escaping to your own little world of creation. That's just lovely. If we get a moment, can I have a look? Share in the dreams?"

"Um, sure? I mean, most of it's like that. Some is-uh, just poses or, um, something a friend asked for and-"

Her laugh cut me off, shaking her head. "Hey, come on, don't worry about it. I didn't laugh at you when we first met, did I? It's not something we see in the wasteland often. Any creation at all is good. You're a wonderful little artist, Murky. Don't forget that. Please?"

'Artist.' I'd honestly never thought about that title before. I just drew, just sketched what came to mind and didn't think about what looked good or not. It was bringing to life the thoughts and emotions of my mind, like a kind of therapy and outlet that wasn't simply crying. But artists were like ponies who knew how to make *good* art, weren't they? I couldn't do those amazing pictures. I didn't even know how to colour!

"I'll try, Unity. I'll try, I guess?"

Seemingly amused by my modesty, she winked.

"It's all we can ever do, Murky. Huh, hey, look!"

She pointed a hoof. Up ahead, past the end of Foal Land was the rollercoaster. Much of it

had been stripped down now, used for metal in the factories after the structure had been made unsteady, and half-destroyed by rocket launcher fire during Littlepip's escape. For a second, I was curious about what Unity saw, before she began to canter ahead, looking not at the coaster itself, but toward a small area of benches below it. An old picnic area, I guessed, for ponies not brave enough to go on the rollercoaster. (Ponies like me, then.) They were kept away from the underside of the ride by a chainlink fence, beside a large map of the FunFarm and a long broken statue of Pinkie Pie. Even with the limbs missing and eyes showing no pupils in the cast brass, I found even more reason to keep my own glances away from it.

But beside it, next to a plaque, I noticed dozens... no, *hundreds* of little items attached to the fences. What in Equestria were they?

Unity galloped up to them, casting her eyes around. Trotting up beside her, I finally saw what it was as I wandered down the line of the fence.

Locks. Padlocks, with every one of them attached into the fence's chain mesh around where the plaque stood. A couple of containers were below, still filled with open padlocks. One of them had spilled around the foot of the fence. Yet my eyes were drawn to the locks on the fence themselves, closed in such thick patterns that I couldn't even see through in places. Every one of them bore scratchings upon their surfaces, often with little love hearts or sketches of cutie marks. Many of them on the fence had pink ribbons or the rotted remains of flowers attached to them. I saw one with a pair of dogtags.

"What in Equestria's name are these?" I breathed the words quietly, looking at the padlocks. They just kept going. All shapes and sizes, colours and designs.

"Lovelocks, Murky. Like the plaque says..."

She cleared her throat.

"In honour of Hearts and Hooves Day, for those ponies lucky enough to have that one special somepony in their lives, the one they may rest in harmony with until the end. The one they would never break the bond with, never leave behind, and trust in *forever*. Have our metalworker engrave your names to lock forever upon the fence."

As she spoke, I lifted a few with my hoof. Sure enough, upon them were scribbled words. Some engraved, others in faded pen. Some were just scratched on. Unity looked up, following me down the fence. Hundreds of couples, all lost to history. I remembered the Memorial Wall in the Stable, filled with memories. But here lay proof positive of the caring that had permeated Equestria a long time ago.

"Ponies in the old days declared their love to the ones they wouldn't ever part with by placing a lock up here, Murky. A symbol that even the balefire couldn't bring it down. They say that the tradition started just after some event showed just how strong the power of love could really be when things were at their darkest."

Across the ground, there lay not *one* padlock that had fallen from the fence itself. Not one that had lost its meaning. Standing before such a sight, backlit by the fires underneath the roller coaster and the dull smog of a storm ridden Fillydelphia ravaged by an event so long ago, I saw one thing that had *not* been broken by any effort of the wasteland.

"Love amongst the darkness, I like to think they're still together up there, Murky. Some slaves even do it today."

Stopping, her hoof rested upon one padlock. Dirty, rusted, and with merely scratched words, she glanced down and sighed.

"Just his initials, see?" Sadly, she held it toward me.

I bit my lip and nodded, as though pretending I understood the letters. She and her buckfriend had done this old tradition even now with the hope that no matter what happened to them, they'd be together through it all. I didn't dare sully the moment with the whole 'I can't read' speech.

"The day we put this on. I remember *that*, Murky. That was when we made the promise. We were escaping, together, or not at all. We locked it as one."

I could clearly see her fighting back some tears, but her horn sparkled a lush red and drew something from her ragged barding. A small length of thin pipe with a stamped end and what looked like a bobby pin.

"We aren't any more. Until I see him, *remember* everything about him, I don't deserve this. Once we get him, Murky, we'll come back here, relock it anew from whatever Red Eye's done to him."

Twisting the metal rod and the pin into the lock, I heard it ping, before the hook sprang out. Unity left it on the fence, swaying lightly on the locking hook.

"I swear, if it turns out to be old Grindstone that's taken him... I always did hear he wanted him back since he got transferred out." She sighed, resting her head on the fence. Her voice was very quiet. "Wherever they've trapped you, I'll find you."

She finally looked away from the lock, her long mane hiding her face when she lowered her head. Master Grindstone? Somehow, it almost felt likely. That donkey was in cahoots with The Master. But outside of their horrid betrayal of Protégé, something I could *never* hope to prove or kick up any fuss about, I could only feel the aching inevitability that they were up to something else in whatever great game the slavers had going. For now, the most I could understand to do was trot over and simply be there.

Turning, one half of Unity's face became visible from below her mane, looking ever so vulnerable and strained. She seemed to take at least a little comfort by somepony else being there, for I saw the side of her mouth raise.

"Y-you know, Murky, I can see you're a little nervous but... this'd be a real good time to give a mare a hug..."

I didn't need telling twice. Without hesitating, I slid forward to gently hold her. Feeling her lean against my own neck, I even dared to offer a firmer hold, squeezing her tightly against me. Sniffing, Unity seemed to quake a little. I felt her breathing quicken for a few seconds, before slowly calming down and gripping me back.

"Sorry you have to see me like this, Murky. You've got your own problems and mine are—"

"I-important!" The word stammered out my mouth, the first one I could quickly think of. Quickly, I rushed to try and think of others. Yeah, okay... *words*, here we go. "We're all getting out. Me and Glimmerlight, Brim and Coral... her son... we've all got little odd things we need sorted and help out each other for! I want you and your friend to come with us too. So I want to help you because you're nice and really helped me and-and, uh..."

I hesitated, before the words began spilling out on instinct, not really thinking about them in my haste.

"And when we're out we can all make a little village together and just be all out of the way, free to do what we want. You two can come with us. We'll all help you find him! Just like one, um, big happy family?"

For a second, I wasn't sure if the slight jerking convulsions I felt from her shoulders and head were from crying or laughter. But she leaned back, wiping her eyes and smiling. Was it both?

"I wish I had your imagination, Murky. Thanks. I don't know what somepony's done to him, or me if this isn't just Fillydelphia messing with my head about him, but I'm going to find out. I never even got to see him before the Pit. It's been so long since we were properly together. He was always talking about escape plans and stuff to me to get my input. We tried once, but that didn't go too well. If we can find one another again, we'll put everything we learned to helping your escape plan, Murky."

My escape plan? I figured it'd be best to let her stay hopeful and not say that it was more Glimmer's idea. She was the effective leader of our little group anyway. But another couple's information was a valuable asset, something we couldn't ignore for the eventual attempt.

"Sounds, um, good. Let's go get him?"

Glimmerlight made big emotional mission decisions sound so easy to come up with. A trait I obviously hadn't been born with. But it seemed to at least do the job for Unity, who nodded and stood alongside me for the final trek to the Barn.

"Yes, let's." She glanced at me once more. "I still remember what I told you the last time we met, when that nasty slaver had you in a collar. That you'd find what kept you going. To hold out until we could run into one another again. I said we'd come and help you, but now it's you coming to my aid. You sure found your courage, Murky."

"Y-yeah, but not in me. It's... I found it in wanting to help those I cared about more than anything."

"...like me?" She sounded surprised.

The question set my mind racing. I'd said it to Glimmer before just fine, but having just met Unity, saying that the answer was yes felt awkward.

Nervously, I nodded, slightly blushing. "Y-yeah. Like you."

I gulped, and quickly continued.

"You changed my life. I drew the first thing I chose for myself because you said I could."

Unity's eyes widened, her mouth opening, but no reply forthcoming. As we moved down the line of padlocks on the fence, she looked away as though processing that, before giving me a rather bashful look.

"Wow, I didn't expect that. It really is the strangest little meetings of random chance that matter sometimes, isn't it?. The oddest things you say that somepony takes in a manner you never expected. I hadn't known that meant so much to you. From the look on your face, I don't think you expected what you did running for the Wall to mean as much to me either. I'd been ready to give up until I saw somepony willing to go that crazy distance. So let's do this together, Murky. Prove to each other, and everypony else that there's still hope left. We'll go find out where he is and get you to your friend at the same time."

We shared a little glance at the end of the fence, after the last padlock had passed. A little mutual matching of eyes and a nod, before we both galloped off toward the Barn.

The main fortress was still a little away, safe behind multiple layers of security. It was so much bigger than I'd ever imagined, so much more imposing up close. To think, Red Eye could be in there right now. What if we ran into him?

After dropping into a trench that had been dug out for underground wiring, we crouched low and watched the patrols ahead of us. I let my eyes drift around past them, observing the newly added wall that surrounded the Fun Barn ever since the riots. Security was tight.

Absolutely no way to 'sneak past' in the normal ways, and no overhanging material to jump from like the Ministry. The rollercoaster had been cut away from where it had once passed through the Barn, as though deliberately for that express purpose. There were a few gates, mostly for messengers and higher ranked members of Red Eye's inner circles. Others were for wagons that carried various supplies or spoils of war to the more advanced facilities Red Eye had built up inside. Those wagons were trundling along a newly cleared path that drifted between the rollercoaster's scaffolds.

That might work.

"Come on, Unity!" I took off, moving into the underside of the rollercoaster, an area filled with higher mounds of wreckage and piles of dull red scrap. Ruined coaster cars lay here and there, one of which I pulled us below.

"What are you-oooh..."

She seemed to get it the moment we saw one of the carts move inside the gates. We just had to wait for another one, then sneak into the back under the tarps that covered them! Even better, no chances of being stuck in a box this time!

Taking cover under the upturned coaster car to wait, we pulled some wooden beams across to keep us hidden. There were patrols around here, masked soldiers that were *not* slavers. Many of them recruited from the tougher gangs of the wastes to be given purpose and better equipment. Already I could see and hear a few groups nearer the walls, but our little hidey hole was almost undetectable. All the same, we would have to wait for another wagon we could use.

To pass the time and avoid our nerves shredding under the oppression and fear, I passed my journal to Unity. She glanced across it, taking in the new images I had done since. She seemed stunned to know that I'd drawn her and almost gave us away with a loud squeak of happiness.

"Oh that's wonderful! Thank you, Murky!"

"Oh, um, you're welcome! The one I promised though, we'll do it when we're out of here, okay? First picture I draw when we go." I smiled, feeling a little more confident. "Maybe you could even pose for it because we'll both be there!"

Only about two seconds after I spoke did I realise what that could be misconstrued as.

"I mean like, uh, like *nice*ly! Not, um..."

She turned the page and nodded her head at it.

"Not like her, you mean?" Unity slyly grinned like we had the first time she'd looked at it. I glanced at the drawing.

"Yeah! Yeah, not like that!"

"Mm... this one's really well done. *Very* realistic. Boy, Murky, you must have had your eye on her for a while, huh?"

My voicebox temporarily stopped working, producing only a strangled squeak of embarrassment, accompanied by a blush I was afraid would give us away by glow alone.

She just chuckled lightly. "Oh sorry, I'm terrible sometimes. I'm just making fun. But really, all the other ponies in here, your friends and... family?"

Gulping to regain the power of speech, glad she'd moved away from one of my more, well, *personal* pictures, I saw she was on the one of myself, Glimmer, and Caduceus. For once, we began to properly talk in hushed voices any time I could confirm there were no ponies nearby. Ten minutes or so passed, within which I took a great delight in explaining who Glimmerlight was ('My big sister best friend forever since two days after meeting her!')

or took a comfort in feeling a gentle nuzzle from Unity against my cheek while I told her of Caduceus' loss.

"I'm so sorry to hear that. He sounded really nice."

Sniffing sharply, I wiped my eyes with a filthy hoof, just trying to keep myself from tearing up in front of her. Instead, I just felt her lean over slightly, sharing a tender little closeness. I hadn't been able to let it out with anypony yet, so I found a sense of immense thankfulness growing that Unity was willing to offer comfort. I hadn't realised how deeply he'd really settled in before it happened, the momentum of *having friends* stitching his presence into my soul in such a short time, only to have it ripped out. Somehow, feeling somepony else that I didn't know as well as Glimmer be the one to offer such a close and caring physical expression helped some of that emotion to finally come out.

Finally, like a spring suddenly snapping, I felt myself lean toward her myself, sniffing with my eyes closed and permitting her to be the one comforting me this time in a moment of rising emotion. Even these mere minutes we'd spent were like all the hurt we'd gone through separately were just being shared with the one pony we'd both met before any of it really started.

Wagons still failed to appear, so we shared stories, such as my trip to the Stable and the hoof-bitingly close run for freedom. Or me hearing of her surprisingly heroic little tales to steal items from Slit's very office! Things she had been hoarding from other overseers that had more of a care of their charges. She laughed as she heard about where my goggles came from and revealed a whetstone used for sharpening a knife in her own barding. My own story, it seemed, was not the only one of a slave trying to find their way to survive by aiding those that trapped them.

Suddenly, my ears pricked up. Unity dropped her sentence midway as she saw stark terror upon my face. I'd heard something very specific. We pressed low, and I listened to the sound every slave feared from above. The sound of wings, larger than a griffon, beating against the thick and heavy air.

Monsters. The purple, blue, and green ponies soared through the air toward our goal building. Alicorns. Red Eye's personal bodyguards and most lethal servants. I could hear my own teeth chattering from fear at their passing. They said they could read minds. If they thought we were up to anything, then we were done for! Even that one minute it took the six of them to pass was pregnant with my imagined outcomes of them dropping to rip the cart away and do whatever it was they did. Even fewer had seen them fight, but the legends were, well, *legendary* amongst slaves.

Watching them land upon the roof, I ducked back in, sighing. I needed to talk. Anything to distract myself from the fear. I had a thousand questions I wanted to ask Unity that had been building in my mind, but with a quick glance to her cutie mark, I knew the first on my list. With a mark like that, so grand, so much better than my own cursed flank.

"U-Unity? What's your special talent?" I tried to not make it look like I'd been staring. Oh please don't think I was staring!

She glanced back from staring up at the passing beasts above, drawing away the rags to show the three types of ponies again, before smiling sadly.

"Sort of a strange one. I guess you could say I bring ponies together."

"That sounds nice."

I saw her smile a little at that, before looking away wistfully.

I wanted to ask in what way, to find out what she meant, but Unity instead quickly

glanced toward the edge of the road running under the rollercoaster. My eyes followed and widened; a cart was approaching! Alone too, as luck would have it. Perfect!

Stuffing my sketchbook into my saddlebag and readying up, I slipped my goggles down out of sheer habit for 'go time' and held myself ready. The cart's clattering iron reinforced wheels bounced and chipped off the harsh, unsteady concrete ground, carrying enough weight that to end up trapped beneath it would be a death sentence of a rather messy fashion. Nodding to Unity, we shared a quick glance before diving toward it the moment the cart passed by. The one weary slave pulling it didn't even turn his head away from the commands of 'faster!' to see us.

I went first, galloping low and quiet to get behind it. The back of the cart didn't have any cover, too high as well! Damn!

We were caught in the open behind it, a few heart-stopping seconds without cover. Already, I could see a trio of black-clad guards beginning another arc across the rollercoaster patrol route! In a panic, I pointed a hoof at the underside. We could hold onto the bottom and drop off when inside! Galloping after it again, hearing the beat of wings once more to set my heart pounding from whatever stopping it'd been doing, I scurried under, grabbing hold of the supports to haul myself onto, upside down. Unity was right behind me! Just running under and-

"HEY! You there, the mare! Stop right there!"

A guard's voice cut through the air from toward the walls into the FunBarn. I almost shrieked at the thought. Unity had been spotted before she'd got in! I waved at her, encouraging her to duck under or drop off myself to run! But she reached forward, keeping up just long enough to tap my mouth shut with a hoof and shoot me a serious look, before dropping back out.

"Sorry! Sorry I just dropped something under the cart and-"

Hooves clattered into view, a baton slapping down across her face. I saw Unity fall, and felt the wagon stop on the spot at the commotion. All I could see were the pairs of hooves from guards, surrounding her where she lay. Her cheek was bleeding, one eye closed with pain. The other caught my own eyes only briefly before she was dragged up. I could see the look on her face, the will for me to stay hidden. Groaning, Unity was picked to her hooves and pulled around the side.

"Dropped something my flank! Trying to sneak around to get some good shit to sell on the slave market, huh? Well that's just what we call a *big* offence around here! What were you after, our smokes?"

"N-nothing! I was-"

"Shut up, you'll answer to the big wigs inside. You wanted to see the FunBarn? Well you'll get to see its *cell*! Take her in. We'll get her overseer over later to send her to the sprite pits or something. Move, bitch!"

The mare's baton swung, catching Unity's rump with a humiliating smacking sound to force her to trot onward toward the FunBarn beside the very wagon I now hid alone in. My feelings were wrenching at my heart to see her being marched away, pulled from me *again*!

No... I'd just met her, led her into danger! This had been my idea, to help Unity get her buck and get back to Protégé with her where she might be safer with his advice and understanding! It was all falling apart before we'd even started. I just wished I had the courage to...

She'd been the one who told me I'd find it. Unity had stood up the The Master once. If

she could do that, then it was worth the risk! Anything was better than knowing she was just rotting away and starving to death in the FunFarm. All this time, I'd been running away, protecting myself. I had just *proven* I could go to help others, but even then with major backup and help.

This was my test before me, a friend being taken to evil ends and knowing that I had to help her.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. You have to *dare*.

As the wagon began rolling again, I clung tighter. After all this, everything I'd been through, I wasn't letting her get away *this* time! I was going to get her out, come rain or shine! Hang on, Unity.

As if to just dare me on, the clouds immediately cast their hissing rain down once more.

Finally, I let my tired hooves drop from the cart after ten minutes of agonising cramps and struggles to ensure nopony was in the area of the courtyard within the FunBarn's interior areas. Spittle from the lashing rain kicked up under the lip of the wagon, scathing my exposed coat. Now, however, I dropped into the mud, feeling the wool in my already damp fleece cake itself in wet slimy muck. Trying to keep my wings from slapping the ground, heeding Weathervane's instructions that they *had* to remain safe, I immediately darted out from under the wagon toward the nearest set of covered scaffolds. Squeezing behind it, I got my first good look at Red Eye's headquarters. My infected eye itched terribly, but I dared not remove my goggles to scratch with so much of this hissing rain springing off the ground. The Mall suddenly felt so inviting with that sofa we had under shelter.

Not much of the Barn was really visible through the rain. The storm was kicking up once again, restricting vision and making sure you couldn't open your eyes too wide for fear of them being burned by the toxic downpour. Some ponies in gas masks and full-body barding moved unfettered, but most had galloped back into the main building to wait out the torrential rain. The interior behind the wall was as rough as any place in Fillydelphia, really. Outside the doors it was simply a low stretch of ground that contained much of the materials to come and go. I saw heavy lead-laden wagons being dragged in as fast as they could, tugging through sodding mud, kicked up from old garden earth. They were filled with radioactive materials, some even glowing, for whatever mad science they were pulling in here. We all heard the rumours, but honestly, it was beyond my intelligence to remember what it all meant.

Unity was still visible, flanked by two guards in thick, black and red combat barding. I could see her trying not to glance toward the wagon I'd just left, feeling a surge of pride at her bravery to still think of me. I'd have been blubbering on the ground in her position. All the same, I could see her posture failing as the rain lashed across her, no doubt causing a hot burning sensation all down her face, neck, and back. Out of the Barn stepped a griffon, seemingly not caring for the rain under her thick coat of feathers. The massive armour didn't seem to hurt either.

"This the squirt you lot caught?"

"Please, I was—"

"Shut up!"

Gasping, I saw Unity struck across her already bleeding cheek, crying out and dropping

to the floor. Magic pulled her up.

"Yes, Ma'am. She-"

"Get her inside. Cells are empty. You'll give that fatass jailor something to actually do for a change. She the one they're looking for?"

"Dunno, Ma'am. We were going to-"

"Then do it! I don't need to know what you're *doing*, only results!"

Even I could point out a thousand flaws with that logic. Wicked Slit would probably burst a blood vessel. But horribly, I saw Unity trooped away from me; forced, shoved, and slapped with a baton into the central section of the FunBarn before I had to duck back down behind the scaffolds. They *knew*. The Master had gotten the word out. I needed to get her out of that prison before he came to collect!

Right. Time to go, before my courage failed me from thinking about this madness for too long! Under this darkness, Luna lend me your blessing to remain unseen, please!

They trooped into a larger warehouse that had been built out of the huge ground floors of the barn. Heck, barn wasn't the right word, this place was huge! It was built around multiple levels all the way from the ground to the decimated higher sections the rollercoaster used to have pass through. Really, it towered, rather than sat where it was, deceptively large and more akin to a Ministry than a theme park prop building. The ground floor extended in every direction, with stairs even leading down underground. Who knew theme parks had such large basements? Whatever was really inside there was only disguised as a barn, for I could see concrete walls inside through the open warehouse doors lined with metal supports. Old buckets contained masses of those sprite-bots, long ruined. Up high, through the mist, I could see the lights on the roof still there. I could clearly see why it seemed appropriate for setting up a headquarters in. It had presence beyond compare. The barn that watched you forever.

The rain was seriously beginning to burn my hooves from standing still in puddles. I was already pacing on the spot, murmuring in pain. Intent to go soon, watching for a break in the guard's patrols, I hopped out and ran quietly alongside a wagon being noisily tugged by two slaves into the warehouse to keep them from spotting me. Gritting my teeth and fighting the urge to whinny as I felt my brow, neck, and rump sting from the rain, I ducked away the moment we passed under the cavernous doorways that Red Eye had demolished from the Barn walls. There was so much more cover inside, watched only by a few quartermasters and their entourages. Clearly, the idea of somepony penetrating in here hadn't much applied. After all, who would really want to come in *here* anyway?

The area was massive, filled with mechanical devices and enough conveyors that I began to wonder if it was a hidden factory. But most of it remained defunct, still bearing loads that hadn't fallen when the bombs shut down everything. But it was the contents that caught my eye while I ducked and rolled under a thick pallet.

The machines were *pink*. Upon them lay presents of all shapes and sizes, clad in shiny or colourful paper and wrapped with thick bows. Items like small foal's scooters and bouncy balls went in one end of a machine, and on the other they came out wrapped. Like one giant processing line for gifts. Old rusted carts lay ready to be loaded on the far side before the main doors to the Barn's production area. I presumed those doors had rusted shut, hence the alternate ones cut into the wooden construction.

The presents weren't alone, however. Other machines, still pink and splattered with yellow and light blue spirals of paint, seemed to have a dozen workers clambering over them. From

their conveyors I saw piles of sprite-bots, lying non-operational upon the floor or in crates. Geez, what was this weird place?

But in the middle of it all, amongst the suspended walkways, the one sight atop the machines almost gave me a heart attack on the spot. A colossal pink sphere filling my vision, that grin stretching all around it with massive eyes that stared down upon me. *A giant Pinkie Pie head decoration.* Easily ten to twelve times the size of a pony in height, it sat as an eternal watcher upon the factory, cast from iron and riveted together. Honestly, was there anywhere in Equestria somepony could go without her just being... *there?*

“Hey! Flimsy Pack! Get that lot in out of the rain for now! We can’t move the talismans until it’s clear. That rain burns the stuff up!”

Perking up at the sound of many hooves beginning to rush for the doorways, I knew I had to move. This place was about to get a lot more crowded. Keeping near to the sides, I kept low, crawling beneath scaffold shelves and around-

I gasped, hearing hooves very suddenly just a few feet in front of me.

Stopping on the spot, I pulled back, hopped up, and dragged myself into a small and empty present box, right before a pony’s head peered down from the corner where I’d almost crawled out right in front of him. Curled up tightly, I just shivered, waiting for him to pass, hearing him right beside the present box.

“Huh... coulda’ sworn I heard somepony.”

The present was knocked. Oh no. He was climbing up to have a look in!

“Ah, shit!” I heard him slip on the wet floor, half-tripping on his hind legs to bump into the present. It wouldn’t have fallen, but I threw my weight to *make* it fall, before tumbling out on the opposite side of the shelving unit and scampering down the line of boxes before he peered over.

“Damn it. Hey, somepony get some slaves with mops over here soon enough, eh?”

He trotted off, and I finally took another breath. Following the line of conveyors, I moved for the back of the room, where numerous doors led further into the Barn. For once, a little luck aided me as the guards were distracted keeping the slaves tugging materials inside in line. As such, slipping into the building further was as simple as biding my time and then darting past them.

Beyond was a serried rank of doors on one side of the corridor, with the other beating open plan offices crammed with terminals. Many ponies sat at them, clip-clopping away upon their keyboards. Behind the small internal fence that separated them from the corridor, I carefully nuzzled my way through, briefly diving into one of the doors to dodge a guard cantering toward the warehouse. Edging the door open, I began to feel a sense of pride grow in me. That I really could start to do this whole sneaky thing well! In the past, I’d always failed dismally, but here I really was managing it, and without even the screw ups of the Ministry of Arcane whatever-it-was!

There were a few more guards coming, so I ducked back again, closing myself inside the small room and digging out my PipBuck to activate its light. As much as I loved wearing it, the little broken machine really was too much of an attention magnet. But under the light green hue, I found the cupboard a rather perplexing little place.

Party supplies surrounded me, as did posters of balloons, leaping Pinkies (yes, plural... how!?), and cardboard boxes of absolute junk. This had to be the storage areas for the party production line in the Barn’s side building! Hearing a great many ponies outside, I began to dig through them to spend the time until I could move again. Mostly party hats, balloons

and-oooh...

Firecrackers!

Having to strain to not grin, I began pulling a row of them into my saddlebag. Sooner or later, I had a feeling they would come in handy as a distraction or, at worst, something to add to our growing escape-kit pile.

Alright, maybe I put in a few party hats too. A buck could dream, right?

The slavers outside weren't moving for some time it seemed. Their chatter was all complaints about the rain, length of shifts, or the price of ale at the Roamer. Crossed over behind them were the dozens of ponies working at terminals, likely doing all the grunt work to organise such a wasteland superpower as Fillydelphia. Gently pulling open another box, I found it filled with lots of little bottles of black dust. Lifting one out, staring carefully at the door as I heard somepony lean against it, I pulled my PipBuck closer to get a look.

It held words. Oh why did it have to be *words*? Spinning it around, to my delight I saw it had a little picture of a pony looking like she was blowing her nose really hard. Somepony was laughing behind her. Ooh! Medicine for ponies with colds! Feeling my own nose almost entirely blocked, I grinned, struggling with the foal-lock to pull it open in my teeth. Popping the top, I glanced down into it, praying I'd get the dosage right and taking as big a sniff as I could in order to try and gauge the flavour. The black dust drifted around the tip, light and moving even by the currents of my nose. Before I knew it, a small cluster of it was floating before me. This, uh, would help me?

Instead, I just felt my nose tingle... and itch... then itch *badly*... before I felt muscles quiver.

Before I even knew what was happening, splitting pain wracked through my face and black eyes all the way to my wicked scar as I convulsed and sneezed.

It was a high pitched sneeze, a squeaking with a shrill little snort alongside it. My body almost jumped under it. Eyes watering, clutching my pain and moaning, I heard the *last* thing I wanted.

"...somepony just sneeze in the cupboard?"

The slavers had heard me! There wasn't a way out! I had to find a place to hide, quickly! Then I could... I-

Sneezed. Again. Trying to ignore the throbbing pain all across my eyes and up the swollen red line that went up to my left ear, I staggered into the wall, attempting to hold my nose shut with my front hooves.

"I swear I heard somepony! Get it open! Sounded like a little filly or somethin'."

Oh come on!

Eyes watering from the sneezes, feeling another one building, I simply threw myself behind the door and tried not to scream in pain when it crushed me against the wall. Light streamed into the room, while I did my best to fumble for the PipBuck light.

"See? Nopony. Told you to lay off the damned Dash, mate. Now c'mon. Boss won't appreciate it if we're late back from break. If we take the shortcut through the prison we'll get there in time."

Flattened into the tiny space, my eyes widened. The prison! I had to follow them! The moment the door was loosened off, I simply stuffed the PipBuck and black dust powder stuff into my saddlebag, and poked my head around the moment I heard them depart. Two bucks, almost identical brothers it seemed, were trotting away. Still fighting the urge to cough or sneeze, I quickly slipped out after them, keeping low enough that the terminal

ponies wouldn't see me. I didn't envy their job, having to just sit and type.

Following them was not especially difficult; there were thankfully few others around who were already travelling. Under the black sky, there was little indoors illumination in non-critical areas, so the FunBarn's interior was a stark contrast of hazed light and thick shadow. Unlike much of the buildings I'd been in, this one was much more open plan, with us crossing a large room that could look up to the next floor entirely via a large mezzanine. Above one side lay a massive window that let in what little light Fillydelphia possessed. It reminded me of the real barn back at the rock farm, only much much bigger and filled to the brim with an inventory of expensive looking items amidst a cube farm of desk areas and research tables. Upon the wide windowed side rooms, I saw ponies bubbling up chems or handling radioactive materials. In others, the hum of spark technology was prevalent, machinery in guarded labs or rooms doing jobs I couldn't comprehend. A full bank of screens showed various areas of Fillydelphia and even the wasteland, with three workers sitting watching them intently. Hearing the couple I was tailing, one of the observers turned to the door, making me duck across quickly. Really, this entire hub was just a huge and busy network of varied experiments and technologies. No wonder Red Eye kept it all so close.

What *really* worried me was the way that many of the research sections were hoisting weapons together.

Part of me felt tempted to find a way to smash or steal some of it. Maybe it would help out Littlepip! But I couldn't risk drawing attention, so I contented myself with stealing somepony's sandwich out of a small fridge beneath their desk while they were away.

For all the interest and potential though, this place was a nightmare of direction. Rooms went into the next at seemingly random intervals, as though a maniac designed it. Entire walls had been cut down by Red Eye's workers to expand working areas, and I could see holes in the roof above the main atrium where slaves hung on grapplehooks to bridge the gaps and repair it. I keenly remembered the sight of a gigantic shielded monster tearing through this place. Everything seemed to have been cobbled back together in a mish mash of placement since that epic demolishing operation that had gone on in the middle of the Pit Riot.

Altogether, if it weren't for these two being kindly oblivious, I'd have been lost long ago. The walls held poster after poster of Pinkie Pie while the furniture often had brightly painted design all over what would otherwise have been dull. The effect was something like a zany pony rushing through the place with ten tins of paint and no real forward artistic plan. Thankfully, it made it fairly easy to creep alongside the many desks and office dividers. The only real worry was anypony on the balconies above, but with the rain falling upon them, nopony was willing to cross below the gaps.

"Eh, mate, wait a 'mo. I gotta' check on the intel. Boss wanted an update, remember?"

Feeling my heart skip, I hopped backward, pushing myself into one of the open topped cube offices and squeezing so tightly behind a filing cabinet that one of my wings jerked and hurt. Biting my own lip to stifle the pained yelp, I heard them trot back my way and move into the room with all the monitors. I settled down to wait again, trying to briefly master the art of telepathy to apologise to Weathervane for breaking his instructions about my wings. I willed them to just move on, Unity needed me!

"Hey, egghead. Any signals back from the outer elements yet?"

A younger voice, female and nasal, piped up. "Please, I told you not to call me that!"

"Fits ya. Now I asked a question, we ain't got long."

"Fine, fine. Scouts got back earlier, dropped off a report but... eh, nothing huge to be honest. The Cathedral prep is coming along as the big guy predicted. That slave caravan we lost is confirmed to have been raiders, and there was a brief tussle at the Manehattan blockade force. The alicorns... um, 'took care' of it, was all he'd say. I think that one's late, though. Scout got delayed en route from sickness. Anything else Stern wants to know before you go get roasted?"

"Urgh. Yeah, she still ain't in a good mood after that fuck up at the Mall. She's either swearing about it happening at all or screaming about headaches from somepony dropping on her head."

Oops.

The stallion scratched his mane. "Talking of which, forgot to say. I'd stay away from taking anything to the main office for a few hours. The higher ranks are going to be starting their jury on what to do about the Mall. Old Grizzly said he'd take charge until Protégé's back on his hooves, but Grindstone's having none of it. Wants the little guy out of there completely, saying he isn't fit to lead. Expect it to explode in there."

"Duly noted. I won't trot near it. Isn't it Red Eye's call though? It *was* his student."

Oddly, her voice sounded a little more monotone than I'd have expected from the agreement to not get too close. I wondered why her voice changed, even as the stallion replied.

"All the more reason. You think Red Eye wants to look as though he's playing favourites? Nah, Red Eye might elect to have him retake power eventually, but for now the kid's on his own. Or rather, in Grizzly's hooves, given he's still in medical. Just keep away from all that, egghead. Too much politics for you or me and way too much danger of making big time enemies. Now, you got the list of factions we're looking into next for Stern? I *really* want to get there before the debate starts."

"Yeah, sure. Not much. We've scared off most of them or have deals already, but tell her she can look at the Gun Gallop Crew or Spark Suitors to see if they've got any good kit worth buying out. The Appleloosa train track remains unrepaired, but that ghoul's still doing her flying delivery. The Golden Cap Caravans are making moves lately too if we need to see about local transport. Want my advice though? We should just stick to our own supply lines. The ghoul wants nothing to do with us and the wasteland's like a ticking time bomb out there."

The stallion grumbled. I heard him shake out his mane.

"Well, that's why I'm *here* and not out on the excursions. Thanks, egghead. Now keep your head down."

"Not difficult in here..."

Only now remembering to open my mouth and let go of my lip, I gently peered around to see the pair of stallions leave. Exiting the atrium, they began to speed up, cantering downstairs. Simply praying they would assume my galloping sounds were somepony unimportant (most ponies had that by simply looking at me), I sped up after them, passing behind 'egghead's' chair without her so much as looking up.

But even as I followed the pair into the door, I cast a look back around the doorframe. Alongside several miserable looking ponies beside her on desks, I could see she was silently crying into her keyboard, chained to a thick weight upon the floor.

Below ground in the FunBarn was anything but *fun*.

Behind a set of thick doors designed like Canterlot castle gates (I'd seen pictures, I could know stuff too!) the light had drastically lowered, giving rise to the sheer opposite of above ground.

Dingy corridors that were higher than they were wide, lined with thin doorways of cast metal and bearing only a single low vision slit. Padlocks held many shut, while others lay slightly ajar. Allowing the pair time to get ahead, I gently pushed one open, before immediately darting away, breathing heavily.

A nightmare. They held... a *nightmare*. Just unlit black concrete rooms bearing a single wooden chair with straps. A sheer physical manifestation of my innermost fears of being trapped forever. The whiplash of design was still reeling in my mind, scaring me and driving my heartrate up to the point I almost felt like I was hyperventilating. *What was this place?*

The hellish thoughts in my mind only grew when I heard some ponies moaning or crying inside some of the locked cells.

Tip-tapping my way across the cobblestone floor toward the three way junction that the stallions had gone left at, I peered around to see them approach another such junction again. The undecorated and unmarked design down here was becoming all the more painfully monotone. One went to go right, until pulled left.

"Hey! I thought we were gonna go see the new one in the cells?"

"We don't have time for you to sit and stare at her rump, you weirdo. I'm not going into Stern's office alone! No, you're coming with me."

"Aww, I heard she was a good one."

"Oh shut up, she'll still be here."

The hell she will. Almost surprising myself with the inner determination (And cursing? I didn't actually say it, Celestia, honest! Honest!), I crept down after them the moment they departed left, before heading right. The rooms grew larger, sitting open. But they were not unlit, spewing small drifts of multicoloured light out of each doorway. Unable to contain my curiosity, I peeked in.

I *had* to bring Glimmerlight here.

Memory orbs. Hundreds of memory orbs! Of all colours imaginable, they lined the metal shelves that had been bolted into the very stone of the walls. Many were flickering on the floor, having fallen and become damaged. Could orbs be broken? Were they just bad extracts? There were so *many*.

Standing amongst them, I couldn't but feel more than a little apprehensive. Amongst this dungeon, such a sight only filled me with dread. Everything I had seen of memory left me confused on just what ponies should be playing with. Aurora Star and Twilight seemed to see a lot of good in them, but then I had seen the effect they'd had on Glimmer's life, and Unity's, depending on what had happened. It didn't take a smart pony to work out these were not willingly extracted.

Very quickly, the purpose of the chairs became very real indeed. A chill rolled from my neck to my hind legs, imagining the reality. Strapped in pitch black, being nothing but a resource of information that gradually lost more and more of yourself as it was torn out, forgetting ponies you knew and having no outside input to restore it!

I simply ran my eyes over each row of the orbs, the idea that in many cases, these might be all that remained of those ponies came to light.

"Whoever you all are, I'm so sorry," I whispered to myself.

"Bastards! Where's mah damn food!?"

Jumping on the spot, skittering around on my bad leg and tripping over various orbs, I staggered to the door, casting my head down the corridor. A light shone from one of the larger doors from where that shout had come from. Cautiously, I approached and used my mirror to take a quick peek without putting my head in a visible position.

My heart leapt. The cells!

Within, there were two large caged sections of a room, the rest made up of one huge desk and two cabinets. It was *filthy*. Mold grotted around the edges of tiles that made up both floor and walls, while a rank stench emerged that suddenly left me *very* glad for my cold. But it was the slaver inside that drew my eyes more. While Brimstone was tall, thick, and muscular; and The Master was wide and heavily built, this pony was simply overweight, a real rarity to the wastes. He lounged upon a large cushion, clad in rotten looking canvas with a foul yellow coat. In the corners, I saw bones and dozens of filthy bowls piled up, sticking out from a mount of pre-war packaging.

Very quickly, I realised *he* was the source of the stink.

But all my attention was drawn away the moment I panned over the cells. Huddled at the back of one, as far from the jailer as she could possibly be, I saw her! Unity! Yet as I stared in wonder at having found the cream coloured unicorn, I realised there wasn't any way I could sneak in, and I doubted this obese pony was going to get up to check too many things outside.

"OI! Little bastards, are ya there? You're late by twenty seconds!"

He slammed a hoof on the desk, making an array of random trinkets or sweetie tins hop up or fall off. Behind me, I heard the pitter patter of tiny hooves and a duller stumbling of thicker set hooves on the stone flooring, accompanied by a panicked breathing.

"I'm-phew-I'm coming, sir!"

"Yeah! We're on our way!"

I knew those voices. Recognition was pinging in my mind. But *anypony* seeing me hiding here would be bad. I began to creep back to the memory orb room to hide, just hoping I'd reach it before they did.

"Don't drop it, Pike! Watch out!"

"*You* watch out!"

"*You*!"

Pike? Pike and Cosh? The ponies that had given me trouble in the air terminal were in the *FunBarn*? Some of the few ponies I'd ever caught out through speech?

I had an idea.

I didn't hide. Instead, I ran toward them as fast as I could. Rounding the corner of the three way junction, I went twenty feet away from them on the third corridor, before running back as though approaching the area for the first time when they appeared. The lanky form of Pike with his vomit-coloured coat and dull orange mane alongside the stubbier shape of Cosh almost ran directly into me. They had plates balanced on their heads and backs, moving as quickly as they dared in rather haphazard fashion. I didn't even let them speak first.

"Hey! Hey!"

"Woah, it's the pega-"

I cut him off, rushing forward and pressing my front hooves to their chests.

"He changed the order! It's, uh, less!"

"You don't work for him! Stop trying to steal food! Hah! Thought you'd steal some from us? Haha, hey Pike, he thought he could steal some!"

"Shut up, Cosh! Get out of our way, shorty!"

Pike knocked me against the side of the tunnels with a hoof. After all I'd been through, I was almost surprised when the hit made me squirm inside at being thrown around. But I jumped forward, trying to get near the plates.

"No, no! Please, he told me to change it! That he wants me to take this and-"

"Get off, pegasus! Our boss still wants you! We'll tell him you're here!"

We were fighting in the small corridor... well, pushing and shoving mostly. We were all pretty small in some way, giving rise to perhaps the most pathetic scuffle in Equestrian history. Eventually, however, Cosh butted me on the side of the head, knocking me to the floor. I covered my head while they hoofed my body a few times.

"Little rat! You wait there. I want that shiny thing you had last time back!"

They galloped on, accompanied by another roar from the jailer about being late. Shivering, clutching my aching scar with one hoof, I slid the empty sneezing powder pot back into my saddlebag.

Oh, the fun was about to begin.

"You get away from me!"

The voice made me cringe, hearing Unity shout at whichever pony it was that had moved toward her cell. Watching carefully on my mirror, I held the next closest door open, ready to leap inside should anypony move for a quick exit. Pike and Cosh I could simply see looking at Unity like she was some sort of tourist attraction, while the jailer was pulling his bulk up to the desk, ready to eat.

Yet even as I peered in, I saw Pike's extended hoof snap back as Unity's magic hurled a stool at the bars.

"Huh! She's feisty!"

"Reeeel feisty!"

"Shut up, the pair of you." The jailer snapped at them. "I didn't borrow your services from that braided idiot for your wits! She's my prisoner until Shackles gets here. No touching."

Her magic swung up the stool again as she backed away from the bars, out of their reach again.

"Like I'd let one of you two near me."

The Jailer cackled.

"Try telling Shackles that."

A sick feeling shot through my stomach at the look upon her face, leading Pike and Cosh to snort with shrill laughter. Grinning at her, licking his lips, the jailer dug into his meal. I held my breath.

I had expected to wait for a few minutes, but apparently, the entire pot had more immediate effects.

The desk rattled, hopping as his hooves flailed and rose to his mouth. Choking, gasping and coughing, the jailer roared aloud, sucking in air and gurgling, attempting to wipe his

tongue with a yellowed sheet of his clothing.

“Blurrgrh! Ya... yain... FUCKIN THRO-YAAAARGH!”

The desk rocketed up and flipped, sending food and tabletop items flying. I saw Unity’s eyes go wide in surprise, while Pike and Cosh moved closer, seeming to hug one another while their temporary master stomped and flailed to and fro, gagging and panting. Sneezing madly, his voice reaching higher pitches to more the powder burned the inside of his throat. I saw his eyes lock on them.

“Ya... YA TWO!”

“Run, Pike!”

“Way ahead of ya!”

I dove into the waiting doorway as they clattered out. Mere seconds later, a wobbling and rippling obese jailer staggered out after them, screaming from the powder in his throat, swearing loudly and chasing them off down the hallways. The moment he had passed, I dove into the jail, and ran up to Unity’s cell. She gasped and hurried up to the bars, pocketing a small bronze object.

“Murky? You came down here?”

“The M-Master is coming, we need to get you out!”

I glanced down at the lock, finding it to have a keyhole. Perfect!

“Can you pick it?”

“Yes! They took my lockpick rod, but I still have a bobby pin from my mane! Can you find anything in here to work with it?”

In the distance, I could still hear the jailer shouting. Damn it, he hadn’t gone far! I had to search quickly.

I took to the mess the jailer had left behind, tearing out drawers and looting the cabinets. The jailer’s voice was becoming louder again. He was coming back! Throwing open the second cabinet, I found a small cupboard filled with tools. Some of them were reddened. Stifling the sick realisation, I began digging through them, feeling the panic rise. Hammer? No. Spanner? No. Screwdriver? Damn it, no! A power drill? Just sick...

“There’s nothing!”

“Keep looking! Try his desk, maybe he has spare keys!”

Vaulting over the fallen desk, I started hunting through the mass of fallen items, tossing them aside. Heavy hoof treading accompanied by mass swearing and spluttering was echoing back down the tunnels already. We had to go *now* if we wanted to avoid him seeing us! I hoped he was further away and this place was just playing tricks on my ears.

“Come on, Murk!” Unity hissed, her eyes watching the doorway. “If there’s nothing there, just go...”

“Not again.” I muttered, striving to not let my mind get clouded by worry for my friends, before my hooves found a little tin box and opened it. Four labelled keys looked up at me. “I got them!”

“Good! It’s cell two, get the one for cell two! Hurry, Murky, I can hear him coming!”

A loud belch and sudden sneeze came seconds apart from outside. I looked down at the keys to grab the second along and threw it to Unity, who caught it in her magic. After a brief attempt, she raised it up.

“...Murky, this says cell three on it! How did you mess that up?”

She didn’t sound angry, just bewildered and strained from worry about us being caught. My mouth gaped as I looked down. They hadn’t been in order? Screwing my eyes shut, I

just slid the entire box to her.

"I... I can't *read*, okay? I'm sorry..."

Unity even took a half second to just stare with wide eyes, before her shoulders sank. But her eyes rolled as her voice deadpanned.

"My hero..."

Looking down, evading my embarrassed blush, she whipped up the key, twisting it around in the lock and trying to force it in. I stood nearby, pacing in worry.

"Stupid... stupid fucking slaves. Damned *pepper* on a damned radroach stew? Oh they'll pa-OH!"

His hooves stopped on the spot, not too far from the cell area, and his deep voice rose in shock, as though surprised by something.

Another voice cut through the quiet of the cellar areas.

"I suggest you care less about your *meal* and more about why you're not at your post, *lackey*."

The Master. All sound other than that voice *ceased*. Oh... oh no, he was here! I spun to Unity, trying to help her with the lock.

"Murky, what?"

"We have to go! We have to go *now*!"

The jailer's thick tread was joined by that inevitably terrifying stomping. He must have come down the other passage! Wiggling the key through the rusted gate, I gave it one large shove to finally jam it in. Together, her magic and my weak strength, we tried to force the large lock around. To my horror, I felt the key bending, but we couldn't stop now!

A sudden *ping* was followed by the *tink* of metal on the floor.

I staggered back, mouth open as I saw the snapped key. But Unity stared at it, closed her eyes and strained. Seeing the deep red aura around the remains of the key, she shivered with the effort to turn it in her magic, before it finally clicked. Together, we struggled to pull the rusty gate open and be properly reunited.

"Come on!" I moved to pull her out, but Unity turned back, grabbing that little object. What was it? A shaped piece of metal? She simply tossed it into her rags, not giving me a chance to see it properly.

"Okay, done, now we go!"

Leaning forward, pulling her quickly, we galloped together out of the jail and down the corridor, charging around a corner the moment I heard The Master and one hell of an unfortunate jailer return. The odd thought that with all this nick of time running, I'd not actually *seen* The Master since Barb's death in the Mall. I'd always been too afraid to look back.

Forever chasing me. Something I couldn't ever look back because I dared not out of terror.

Terror of seeing what could close around my neck once again.

To that end, we didn't wait, we didn't judge. We simply galloped as fast as our tired bodies would carry us until we found stairs upwards. Hearing nothing behind us other than a spine-chilling *roar* of anger.

Doubling up to shove aside the thick dungeon doors, we found ourselves back in the atrium. Immediately, we ducked into the side of the room and began heading to avoid this main nexus of activity. Ponies were moving between the cubes or dragging small carts to the experimental areas and chemistry labs, giving us few exits. Most of the other doorways were

blocked by old rubble, I guessed from the balefire or the riot destruction.

I felt Unity tugging me. There was one hole left, where a door had once stood at the opposite end from the large broken window. A thousand shards of glass still seemed to be embedded into the walls surrounding it. Amongst this mess of a central hub, it was only one more oddity. Perhaps a little recklessly, we galloped across the floor, trying to blend in like two ponies rushing to work. In a minute or so, I knew The Master would come tearing up after us and raise the alarm. If we wanted to find Old Grizzly's office, we had to move quickly, *very* quickly.

I just prayed we could somehow find Protégé amongst all of this.

Hopping through the hole, raising a few complaints from the slaves trying to work on picking out all the glass with tongs, we found a stairwell that had clearly only *just* been repaired from almost nothing. Even one more level up, it began to feel like this entire section had been repaired in a way that did not reflect the original style. Under all the patchwork, I could see a peeling pink wallpaper.

"Do you know the way to his office?"

"No! But I know where the higher rank offices *are*. We'll just look for the name on the door!"

Galloping out onto a floor, we shared a look, before Unity bit her lip and turned back to look ahead.

"...ok. *I'll* look for the name on the door."

Emerging onto a more traditional corridor with more of that horrible pink hue decorating it, Unity began to look at each door in turn. Behind us, I heard a great commotion going up in the main rebuilt atrium research labs. Clearly, The Master had emerged from the dungeon. Perhaps we could-

I heard trotting. Darting forward, I almost tackled Unity through the door she was checking, for us to land in a heap beyond it. Clamping a hoof to her mouth to avoid any sound of surprise, I gently let her go as another pony cantered past.

No. Not another pony. *Grindstone*. The old donkey was pushing his way down the corridor, grumbling and hissing with anger to himself. Remembering the stallion's warning, I figured that council jury chamber was about to get *very* heated once he arrived. Behind him trotted a young mare, desperately trying to get his attention.

"But, Master Grindstone! The machine can't be repaired if it becomes strained. We can't risk-"

"It was designed by Aurora Star herself, known for memory technology that functioned in great stress. You will carry out the orders! Now leave me alone, the hearing is in five minutes."

"I'm so sorry, but we *can't*! If we try to extract the memories too quickly, the pony you're inside could expire and-"

"One wretched life matters nothing to me! You think I care about that buck any longer? Now that that ridiculous robot is gone, you can do what you want with the machine, can't you? He knows where it is. That's the only bit of information that matters, everything else we can find down there. Now get away from me! This hearing is crucial. If I get it the way I want, that little buck will be back with the slaves, where he belongs."

"Y-yes, master."

They passed down the same rickety stairwell we'd came up. I pressed against the doorway, listening carefully while nervously chewing my lip. Good luck, Protégé.

Unity shifted up to me.

"Somepony that matters to you? If they're on Grindstone's bad side then I'm on their side." Unity had stood up again, moving back to the door herself. "What's his name? What did he mean about 'back' to the slaves?"

I only hesitated for a second, before mentally bucking myself for being so paranoid these days. It was *Unity*, of course I could tell her.

"...his name is Protégé. My master."

"*What?*"

Turning quickly, I lifted my hooves to her shoulders. "But he used to be a slave, like us! He's a good pony underneath, really! Just... converted."

Looking away, I dropped back down to all four hooves and glanced around as a means of trying to change the subject. But amongst the empty wall safes and a discarded cloak upon the floor there was nothing to give me the opportunity. Instead, I just sighed.

"But I swear, I sometimes see who he really is. It's like he just feels lonely and lost inside. Like he's been searching for somepony else without even realising it beneath what Red Eye's done to how he sees things. Somepony who understands or sees more to life. He was really hurt and I wanted to find him, tell him where I was going!"

To my surprise, she seemed to react a lot less than I'd expected, taking my words at face value to just smile and pat my (uninjured) shoulder.

"Then we'll go find him if we can, Murky. I trust you. Now, I think Grizzly's office is just down this corridor. We'll get there, then judge where we are, okay?"

"Right."

The corridor was empty again. No doubt all these higher ranks who deserved offices were moving off to the hearing on Protégé's future. I let Unity lead, checking each name plate in turn. Below us, there was rampant shouting and rushing around. I simply hoped they didn't presume our escape route to be deeper into this beehive of slavers.

"This one!"

Unity tapped a door emblazoned with three balloons. (Ones somepony had once tried to chisel off, it seemed.) Not hesitating, she simply shoved her way inside. Casting one more look back down the corridor, half-expecting The Master to be waiting, I trotted inside and closed the door. The sound of dozens of ponies beginning to gallop around was growing. We didn't have much longer. Turning back to the office I... *woah...*

This was no normal office. Tall and with a balcony that blew in hot stormy air, it indeed had a large pink desk and a chair, but that was where the 'normal' stopped. The walls were covered in small pigeonhole boxes, bearing hundreds... no, *thousands*, of letters. Large sacks had been tossed in a corner as part of a futile attempt to tidy up. Now they simply overflowed, dropping even more thin pink letters everywhere. Below my hooves was a thick carpet, also pink, that was strangely comfortable to stomp on. An odd brass tube seemed to run into the pigeon holes with wires connecting it to a terminal on the wall, for whatever use I couldn't even fathom. It had little highlights of... *yup, pink.*

Oh yeah. This room sure was *pink*.

Somehow, I didn't even need to read the little plaque upon the desk marked with three balloons to know who *this* office belonged to. Already I could feel eyes watching me from somewhere. Together, we wandered into one of Pinkie's rooms, finding both our pairs of eyes fixated on the letters.

"What are these?" I looked closely at one as Unity raised it with her magic.

"Well, not like anypony's going to shout at us for taking a little peek, huh?" Carefully, she began unfolding it. But what *was* it anyway? It didn't escape my ever active imagination that all these were meant for somepony who had died, though.

But each of them bore the same stamp alongside a wax seal of the Ministry itself. The stamp was shaped like a cake.

"It's a birthday card." Unity whispered quietly, raising the little white slip from the envelope. "Says, hmm. 'Hi, Pearly Swirl! Happy super-duper twirly twirl Birthday! You didn't think your old pal Pinkie would forget it, did you? Enjoy the gift and make this the bestest day ever until the *next* bestest day ever next year too! Signed, The Pinkiest of Pink Ponies, Pinkie Pie! PS. don't go near any doors today. Take it from your bestest friend Pinkie!'"

Finishing the short letter, we both just looked up, probably even more confused than *before* she'd read it.

"Uh, that was..."

"Weird?"

"Yeah, weird."

"Definitely weird."

Absolutely weird."

She gently placed it upon the desk, immediately cantering over to the (pink) table's (also pink) terminal on the desk and seating herself upon the (again, pink) chair. I just ran my eyes along the walls, finding a giant map of Equestria. Lines from Fillydelphia were drawn to every settlement. Trade routes.

I had no idea if this was the most endearing or *terrifying* thing I'd ever seen. No, surely my imagination was playing tricks on me. She couldn't have known the birthday of everypony in *Equestria*! It made no sense! There wasn't any automation or space for a large workforce. Just maybe a couple helpers and the mare herself. How was this possible?

Watching everypony... FOREVER.

Absent-mindedly needing some air, I wandered to the balcony and glanced out. From here, you could see the entire roller coaster on this side of the FunBarn. Below us lay the much longer and lower section of the Barn where I had seen all the machines creating presents. To my horror, I saw the guards rushing to cover every single exit around the wall.

"Unity, we need to go soon."

"In a second. He said he keeps lists of all their names on here for ponies who go on special assignments or get sent to the Pit. I *will* find him, Murky. He needs my help! This could be the only link I have! Okay, okay, there we go! I'm in! Let's see... 'Pony Database!'"

She kept typing away, furiously hammering the keys with her hooves, lacking Glimmer's natural duality of magic and physical interaction, but making it all up in determination.

"It doesn't search by initials! One second, I'll put *my* name in, see if anything comes up! There... we... go!"

A rush of air blew past us with a small *thwip*. The sound caught both our attentions, as the tube attached to the wall of letters sent a small envelope firing out of it to land upon the middle of the floor. Sharing glances, I moved to pick it up, while I saw Unity look back at the screen and scowl. The expression didn't seem to suit her.

"It's got info on him alright! I can see the request against my name that Grizzly put in that someone be sent back with me to the same assignment after the Pit! But it's got no name-wait!"

She almost hammered the keypads into submission with her hooves in excitement.

"There's something saying about a transfer to another role for Red Eye's empire after the Pit; they took him somewhere else in Fillydelphia but-but no record of where or with who!"

"Anything else?"

"NO!"

Her head lay in her hooves, staring at the insultingly bareboned descriptions on the screen.

"I was so *close*... I thought I had him! Murky, what happened to him? Was somepony giving me false memories? Was he not really in the Pit? I just don't know anymore! I just. Don't. Know!"

Her front hooves slammed on the keypad of the terminal with each word, before she slumped over it, sobbing through her own frustrated anger. That flattened dirty mane fell either side of her head. But then she stopped, as though realising something.

"Wait. Grindstone was talking about a buck back there... do you think he could have slipped him off there? I used to be with Grindstone, one of his stock. How am I meant to know what to pursue?" She quaked, holding back a scream of frustration. "Why does this world have to *do* this to us all?"

Picking up the envelop in my mouth, I dropped it on the desk before moving beside her.

"Maybe this?"

"Murky, that's just some stupid thing Pinkie used to do."

"But it came out when you put in your name so..."

"Look, Murky, I-huh?" She had looked up to knock down the idea, but I saw her eyes simply stare at the seal. "M-Murky..."

"What? What is it?" I leaned over, but the words were absolutely unreadable in the same writing style I had seen Pinkie use on the other letters. But Unity's face was one of abject shock, of a mixture between wonder and stark fear. "What does it *say*?"

Her mouth quivered, before she spoke slowly, gulping and forcing the words out.

"It's... it's addressed to-"

She took a breath.

"...to us."

To,

Murky and Unity.

So super super sorry that this letter took soooooo long to arrive, but when I knew I had to send it, I was just like 'Aaaaaaaaah!' for at least a minute! I mean, can you imagine?

I'm really really sorry that it missed your last few birthdays, Unity. That's why I want to make my gift to you really special! I just want to tell you that you don't need to panic. It's all going to be fine! I hate to say it, but there's a hard road to go first, before you see the buck you once knew. I wish I could just tell you, but I don't really know all the itty-bitty details. This isn't like one of Twilight's crazy organised experiments, y'know! I'm sure you'll work it out together. You're a smart pony. Smart ponies always figure things out! Except me. But then, I can't figure me out either! How crazy is that!?

Just trust me, Unity, it'll be alright. Together, or not at all, right?

Hey, Murky-Murk? You're what set off my Pinkie Sense so bad that I spilled

somepony's sarsaparilla! I mean, a pony who never had a birthday party in his life? I will not, as Ministry Mare of Morale, let this happen! But it's a few days till your birthday yet, Murky. Be patient, okay?

Oh, and Murky? Listen very carefully to your Auntie Pinkie. Don't. Worry. When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not, you'll know what to do.

I'll be watching out for you two, from wherever I am.

With hugs, (Give each other one for me! Hehe!)

Pinkie Pie!

PS – I'd leave the office right now if I were you.

Unity let the letter droop after finishing her read through.

Speechless... utterly, utterly speechless.

My mind didn't actually even know where to begin with the process of figuring out what I'd just heard.

"I'll see him again?" Unity spoke gently, lowering the letter back to the desk, her eyes still wet. But then her teeth gritted, with a smile that only somepony with their mind set on the daring could make. "Yes. Yes she's right, I *will*. I don't care how long the journey is, Murky, or how hard it is. I'll trot it if I have to. Whatever Grindstone's done to him!"

"There might be something. I was in Grindstone's place before. That machine he mentioned, it had a buck in it. I don't know him and some robot said he was there for a lot longer than recently. He was in some uniform. But maybe that has something to do with it? Maybe it's him!"

She was quivering on the spot, resting her hooves upon the desk. But her took my hoof, holding it tightly and nodding.

"Yes. I... I hope so. We'll get in there someday, Murky. If you're right, maybe that is him! Grindstone was always hunting us when he could, like that other beast that's after you."

We had something to go on and I knew I had an ally in the Ministry. It was decided. We had another objective after all this.

Yet I couldn't ignore that else I'd heard when she read it. My mind was reeling from a message to me. A birthday? What choice to make was Pinkie talking about?

They were details for later. Right now, I did the only thing I knew I could do immediately and gave Pinkie her only request. I hugged Unity amidst her shaken thoughts. Her hooves wrapped around me tightly enough that I felt my wings ache. We were both scared witless, not even trying to comprehend the truth of what we'd just found or how or *why*. But all I could think about were those eyes that seemed to follow me everywhere and the dungeon below. Was I right to trust a two hundred year dead pony with a *dungeon*?

A crash sounded through the hallway. The sound of a door being bucked in.

"Check every damned room. They have to be up here!"

Jolted back to the harsh reality of Fillydelphia from the voices of the past, our faces swivelled to the doorway. I could hear slavers smashing open every office door and storming the rooms. They were coming! Grabbing our things, Unity and I galloped back to the door, peering out to see a half dozen slavers armed with rifles barge into a room six doors down.

"Go now!" I hissed, before we moved into the corridor, moving away from the way we'd come up. Side by side, we sprinted for all our combined worth to reach the next corner.

"There they are! There they are!"

The shout behind us was followed by an ear-splitting crack from a rifle. The wall to my left splintered. A warning shot, no doubt. But there was no stopping me now. Unity and I had our ponies to find, the ones that mattered to us.

Another shot came much closer. I screamed as it tore through my saddlebag. My journal! Oh please be okay, please be okay!

We turned a corner, three shots slamming into the wall behind us, to see the balcony over the research areas up ahead. No going that way! Instead, we turned down a side corridor through a massive steel door.

"Look, Murky! That sign says 'Medical!' This way!"

Those chasing us were gaining, but passing through into the medical wing, our combined strength was just enough to shove the thick door shut and spin the lock. Pre-war ponies may not have known anything about safety railings, but they sure could make a big doorway! On the other side, I heard many attempts to spin the lock, before we pulled a pipe from the wall and jammed the doorway.

Now to hope there was another way out. But instead I just heard Unity shriek.

"Murky, you're bleeding! You've been shot!"

My hooves stumbled in terror. I was? But I hadn't felt it! Unity pushed me to the ground, her hooves becoming slick with...

...with orange liquid.

Unfortunately, that brought even greater fear. Dread realisation emerged as I began pulling open the saddlebag.

"No, no, no, NO!" I simply panicked, tussling around in the mass of *stuff* I'd acquired over time. I felt a sticky liquid as I drew out the *one remaining* RadAway sachet I had. It was leaking badly.

"NO!"

"Murky, what's wrong!?"

I didn't even answer, just trying to press the liquid back in, but hooves weren't meant for such a role. Crying, hyperventilating, and feeling my lungs flare up as though sensing the only lifeline I had left being drained away, I instead just crammed it toward my mouth, downing every bit of it that I could. I didn't have to take it for another twelve hours. It felt like such a waste, to be throwing away something I'd need. Clutching the empty packet, the realisation settled in.

I was dry of RadAway.

"I need it to live! My lungs they, uh, they get real bad and I don't understand it but the doctors say they can't fix it! They can't fix it, Unity! I cough and get blood and... oh Goddesses help me. I'm going to die in a day if I can't get more!"

Unity's face bore a mask of horror, before steeling herself.

"I didn't know, but Murky, we need to get out of here first. We're going to *medical*, we'll try and steal some! But we have to get moving!"

Allowing myself to be led, my limbs shaking in fear, I couldn't help but remember every time I'd been through this hell. In the air terminal, in the crater, in the pits, and in the Ministry. The one thing that I couldn't get rid of that lurked within my chest, eating away at my life. Through a mask of tears, I followed Unity. Yes. Yes, medical, we'd get some and-

Medical was heavily guarded. *Very* heavily guarded.

The corridor opened out onto a selection of small rooms, each walled by thick glass. Beds

lay among them, sometimes with an unconscious slaver on them. But at the end I could see griffons surrounding a large door. Past that there were crowds of ponies. Unity and I ducked low, staying underneath the lowest height of the windows and moving around parts of the room the griffons couldn't see through too.

The ponies were arguing, one donkey too. I heard Grindstone's deep and rough voice.

"The boy is an embarrassment, garnering nothing but advancement through his association with our leader! It's bad enough that we be dragged down here by Master Grizzly to have to be doing this under some stuffy bureaucratic means to be in Protégé's presence, but to have any capability he has held up as good for Fillydelphia? Absolutely not!"

Many ponies cheered and roared their support. Another voice, stern and wise, barked back.

"You accuse our leader of permitting anypony to hold rank without proving themselves? Protégé spent two *years* proving himself to Red Eye and took on the responsibilities only after Red Eye's personal approval! In his duty, he has carried out numerous--"

"He *failed*, Grizzly! Did you not see the Stable débâcle? He let Steel Rangers destroy most of the workforce until Stern had to rescue them!"

I felt a personal objection and unthinkably frustrating well of emotion at that. That mad donkey had set that damn ambush up himself!

"Not only that, but he then proceeds to fail to control his own slaves, resulting in a riot that killed over twenty slavers and over forty slaves! It was his warmongering attitude to launch an all-out assault, with no tactics and without even attempting diplomatic negotiations that almost got him killed!"

The urge to scream and rant in response was almost *overwhelming* at the sheer *gall* of Grindstone to say such things as truth! Protégé hadn't done that! But hearing the amount of ponies hollering and agreeing made my painfully grind my remaining teeth to bite down the anger. I had to find Protégé in here.

The medical station held several windows in the far wall that looked in more secure rooms. It seemed likely they might be there. But to get there, I'd have to cross the primary 'path' through the centre. The griffons couldn't not see me then.

Sitting back, sweating, still afraid for my own health, I took a second to breathe and try to figure something out.

"You have no proof for any of those claims, Grindstone!" I heard Old Grizzly, the one voice shouting back for Protégé, speak up again. "You have yet to hear his side of the story!"

The donkey's voice was weaker in reply, but firm and authoritative.

"Chainlink Shackles has offered a witness' viewpoint. Many others who say it back him up, including Quartermaster Mosin. They report that Protégé ignored any advice in an apparent effort to attempt to impress Red Eye. He is not worthy to lead! He should be cast from our ranks! Thrown back into the pits!"

Another pony, rough voiced.

"I say we just let him die! I lost friends in that fuck up he caused! He deserves punishment! Shackles is the hero, trying to calm it, but then Protégé went and caused another mess up with friendly fire on the griffons!"

"Yeah!"

"Punishment!"

The urge to just run up and give a 'witness viewpoint' of my own was tempered only by the natural fear I had of Grindstone. Unity, having been sitting so quietly that I almost lost

track of her, lay a hoof over mine, calming me. She spoke quietly, gently.

"Politics, Murky. They want him out. Old Grizzly's honest, he won't give up. But we can't change what's going on over there. I'm sorry."

"I know... j-just... he did so much! Gave so much of himself, saved my life so many times and put his life on the line to help slaves, and *this* is what happens! They make him into the fall pony. It's not *fair*!"

She patted my hoof. I knew she was right. Giving me a second to take a deep breath, she nodded to the opposite side of the room.

"Come on. We should get moving. We need to cross here anyway. When you dumped your bag, were those firecrackers I saw?"

Oh? Ooooh...

That improved my mood a little. I couldn't speak out on this horribly biased version of events, but I *could* interrupt them! Tearing them out, I ripped the ignition strip from the top of the line and passed them to Unity. Holding them in her magic, she threw them to a far corner of the medical chambers. I covered my ears.

But nothing happened.

"...did it fail? When's it going to-"

It went off. A mad burst of noise and fire cracking off in rapid succession. Like a gun on fully automatic, they sparked and blasted around the corner of one operating theatre. Clutching my ears, gritting my teeth, I tried to watch as the griffons immediately bounded forward, flanking around the room to check out the commotion. I heard the higher ranked masters scatter, some dropping to the ground. To my delight, even a few cries of fear. The moment the griffons soared past us, Unity and I ran into the next chamber of this wing and started pushing the next security door shut behind us.

We got it half way, when I saw Grindstone stagger forward and cast one beady eye at us. I saw his eyes go wide at the sight of me, like a surprise at seeing such a slave here.

"You..."

"Push, Murky!" Unity screamed, throwing her weight against the door as Grindstone called the griffons and charged the doorway.

"You trespassers! Thieves! Guards, get over here!"

The door slammed shut. Repeating the same trick, Unity jammed the wheel and dragged me further in.

"You've got a few minutes! I'll look for a way out, you find him!"

She took off, running into the facility while I began cantering around each window. The door shook from gunfire rattling against it, seeming to bulge in places. I could hear the zap and crackle of energy weaponry too. Knocking aside chairs and skittering about on the slippery tiled floor, I hopped up to the windows of every enclosed area and side room, checking for my master. Most were empty, a couple bore incredibly confused and sick slavers who merely let their eyes wander at all the noise. One had clearly been at the receiving end of an auto-axe, displaying a grisly sight indeed.

But then my sight fell to one side room at the far end, secured by a whole separate door and with a thick window looking in. Slowly, tentatively, I trotted forward and hopped up.

The fight to not explode into tears on the spot was one of the toughest I had ever faced.

He lay upon the bed, his shoulders, chest, and throat swamped in blooded gauze. Tubes ran into his nose and mouth, needles were inserted upon his left foreleg, and a machine in the corner fed liquids down the tubing in a watchful vigil. It marked his life by a small

picture of a pony that flashed red around the neck area.

Protégé lay unconscious. They hadn't even covered him. His cutie mark was still before me, carrying with it his dreams and hopes, under the Red Eye or not. Every wound, whip scar, and burn on his body from years of slavery made it all too easy to see why they hated him. He wasn't one of them, not truly. He never *could* be in their eyes, yet for all his life it was what he *wanted*. To work beside his idol.

Hadn't I wished so often for the same? To travel with Littlepip and aspire to her goals?

Leaning on the glass, noticing it steam up from my breath, hearing the growing thumping on the door, I knew that he was in danger. They wanted to execute him or punish him! I had to get him out of here, get him safe with Unity and I! We could prepare together! Go back for Glimmer, Brim, and Coral, her son, and even Sunny! We'd all get out!

I galloped to the door, tugging on the same wheel lock the barrier between me and the griffons now had. Wrapping my hooves around, I *tugged*.

Two explosions rocked the room, the security door behind me bulging in the middle. Dust fell from the ceiling and instruments scattered. Patients cried out in fear. I simply pulled, dropping my pitiful weight on the wheel to try and force it to just MOVE!

A horrible creaking behind me gave rise to a new sound of ponies shouting. They'd made a small hole! Come on! COME ON! I couldn't let them take him! I couldn't!

My muscles strained, my tiny little strength causing me to cry in sheer anger at everything about being born a slave! From being here, here at all to even the horrible weakness of body it left you with! Even Protégé, better fed and trained, was still a little smaller than most ponies. But my light-boned body only made it worse.

"Come on! Come on, move, door! MOVE!"

A further explosion rocked the door, blasting air through a hole it was creating at the side.

Unity returned and ran over to me.

"Murky, we're out of time!"

"HE'S HERE! I have to get him!"

To her credit she, without even looking in the room, trusted and tugged with me. The wheel moved slightly, grinding around from whoever had locked it so tight! But two weak slaves just... we couldn't...

"It's jammed! Murky, we can't get this! They'll be in here within seconds!"

Another explosion rocked the door, making bolts fly out.

"I'm not leaving him! They... they're going to hurt him!"

The door rattled on its frame, before yet another detonation set it leaning inward...

"Almost! Get them! Two more hits!"

Unity looked around at it, before turning back to me.

"I'm sorry, Murky! I'm so so sorry! But you can't help him if you're dead!"

She tugged at me, but I only screamed and dove back at the door. Remembering every time he'd leapt in for me, begged me to let him help me, guarded me with *his own body* and fought in my defence! I couldn't turn away now!

A loud crunch announced the door's top joint breaking from the wall. Unity whirled me around, pinning me against the window and pushing her muzzle almost right against mine.

"MURKY! I know what you're feeling! I... I know it too! Someone I care for is out there somewhere too and Equestria knows how much I want to help him too! I want to search here for more information, to call out Grindstone and know for real if that's what it is! But the ponies we care about won't be helped by us getting killed!"

The metal groaned. They were bending the door inward! Staring right into her crying eyes, I realised what I hadn't even thought. She'd come here for the same reason as I. She was having to leave without him too. Deep in those hazel eyes, I recognised my own pain. We'd failed, but that didn't mean we had to give up.

"Y-you're right."

Unity dropped back from me.

"Then come on, I found a way out! Fillydelphia wins today, Murky, but all the old stories from Old Equestria say ponies had to face the darkness before the dawn too. We'll have another chance. They won't do it right away if they've got him hooked up like this. We can try again."

She turned, leading the way. I hesitated only just for a second, turning to look back through the glass. Smoke was billowing in from the door now, whirling around this chamber. I simply gazed in at my master, at the only other born slave I'd ever known to share the pain with.

He opened one eye.

My gut wrenched. The first sight he'd seen of me, and I had to run into the smoke.

"I'm sorry..." I muttered, backing away. That one eye, tired and in pain, seemed to quiver. "I'm sorry! And... thank you."

I hoped, somehow, through that clearly soundproof glass, that he understood before I turned and ran to catch up.

We made it a good thirty feet down a side passage away from the medical wing before the door busted in. I heard it crash down, followed by the scathing sound of talons on tiles. Unity led the way, bringing us out to a section of unrepaired roofing. Scaffolds lay around us with many tools, all open to the sky. Unity quickly spun back to me, rushing over and starting to tug at my fleece.

"What are you doing!?" I was still reeling with emotion, but this genuinely caught me off guard.

"Helping you get your wings free! They'll spot us if we go too far, but if you can just fly us over the little wall here we can make a run for it!"

My face flushed. Feeling rather hollow, I gently brushed her off and looked away, screwing my eyes shut.

"I never told you but... I can't fly. My wings are broken."

Letting my eyes creak open a little, the look she gave me could only be described as absolute heartbreak, before she galloped up to nuzzle close for a second.

"Oh Murky... I'm so sorry, it's like if I lost my horn or something I wouldn't know what to do! But what do we do then!? That was my plan!"

Behind us, I could hear them approaching our dead end. Casting my eyes around, I spotted what could be our only way out. Near the tools, I located one of the utility saddle grapple launchers.

"Help me get this on my saddle!"

It took a few tense seconds of work, but Blunderbuck had done his work well. It was as easy as slotting on the tool, tightening the gear and hooking it up to the wires! Suitably equipped, I flexed my front hoof, springing the mouthpiece out. Trotting up to the edge, I

cast my eye around, spotting the rungs of the rollercoaster above us. Below us lay the same wide factory level of the Barn I'd seen on my way in.

"Hold tight, Unity! I-I have *no* idea what I'm doing!"

"Aren't you reassuring. Well... *geronimo?*"

She fed her hooves around me, hugging tightly. Gripping the mouthpiece, squinting through the rain, I aimed for the rollercoaster and bit down.

My body jerked backward from the pneumatic force of the grapple rocketing from the launcher. Trailing a thin wire from the canister, I saw it, by some miracle, wrap around a rung of the rollercoaster. Well, now or, never!

"Y'know, Murky, about that whole *geronimo* thing? I *really* don't feel quite as confident about that as I first said it!"

"Neither do I!"

Someone shouted from behind us.

"There they are! Get them!"

I didn't even look back. I simply jumped forward. We both screamed and simply fell, plummeting off the side of the Barn, before the wire went taut! My entire torso twisted, making me cough loudly and cry out in pain, before I felt our weights being swung like a pendulum low over the roof of the factory segment. Picking up speed, an insane sense of adrenaline and surging motion blasted through my senses. Almost crazily, I felt my mouth widen into a mad smile. We... we were doing it! We were-

The hook came loose and pinged out of its target.

...falling! I felt the hook drop loose from the coaster, my eyes catching a brief glimpse of that rusty structure breaking under our weight. Barely feet from the factory, soaring through the burning rain and incoming fire from above, we hit the new corrugated roof and bounced, rolling over one another along the soft metal like a mad two-pony-shaped bowling ball. My body flared in pain, my wings screaming in agony before we finally came to a stop upon a clear plastic skylight. Breathing hard, eyes wide, hooves locked around one another in sheer panic. I didn't even move when the grapple zipped back in and returned to the launcher by my side.

"W-w-wow..."

"T-that w-was s-some ride..."

It wasn't over. To our combined screaming, the roof gave way beneath our weight, dropping us into the factory, right into the view of about forty slavers below. After a bone crunching landing on hard metal, they all stared up at us on our unstable platform of...

...huh? *Up* at us?

Getting a sense of my bearings, feeling my balance lurch beneath me and my body ache, I realised that we had landed on the giant Pinkie head I'd seen. Soon after that, I also realised that it now was beginning to topple very dangerously.

"Hey, that's those runaways! Get down from there!"

The slavers surrounded us while we got up, struggling to keep our balance.

"Uh... Murky, I think this is going to go!"

My life had been punctuated by moments of rebellious insanity in here. It seemed I was about to add another one. Looking down at the almost spherical shape of Pinkie's head, only one idea came to mind.

"Lean forward!" I didn't wait for her, pushing us both forward and feeling the unsteady massive ball beneath us lean.

"I said get off! GET OFF or we'll just gun ya down! Bosses want ya alive!"

They had us utterly encircled, weapons pointed. I just hoped for the element of surprise. With a creak and a moan of twisting metal, Pinkie Pie's head broke loose. Unity and I screamed, back-pedaling madly to stay atop the rolling metal ball as it fell the ten feet to the floor and delivered the headbutt of the millennium to one poor slaver who didn't get out the way fast enough.

Slowly, it began to build speed. The dull rumbling offset by the sudden bump and jerk every time Pinkie's muzzle hit the ground and made the entire thing hop like a mad bouncy ball.

My hooves quaked from the unsteady mad ride, like some crazy circus act as Pinkie's head rolled forward, gaining speed on the smooth floor and beginning to thunder across the factory with us atop it. Turning, we had to *gallop* for all we were worth in the opposite direction to not be pulled under it!

"*This* was your idea!?" Unity shrieked, panting and powering her hooves as fast as she could.

"It's all I could think of!"

Looking over my shoulder, gasping for breath, I saw slavers and even slaves scattering in all directions from the oncoming pink ball of devastation. Boxes were crushed, machines knocked aside, and shelves toppled. But at the end of it, we were approaching the main closed doorway. The one normally too rusted to open.

Well, we were going to help Red Eye in *one* way at least.

Behind a rending crash of thin metal, the entire door was torn from its hinges, propelling us back into the outside. Churning through the earth, our transport threw waves of pooled water to either side behind it. Almost immediately, the rain lashed upon Pinkie's head, picking up mud and dampening the surface. Our hooves skidded, slipped, and fell. In desperation, we dived to the side, freefalling once more before landing in the thick mud.

"Urgh! Get up! Get up, Murky! The way's clear! Come on!"

Groaning, I tried to roll to my hooves, finding my body complaining all the more. Unity was pulling me, hissing through her teeth at the burning rain on her back. Around us, slavers were galloping and slipping about, but the gate was clear! The guards had fled the ball that now careened out into the FunFarm! We could go. We could-

Around us, shimmering in the darkness, a colossal shield slammed down into the ground ten metres to either side. The rain ceased when it enclosed us, trapping us in one green hue. Staggering to a halt, I spun and shrieked. Just outside the shield, one of those *beasts* knelt.

A green alicorn! Its horn was glowing and sparking brightly, projecting the thick magic shield that had trapped us.

And that was that. The slavers closed in, surrounding us and ending the escape about as suddenly as it had begun.

Behind us, I heard one final crash as Pinkie's head rolled over and sat atop a rather recognisable looking den. I heard one familiar overseer's voice echo across the storm.

"OH FOR FUCKS SAKE!" Screamed Whiplash.

We waited together. Pressed against each other's side for support, we simply waited as slaver after slaver surrounded us back inside the factory. Weapons were loaded and aimed, and we

were the centre of a dozen furious glances. Griffons watched from the rafters, all awaiting a master to come and judge us. One slaver was staggering around, groaning after being run over by the Pinkie head.

"Sorry, Unity... I-I didn't want you to be-"

"Shh... it's alright, Murky. I chose to come. We might still be alright, look!"

She pointed with a hoof toward the door that came from the main building, where a somewhat shaggy looking pony approached. A monotone colouring upon his mane and coat was tinged with light and dark grey, almost covering his eyes. He moved with a certain poise and harsh eyes that seemed to widen upon seeing us. Raising one unshorn hoof, he waved the guards to lower their weapons.

"Unity. I had dreaded it was you. What *are* you doing!? I told you to stay out of trouble for now!"

This had to be Old Grizzly. Wiping my soaking wet brow, I squinted my eyes to get a better look at him. A tightly worn jerkin covered his thick, earth pony body, loaded with small pockets that held extra magazines for a long barrelled pistol strapped onto his hoof.

"The pony I'm trying to find! I told you I wanted to know out about him, but you've been lying to me when you said there was nothing! You knew he was-"

"Silence!" Old Grizzly cut her off, his voice leaving the calm and wise demeanour to remind me that yes, he was *still* a slave master. "You are still the slave here, Unity! You will mind your tone to me. This is unacceptable. Many slavers are calling for you both to be thrown at Hive's teams until you're just eaten alive! I've half a mind to agree, with all the damage you've done in here! I cannot prevent a true punishment from arising here!"

I felt Unity quiver. That wasn't good. Old Grizzly certainly still seemed more intense than Protégé.

"But I saw the records! He was taken somewhere when you said he'd be brought back to me! Why!?"

I presumed she felt it best to not blame Grindstone in the presence of so many potential allies of the donkey. Old Grizzly's eyebrows raised, before sighing and wiping a hoof across his brow.

"I have told you all I knew, Unity. I placed the request for him to be returned to you after the Pit, which I believe he did survive. I never saw the name, but the request referenced the buck you were sentenced with before. Past that I do not know! Fillydelphia is a complex machine, sometimes ponies fall through the cracks."

"But it said he was carted off somewhere!"

"Standard procedure for *most* ponies..." I saw him eye me. "...after the Pit. To not let blood fuelled maniacs go axe-crazy on their cellmates. Past that I *do not know*, Unity. They were told to-"

"Oh, I can answer that one..."

The third voice, deep and hateful, rumbled across the factory floor. Half limping, pulling his old body along, Master Grindstone moved at the front of a dozen huge and imposing slavers. They all bore symbols of power or clear higher rank, but Grindstone was their figurehead, shuffling along to Old Grizzly. I felt Unity shake with anger, her eyes locking onto the old mule.

"Really, you're all fools for not spotting it. Makes an old vet like me fearful for the dejected upcoming generations in here! Haven't any of you figured it out yet?"

Unity and I exchanged glances. I saw that she looked to Grindstone with sheer hatred.

She'd mentioned me before. Had she spent time under him? The donkey looked at us both, scowling at me in particular. Meekly, I averted my eyes. Old Grizzly huffed, turning to his fellow slaver.

"If you have some revelation, do share, Grindstone. I've had enough of listening to your poisonous words today."

"You idiot ponies. Her *name!* The transfer, stated that this 'buck', by sentencing, was to be returned to her. To Unity. To be sent to *Unity*."

Against me, I felt Unity shiver, no doubt a shot of horror going right down her spine. Taking a few seconds longer to get it, I twisted to look at her. Unity's face was drawn, pale, and devoid of that warmth she normally possessed.

I caught her before the stagger led her to fall. My friend simply stood limply, staring at Old Grizzly. The big slaver seemed morose, Grindstone's harsh words finally settling in as to the reality of what had happened.

"You... you approved that, didn't you!?" Grizzly snarled at the donkey.

"What does it matter? I just did a little checking up behind you after seeing you get a little too close to the *labour*. Had a look for who this request was actually talking about. Just doesn't take a half-intelligent being to figure it out when you look at the logs! Some idiot just looked, saw your dumb demand, and took it at face value! Best place for them. We needed more back then anyway. She's just a slave, so why care anyway?"

"You watch your tongue, Grindstone."

"Oh, do give it up. I'm much too old to be sneered at. Now, deal with your rogue slave, get her to the pits, and get back to your workplace."

"No!"

Everypony turned. Unity had shouted the one word with such conviction that even Grindstone's head moved with surprise. She looked at me, remarkably holding back tears. Holding her head high, Unity looked at the slavers.

"I'm not going to the pits."

Grindstone grumbled, talking as though to a child.

"I'm afraid you are, slave. You don't get a say in-"

"Because I choose to go to *Unity!*"

An audible gasp passed around, mine included. Pulling her around, I tried to get her attention, whispering.

"No! Nopony comes back from there! I'm sorry he was sent but you don't have to g-"

"No... Murky..." She gently moved my hooves away, only now allowing small tears to form. "I do..."

She fixed me with a sad look.

"Together, or not at all. I promised him that. At least this way, whatever *Unity* really is, I'll have a... a chance. We'll face it as one. It's what Pinkie told us. A hard road, but that I'd find him at the end of it."

"This isn't right. I just *found* you!"

Unity shivered, trying to catch herself, before leaning forward to embrace me gently.

"You helped me so much, Murky. Got me this far, but it's all right. If it were your friends, you'd do it too, wouldn't you? You're a brave buck, and I'm sorry to leave you, but stay by those that matter to you, alright? I know that Protégé will need you before the end too. Thank you, Murky."

Letting go slightly, I felt her lean in and lightly kiss me on the cheek, before we nuzzled

slightly. I couldn't prevent myself from crying, feeling like I was losing her forever. Nopony... *nopony* survived coming back from Unity.

"Oh, one thing."

Unity backed off, digging into her ragged barding. Finally, she drew out a small object, a brass item. It was the one I'd seen in the prison cell, a small statuette of a little pony carved from metals and small pieces of scrap. A tiny unicorn, held aloft by her own magic and bearing a PipBuck on her right hoof.

"I told you my special talent was bringing ponies together, Murky. This is how I do it. I can read a pony's unique magical signature, we all have one, and we're all different. It's what makes the magic of friendship so strong between ponies. I can imbue small objects, s-somepony holding it can feel like the other pony is still there with them, j-just a little."

She sniffed, and wiped her eyes.

"I made this one and imbued it with my own signature, hoping I'd see you again. I know what she means to you, Murky, about the hope she gave you. Well... you gave me the same today. So please, take it; so we'll never be completely apart now, even if the worst happens."

Gently, she let it drift to my hooves, before tucking it away in my saddlebag for me. I saw it to have a few words along the base, unreadable. I didn't dare spoil the moment to ask.

"Th-thank you."

"Thank *you*, Murky... just remember. The friendship between us all is what keeps us going, okay? It's what'll let me help him, and it's what'll keep you going with your friends. Stay strong, Murky... keep inspiring others, okay?"

She backed away, moving toward Old Grizzly. Every step wrenched my heart, seeing her move all the further away. The one beautiful mare, for all the hurt slavery had done to her, giving herself up to the darkest secret of Fillydelphia in pursuit of one pony she'd promised to not leave without. Somepony she couldn't even *remember*.

The tragedy of her bravery struck me hard, almost too hard as I saw Old Grizzly nod.

"The next shipment to Unity isn't for some time. You'll be waiting in containment till then. I'll... I'll try and see if there's anypony over there who's been asking for you."

"Thank you, Grizzly."

My tears dripped onto the ground as I saw her led away by two guards, back into the FunBarn. Most of the masters left, Grindstone casting me a harsh look before moving back inside too. Silence reigned around the factory. Even the slavers were stunned at her volunteering. Soon, I saw Old Grizzly turn back, but not directly look at me, speaking quietly.

"You're Protégé's little helper, aren't you?"

"Y-yes, master..."

His eyes glanced down through that thick mane. He seemed so much older, watching one of the slaves he somewhat cared for leave. Probably as old as Brimstone.

"You saw what happened in the Mall. He'll need ponies like you. Stay low and get going. I can protect him from punishment for now, Red Eye wouldn't allow it, but he will *not* be returning to power. They decided... damn, that decided that Chainlink Shackles is now the permanent master of the Mall."

"Oh no..."

"I know, Murk. I know. He offends me as much he did your now previous master. I was Protégé's tutor to the ways of our work here, the things Red Eye doesn't directly teach himself, like maintaining workforces and shift patterns. I would prefer it if you were not

near Shackles, Murk. That pony. He's more than just a nasty basket case of sadism, much, *much* more. Believe me, he is entirely sane. One of the old timers that held power in Fillydelphia before Red Eye came along. Do not trifle with him, Murk. I don't want you to get involved in the madness of a pony forged in the fires of what this nightmare city used to be."

My mind reeled and filled with horror in equal amounts. The Master was a constant. A singular constant in my life now that he had become almost predictable and terrifying in his sheer weight of presence. But to know that there was more in there, a life when Fillydelphia was not as ordered, for all the modern horrors.

"So I'm going to let you go."

"H-huh!?"

"Be wary. I heard Grindstone sending somepony to fetch him, knowing you were here. So go. *Run*." His voice lowered. "Stay safe. I may need your witness account when Red Eye is told of this by Protégé upon his recovery. You've become suddenly very important in a great game of politics and intrigue, Murk. I need you to disappear for now. So play along."

Shivering, fearing Shackles would stomp out the door at any moment from wherever he was hunting, I nodded.

"Right..." He took a breath, increasing the volume of his voice. "Now get going, you stupid slave! Hive's waiting! MOVE!"

I shrieked. Turning, I skittered, tripped, and fell in my blind hurt and sadness to leave Unity with them. Finding my hooves, I galloped. It hurt my aching body, but I simply galloped and did not slow down.

Choking, retching, in pain and exhausted, I finally collapsed in the first safe place I could think of.

Foal Land. Hidden amongst the old stuffed toys, I fell to my side and hoarsely took in what air I could.

But my eyes still moved, and they found one thing nearby. Upon a chainlink fence, sitting amongst a thousand others of its type, only detached, separated, without union.

Pulling myself over, I gently reached out and clicked Unity's lovelock back together once again, before collapsing at the bottom of the fence.

Hours later, I dropped into my hiding hole amongst the residential areas of Fillydelphia, a basement long abandoned. Hiding in the dark, fearing every hoofstep and wingbeat above, I simply curled up, clutching the Littlepip Statuette. Somehow, just by holding it, I felt better, like Unity's calming influence was crossed with the strength of my beloved legend.

Somehow, somehow, I wasn't going to let them have her. The impossible escape in my mind was a quickly growing list, to escape, to free Sunny from The Master...

And now to bring two ponies dear to one another back from the brink of Unity itself.

But I was alone. Without weapons other than a grappling hook on my saddle. Without food bar one solitary sandwich. No RadAway to speak of and only twenty four hours to live in a city that desperately sought to ruin me in every way possible.

I needed help, I needed strength. Holding the statuette close, I drew my PipBuck and curled up around it, switching on to the DJ's news slot. Let his tales of Littlepip bring me to bravery, as always!

"Good evening, wasteland..."

If there's one job that a DJ can often learn to get a little bit feisty about, it's repeating stuff now and again in the times when we have no new information. It gets a little boring sometimes to have to repeat tales that I know all of you ponies have heard time and time again.

But sometimes... just sometimes, the truth of the matter is those stories that no DJ wants to keep repeating just have to be done for the benefit of those who miss other slots. So it is with great regret that I tell those of you who missed it, the news from the town of Arbu..."

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Mad Gallop – Without any concentration for shooting back, you can put more emphasis on just staying hard to target by diving around! (Now if only you could outrun them too...) While galloping, enemies suffer a penalty to hit you with ranged weaponry outside their own natural perception range.

The Lost Virtue of Legends



"I know who you are. You are walking death, a plague in pony form. Where you trot, blood flows like a river."

"What's it like to lose faith?"

A downward spiral.

Like... like I'd been low before, right? I'd been *really* low in my life up till now. Most of the nights I knew I could remember were spent curled up in a corner or under the harsh wasteland weather, crying myself to sleep and failing to dream as any pony should.

But the last while had been building me up, filling me with sources of strength, the ones that *any* other pony has to some degree. Friends, advice, self decision, and even small victories amongst the darkness. Reunions with those that mattered. I was waking up for the first time in my life.

At my core, however, I had *one* pushing urge greater than any. One that had been with me since the moment I had witnessed her soar above the Pit I had lain stricken in, rising from the stagnant horrors into the light. My belief in the Stable Dweller, in her *legend*. They had been telling me that she was not the hero I believed, but I thought I knew better. Every day on the radio I listened to her exploits, old and new, like the tales of some mythical being that had once crossed my path. She was my absolute. The one thing I could hold to, believe in and trust the efforts of. To know, through efforts of her and those like her that the outside world was a better place than Fillydelphia. That Red Eye was wrong.

I'd put all my hopes in creating this implausibly perfect icon of a pony in my mind.

But... but...

"But then Arbu..."

Yes...

I think I just lay and... and clutched that PipBuck until I was forced to move by hunger. I didn't believe it. I didn't *want* to believe it! The Stable Dweller was *my* hero! I'd insisted she

was perfect and strong and brave and kind and modest and lovely and... and... and everything! Every minute I just felt my chest ache as I waited for the broadcast that would tell me it was all a horrible mistake!

“You’re shaking... are you gonna be—”

No! I’m not fine, all right? Because I had to sit alone, away from *everypony* and listen to that broadcast! I didn’t have anyone around me to offer words of comfort! No one to tell me if it was all just a big mistake!

My mind only knew one way to cope. To fall back on mere belief. I had my faith in her and it had to remain strong! Heroes didn’t just change like that! Ponies who do so much for others and Equestria couldn’t be corrupted like that. Living legends that I’d believe protected and inspired us and... and...

Sorry... I didn’t mean to shout, and, well, this part’s difficult. I’m just scared.

“Of what?”

I was alone. Alone and more outcast than ever before when I had a crisis of belief. My very innermost inspirations my life began to take a downward spiral. A fall that I couldn’t turn back from no matter how hard I tried. One that just kept going and hurting and forcing me down. I still feel it.

The legends of Equestria were beginning to fall around me.

Without them I was defenceless, unable to feel the hope.

If they could fall, if those mighty titans of wonder could fall, how could somepony like me rise up? That’s all I could think about. That I would be better off just staying a slave and realising the truth, that there never was any great and inspired ‘better’ world to escape to in the first place.

That message was what started the descent into the darkest period of my entire life.

Lines... lines became... a line...

Shivering, I spat out the charcoal, before ripping the page from my journal entirely. Throwing it to the side, it landed within the damp corner of my hideout. I began staring at the blank page... taking the charcoal up once again and lowering my head to... to place a single dot and...

And draw a... a line...

It squiggled, juddering from side to side. Then... then it could be her tail! I’ll just move it to the side and fit her in the corner then! Lifting the charcoal, I repositioned and gently drew an arc. Yes... yes, curves! Curves came next! Draw a c-curve...

The line ground across the paper much harder than it needed, chipping the charcoal. Her head! Yes... round it up and flick for the ear... just... flick and—

NO! Too much! My hooves wiped across my straggled mane, biting my lower lip so hard I tasted blood. My hoof scraped at the paper, trying to rub a little bit out. It just smudged. Wait... wait maybe if I smudged it *all* I could redo the main bits in sharper lines!

My hoof rubbed, harshly ripping away at all I had drawn to turn it to nothing but a black mist. Quaking, I took up the charcoal and attempted to start again. She’d just be darker than normal, not as bright as I’d once seen her in the sky. Just... just like they s-said...

Lines... lines...

I looked upon the lines I had drawn, like a crude foal’s stick figure.

Crying out in frustration, I took up the journal and tore another page out...

“Get that little rat! Somepony grab him! Thief!”

I burst from the back door of the old supermarket, skidding across the mud and falling onto my side. My wing stinging madly, I staggered to my hooves, hearing the clatter of hooves behind me. Breathing quickly around the clasp I held in my mouth, I fled. Behind me, the stout quartermaster from one of Red Eye’s supply depots in this supermarket knocked the door open again so hard it smacked against the wall. Brandishing a cleaver in his magic, the bearded unicorn swivelled his eyes, spotting me clambering out of the mud and galloping off.

“There he is! Guards! *Guards!*”

A chainlink fence surrounded the supermarket. The only gate in was immediately swarmed by six slavers in masks, kicking their battle saddles into gear to take aim. Panicking, breathing hard, I instead ran around the opposite side of the building to where a dozen large rubbish containers sat awaiting somepony to ever arrive to empty them. Screams to circle around the building permeated the air, guards pursued behind me.

Diving between two of the garbage containers, I began stuffing my saddlebag and the package through the small hole I’d dug under the fence. Immediately after, I pushed my head through and started kicking furiously at the dirt.

“Get those containers out the way! Grab his legs!”

Shrieking at them being so *close*, I bucked out of habit, only striking the solid metal surface of a container, before yanking myself through the slick and searing mud. The rain had come and gone in Fillydelphia, keeping it drenched and dark amidst occasional electrical storms. Yelping when the sharp underside of the fence tore along my back and rump, I felt my body finally slip through and—

“Ah! Gotcha!”

My body jarred to a halt, feeling a pain shoot right from the top of my rump. Turning, sweating and pulling at the ground, I saw a slaver with his head right down at the hole, grasping my tail between his teeth. A gas mask was pushed up over his head.

“Go roun’! I ’ot ’im!” he snarled through my filthy tail, fixing me with a look. Behind him, I saw the slavers going back for the entranceway, aiming to properly get me.

Panic overtook me, before I lashed out with a back hoof onto the fence. The impact didn’t hit him, but the sharp impact on the metal near his face distracted him enough that my tail slipped out, tearing a few strands along with it. Crying out loud again at the sharp twang, I fell forward. No, I couldn’t stop now! I had too much to lose right now!

Either side, slavers were coming around the fences, galloping toward me. Scrambling to retrieve the package I’d stolen, I simply took off toward the closest group of buildings that I could. I needed cover! Somewhere to hide and wait them out! Immediately, in my rush, I slipped and fell upon the mud. I was caked in it, from the time spent crawling or falling in it during desperate efforts to escape everypony who had heeded the word of the slavers, that the one who brought in the pegasus would immediately win a reprieve from work for a week.

My limbs were tired already. How long had I been on the run? Was it just hours? Had it been days? My eyes felt heavy, my limbs leaden, and my mind drawn thin with exhaustion. I

hadn't slept since the hospital over a day ago. My one sandwich had lasted one short meal to recover from the efforts in the FunBarn with Unity.

It could have only been a couple hours, but to me it simply felt like an unending rush to survive.

Up ahead, a group of slavers heard the calls of those skidding across the mud behind me and began rushing to cut me off. I was standing on a road between the supermarket and a housing estate. To my right lay busy factories, to my left a large soiled field filled in wet slop that in better days had once been a grassy expanse.

"Come on... come on, Murky. Ideas... *ideas*..."

Feeling tears running down my face as the slavers closed in, I paced rapidly on the spot, before simply screaming and running away from them all, no matter whether I knew the way or not. Finding myself heading toward the factories, I pushed my legs to gallop madly, trying to lengthen the time before they caught me. Glancing back, I saw the horror of six slavers catching up at a frightening pace. Why did everypony else have to be so tall or have such long strides!?

Slaves looked up as they saw the chase pass by. Many of them recognised me, but few dared interrupt the slavers (who, naturally, had a much greater reward for catching me than any mere slave) in their efforts—other than some who stood up, considering joining the chase. At their head was the quartermaster, that cleaver following him the entire way. Ducking around groups of slaves, trying to put as many tight corners between me and them as possible, I simply tried to break line of sight amidst the construction materials and large stockpiles of bar iron outside the main factory building.

Ahead of me there was a huge ditch that fell away by a good fifteen feet into what seemed to be a small quarry or deep storage basin. A storm drain ran along the bottom, filled with a green gunk. Striving to reach the ledge to slide down, I found my way blocked by a mesh fence that had been crudely stamped into the ground. The top was lined with razorwire. Above it, a massive crane loomed between the factory ground and the quarry. Its stairway was blocked off. Crashing against the fence, I spun to look behind me, finding confused slaves looking up at me. In the distance, I saw the slavers searching around the buildings. I had a little space! Time to dig! Then I could—YARGH!

"Hold him! Hold him! They'll like us if we just slow him down!"

Two slaves had grabbed my hind legs. Hooves were not the greatest for holding, I lashed out, bucking and trying to stop one stinking tar coated slave from lying over me to pin me down. Her hooves knocked my bandaged shoulder, drawing a squeal from me.

"Over here! He's here!"

"Please! Let me go! I'm like you! *I'm like you!*"

"Shut up, featherbrain! I'm getting a break for you!"

The slavers closed in, finding me held down by the slaves. Slowing, breathing hard, the quartermaster grinned and cackled.

"Think you can steal from Pony Moe's market, huh? I'm gonna have you strung up by your balls for this! Right outside my storehouse so *nopony* will ever think about that again, you little thieving rat! We got you red-hoofed."

I struggled, pulling my hooves in vain against the slaves who kept me on my back and spread-eagled before the slaver. My eyes couldn't leave that huge bloodstained cleaver.

Wailing, I paused for just a second before letting loose what desperation I could muster and simply *biting* the muzzle of the slave atop me with savagery I could only draw from

sheer terror. The sprung back, howling as I felt a chunk of skin come out. Lashing out, crying, panicking and pushing myself against the fence with at least one part of my body free, I flicked my hoof to deploy my battle saddle's mouthpiece and looked skyward before pulling the trigger.

With a jolt, the grappling hook rocketed vertically toward the crane with a burst of pressurised air. Above me, I heard the clang of impact. Kicking at the slaves trying to hold my back hooves down, I bit hard on the mouthpiece, pressing my tongue onto the trigger to make the device start retracting.

The rope went taut, before I bucked once again at my captors and swung free into the air, pulled almost vertically upwards by the gun winding in the rope. Pulling my legs up, the cleaver whizzed below me, narrowly skiffing the hairs of my tail before the winding gears in my saddle got into their stride and whisked me upwards. Bouncing off the fence, pulling my legs up and away from them, I only barely missed the razorwire before whizzing off to a good height about them all. The storm's wind spun me until my stomach churned, blowing me back and forth like a pendulum. I had to get this right...

Unable to properly see where I was, hanging twenty feet from the ground by a rope attached to a crane and spinning madly like some wretched and well beaten piñata, I tried to gauge the right moment and bit down on the mouthpiece to release the hook from the crane.

Suddenly, gravity took over rather harshly.

I fell, tumbling through the air, dull red horizon after grey earth after black stormclouds in a whirling spiral before the wind was bludgeoned from my body. Gasping in shock as much as pain, I felt my body roll and fall further, sliding down a steep embankment of rough rocks and loose gravel. Shouting, whimpering and struggling to get upright, my hooves skittered out before I simply fell again onto my side, bouncing off the uneven ground to slam down again and again. Bones ground in my wings and I felt my muzzle's rad-sore savagely tore at before everything thudded to a halt upon an earth level surface. My balance was shot, the instinctive effort to get up and *run* leading onto to a dizzied fall and pathetic pedalling of my rear hooves. My front hooves simply clutched my own torso, breathing through gritted teeth until the pain subsided.

"Don't stop, Murky, don't stop, they'll be coming! Get the package and go! You need it!"

Growling the words to myself, and forcing all the pain into a howl of frustration and determination, I slowly pulled myself to my feet, finding the grapple lying nearby. I bit the mouthpiece again, drawing the last length of it back into the saddle. Turning my head, my muzzle now seeping infected looking fluids from the sores, I glanced toward the fence at the top of the large embankment I'd just fallen down. Slavers were tearing at the fencing, drawing bolt cutters from the tool chests nearby to start cutting through. Even as I watched, that cleaver flashed and separated an entire set of links. His eyes met mine, before they started trying to force through. They promised a lot more than just being handed over to The Master.

Groaning, I began limping, then trotting, then a painful canter toward my goal: the drainpipe of the storm trench. I could see a small gap just large enough for me in the thick bars that covered it. It would take me back to my hideout! Dragging the messenger bag package behind me from my teeth, I heard the scuffling of hooves on gravel.

"Stop there, slave!"

Don't listen, you'll obey... don't listen, you'll obey... *don't listen!*

“I said, STOP!”

I half tripped, my hooves juddering and trying to halt on the spot out of fear of offending my masters further. But I kept going, sloshing through liquid waste and pus-yellow slop around the drain entrance to drag my shrivelled body through a gap nopony else could hope to get through. Behind me, the slavers and even a few slaves rushed the drainage ditch, clambering down the sides and surging forward. With one more striving push, I popped through, scant feet ahead of them. The quartermaster slammed against the bars, his cleaver flying between them in his magic to swing at me. Screaming, I backed off, pushing myself into the huge pipeline of Fillydelphia’s sewer system to get out of his magical reach. The slaver beat against the bars, laughing maniacally and hollering at me.

“You can’t run forever, runt! *We’ll get you eventually! Shackles wants ya! SHACKLES WANTS YA! YOU CAN’T RUN!*”

Knee deep in sewage, I turned the first corner I could see before lying against the sewer wall to get my breath back. My nose was still blocked, unable to take any smells in, but I could still taste the rank atmosphere and feel the stuffy heat of Fillydelphia trapped down here. My eyes felt too dry to cry, so I simply huddled down and quivered, clutching the package closely. My body was failing, the hunt for RadAway not going well. Everything felt hot, the sprint from the supermarket had left me dizzy and my lungs burning. Biting a leg to stop the coughing, I searched inside the package for them.

My hoof drew out three small dry biscuits, almost crushed completely. Feeling my stomach twist and cramp, I guzzled the biscuit shrapnel as best I could.

That was it.

Still desperately hungry, my dry throat crying out for water that wasn’t simply taken from the brown sludge in puddles that seared my throat from the acidity, I lay back to let my legs recover. While doing so, I felt the little jab in my chest before drawing out the newest valuable I’d acquired and kept close to my heart.

The little statuette of the Stable Dweller that Unity had made for me.

I should have taken comfort in it, strength in it...

But with one sentence from a radio, half its meaning had been taken away before I’d even gotten the chance to enjoy having it.

No! No! *No!*

It wasn’t *right!*

Scrunching up the paper, I hurled it behind me, landing amongst the few others that now slowly dissolved on the wet cobblestone floor of the sewer maintenance room. Her neck had been way too long and... and stupid... argh! Come on, Murky! Just draw her *right* this time!

“You know what she looks like. Draw her all... all heroic and...”

My charcoal stick lowered, shivering, and tentatively drew one long curve. Yes... yes that’s her back, now flick it upward and make a small circle to rough out the head... a... a shape! The curve becomes a shape and then the shape...

I stopped, before letting out a foal-like whine and whinny of sheer annoyance and frustration. Her head was too big! I started adding new lines, the old ones I could work into her mane, *I could save this! I could save her!* Save how I saw her!

The charcoal stick scribbled, making one new curve for the head... too small! Another... too long! Another! *Another! Another and another and—*

That was too many! I... I couldn't fix it.

"PLEASE!" I cried at the paper itself, breathing hard and hearing my lungs wheeze. I was sweating, both from sickness and the frantic worry. I... I couldn't draw any more! Everything I did just... just turned to a mess!

No, I had to keep trying! Drawing was how I saw the world, viewed it, judged it; how I *believed in it!* Why couldn't I make her look good again?

Why couldn't I make her look good again?!

"You didn't do it... you didn't do it, Pip. I know you didn't... it's all a lie... all a lie!"

The horrible mess of lines and awful curves was torn away, joining the growing pile behind me where all my charcoal attempts of the Stable Dweller slowly darkened until they almost seemed to gel with the black stone itself.

Panting, my entire body jittering and stinging, I skidded around the corner of the hallway and dove into the bathroom. Three sets of hooves thudded and rumbled across the teak wooden flooring in pursuit, rounding off at the top of the stairs and locking onto me like fervent predators. Whimpering, shouting my pleas and begs to them, I slammed the door shut, pushing my back against it.

The first impact nearly knocked me clean away, the doorway burst open by a few inches. Catching my hooves, I threw myself back against it again, holding it shut.

"He won't give you anything! Leave me alone! Please!"

"Push it! Push the door! *Harder!*"

The slaves rushed it, bucking and ramming the doorway. My little hooves struggled, being bashed and bruised upon the door that let its fragile nature be known when it kept smashing back in my face. Weeping openly, I just kept pushing my hooves against the slippery tiled floor to try and keep it shut between each impact. Eyes flickering, I saw this was a dead end. I'd run here simply to put a door between myself and the three slaves who'd spotted me. I hadn't even *thought* about what I was trapping myself in!

I fumbled for the lock, but the rusted latch fell right off, being knocked away as the door was forced inwards by a good couple of feet. A hoof appeared around it, being pulled back sharply as I knocked it back and jammed them in the door.

"Argh! You little fucker! You're getting it! GET HIM!"

Again, again, and again, the door was assaulted, starting to chip in places but all too horrifyingly being forced open against my pitiful strength. I couldn't shut it fully, I just couldn't compete with their power! A body wedged itself into the gap, a hoof swinging to grab or strike me. Knocked onto my back, I braced myself against the wall behind the door and just shoved my back hooves against the bottom, frantically trying to keep it shut just a few seconds longer by using my own full body. Each crushing blow sent a jarring pain through my spine, giving me more than enough reason to keep shouting for them to stop.

One more charge and forcing wrench from the wedged stallion knocked me clean away from it. My back hit the far wall of light wood, shattering much of it to fall down the gap between the outer and inner walls of the house. My assailants were in. Nursing my neck, I held one hoof up to the first one bearing a nasty cut on her hoof, the one I'd jammed in.

Looking up from behind it, I saw them come to claim their prize. Noose, Lemon, and presumably their new stallion member of the gang.

“No, no! I’ll come! I’ll come, just don’t-”

Her hoof whipped across my face, dropping me to my side amongst a splitting and searing wash of pain in my cheek. Curling up, I felt another three or four stamps upon my ribs, clearly held back or they would have been pulverised. Noose was angered enough to hurt me, not frenzied enough to ruin The Master’s prize. But it drove all the fight from me, leaving me a groaning heap before them. Hissing through her teeth, Noose shook her patchwork mane and snarled. Her ganglife colleagues flanked her, the rough form of Lemon and the new and very *large* stallion.

“Ya gotta do anythin’ you can in here to survive. So if that means giving you up, runt, I’m happy! You thought we wouldn’t recognise you in the crowd? Trying to blend in, huh? Well I remember your fucking face!”

Even as I had tried to sit up again, she struck me once more, right across the jawline. I felt my head whiplash around and strike against the porcelain of the toilet. Stars spun, my vision turning hazy. I simply rolled onto my back, moaning. The blurry shape of Noose stood up more fully, before heaving and hawking a wad of spit onto my face.

“A damned *pegasus*. Wish I’d just beat you to death in the airport for what you brought on one of our gang. Well now you’re going back to him. Lemon! Get that rope, tie him up!”

Both my eyes were throbbing, still blackened from but a couple of days ago with Barb’s raiders. But squinting them open, I saw Noose toss a length of rope to Lemon, the same rope she used to tie me up in for fun, to make me miss shifts so that she could watch the results.

My body wouldn’t move to stand, but las I pushed my hoof against the wall to try and get some leverage, I felt it pass through.

My collision from her striking me had knocked a small hole on the wall. The rotten wood had splintered away.

Feeling the trundle of Lemon’s approach, I did all I knew I could. With a deep breath, I threw my whole weight into the wall itself, and crashed through the weak surface into the gap between the walls of the house.

Immediately falling, I felt the gap, far too thin to properly accommodate even a pony of my size, splinter and scrape at my sides. Thick cobwebs broke beneath me, coating my face and hooves in them. But the fragile wood was also slowing me down, ensuring I never simply tumbled to the ground floor and crushed myself from the height of the fall.

Not that it made it any easier.

A sudden impact marked the ground floor, void of any further injury. My head ached terribly, the close darkness and complete blindness not helping any. Only then did I realise the real horror.

The ground floor walls had been made of two layers of brickwork that were either side of me.

I was trapped.

My breathing accelerated, the gap was so thin I felt my sides being crushed in, unable to move forward or backwards due to the tightening width. I couldn’t pull myself upwards and the floor was beneath me. In complete darkness, covered in thick web, I could barely even struggle while my limbs burned, full of small splinters. My hind leg was wedged awkwardly backward at an angle that was already beginning to cramp. Above me, the curses of the gang

echoed downward, but I couldn't turn my head to see upward.

The thought of being stuck here, unable to escape, and slowly dying of starvation hit me. I'd be nothing but a lost soul, *nopony* would know what had happened to me! I'd just be a skeleton in a wall to scare somepony else in the far-off future...

I began simply struggling and stamping my hooves. The only movement I could, just to make some vain effort to feel like I hadn't consigned myself to a few days of a lingering death. Below me, I heard a crack. Fixating on it entirely, ignoring the shouts of the gang that they were dropping a rope if I would *prefer* to go with them, I kept slamming my little hooves on the dry flooring. It was wood! Maybe I could... I could...

I heard a creak, and took a sharp breath, this wasn't going to be good.

The floor splintered and shattered below me, drawing a long shriek as my sides once again ripped against the walls. I prayed my wings weren't damaged further, as I dropped another ten feet into darkness before striking concrete. Landing on my hooves before simply falling to the side, my hooves cradled my injured head before it slapped against the concrete I now lay on. Under my mane, I could feel the welt of my scar, red and angry as it ever had been. But I breathed in the rotten and trapped air like it was a saving grace. I had fallen into a full *room*.

"Oh, thank you..." I muttered to whatever luck had let me get out of there.

Finally, blinking, I let my eyes adjust to the dark down here. (I didn't dare use my PipBuck's light.) Small wooden pillars held up the ceiling but the rest of it was just like an old antique store. Everything from cabinets to tables and chairs were littered amongst packing crates and dressing boards. Massive cobwebs hung on the diagonals, off the pillars, or between the furniture. I could see two wooden staircases rising to differing doorways. Trotting up, I found one that seemed open, but far too heavy for me to push while injured.

Above me, dust dropped from the ceiling, dislodged by a rampant clatter of hooves on the floors above. They were coming down, and I didn't have the time to force any doors.

"Right, plenty of hiding spots, plenty..."

Dragging myself up, I staggered over to a thick collection of furniture. The door to the basement slammed open only just as I tugged away some of the larger webs and reluctantly forced myself into the sticky confines behind a musty old couch. Noose and her gang galloped down the stairway.

"We know you're in here! Better to come out and let me beat your head in than me getting angry looking for you and letting Barbell do his thing! I hear he *likes* little bucks. They squeal louder!"

I dreaded to think. But I simply huddled close. The sofa was buried beneath a few upturned tables and bore dozens of old bags stuffed with long lost possessions, so I simply prayed they considered it too thickly buried to be a hiding spot. As such, I just waited.

It took a lot of willpower, by my standards, to ignore that odd feeling of something creeping up my left hind leg. My skin *crawled*.

The sound of furniture being thrown and bags torn open reverberated around the basement. They moved nearer and further away in apparently random decisions to ransack the entire place. I heard Lemon holler upon pulling away something.

"SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!"

"What!? What is it? You got 'im?" Noose screamed over to him.

"NO!" Lemon sounded strung out. "Fucking *spider nest* just crawled from this bag! Just... FUCK!"

"Shut up, you pussy. An' keep looking."

"Pretty rich, that coming from *you*."

"I said shut up! It means coward. Not 'female,' you stupid lunk! Hey, runt! I said come out! You still hiding? Hoping? You got nothing to hope for, kid! Word's spreading about that bitch in the wastes killin' our gangers and all that. We know you always liked her! Ha! You've lost her, runt! She turned! One of us now! Never gonna go pork her now, are you? She's *one of us*! So just give up!"

Every shiver, every smash that neared me just bore a new wave of terror. I tried to blank her out. To not listen. She... she wasn't! I couldn't just stop and start believing that there was nothing worth fighting for! Heroes didn't fall like that!

"You'll learn... wasteland's fucked up worse in places out there than here... you'll learn..."

I wanted to move, to jump, as I felt whatever it was move up around my rump and over my cutie mark. Rapid, light touches, like many legs. I tried to shift a front hoof back to swat at it, or use my tail. But that only gave way to a rapid movement that skittered across my back. Biting my lip as hard as I dared, I whined into my hoof.

"Ere', there's a second door up there." That must have been the new pony, Barbell. His voice was richer than the other two. In fact it would have been almost oddly relaxing, if I hadn't already known his allegiance.

"So?"

"Just thinkin', maybe he went and ran off up it. Might not be here, little buck seemed in a rush."

"Shit, you're right. Go!"

Luck, it seemed, felt good in these times. The three of them darted off, rushing up the stairs. One of them seemed to hesitate, snorting and smashing something made of glass before they all departed. No sooner had the door shut than I immediately pushed and tugged myself free from behind the sofa. Rolling, I swatted and flailed at my hindquarters until I was sure nothing was on me. In the darkness, I saw something the size of somepony's hoof skitter off under the sofa again.

Then, I collapsed.

I had wanted to run upstairs, hide in a room till they went further, but the fear, adrenaline, and emotional pain just slammed down, driving me to simply fall on my side upon the floor. The dusty air here was giving my throat hell. My excursion to try and steal from a supply cart had gone so badly when they'd spotted me. I'd seen RadAway on it, something I desperately needed. Coughing fits were becoming more common. My spit had a metallic tang to it, while the pressure in my head and chest was growing. Even past my cold, I was definitely feeling the initial effects of radiation poisoning. Breathing lightly, holding my head and feeling the lump growing from my cheek, I simply did my best to keep believing.

There was *still* something out there... it *wasn't true*. There was more to life than slavery, she'd shown me that!

Opening my eyes, I almost jumped as I saw what had been broken on their retreat. An old dusty mirror, now in shards upon the floor. It showed everything that I now felt.

In one shard, I saw my PipBuck. But in another, the scar upon my forehead. A third held my eyes, a fourth the weltering rad-sores that began to swell on my muzzle as my deadline neared for death. Another held my cutie mark.

All separate, all meaning different things now.

Water was flowing.

From the waste tunnels in roaring cascades that broke upon the brickwork and let steam rise from the algae and sewage that it ate and dissolved in its path. The spray washed over the sides, flowing its bitter burning taste into the old sewer workshop.

It flowed from the ceiling, centuries of neglect leaving fractures and leaks to allow water to trickle and gush from corners and down the walls, pooling amongst the cobblestone. It soaked and destroyed the bottom layers of the growing pile of scrap paper into a mushy mess that stank and shifted.

But it also flowed from my eyes. Streaming and unending, it came from puffy injured eyes and clung to my face before dripping constantly upon the failures beneath my head. Tears fell onto lines of charcoal that were already obsolete and forgotten, my desperate efforts concentrating elsewhere on a page.

Another page was torn and thrown. Then another. And another. All began to lie in corners, all around me or upon the slowly dampening pile.

Lines... remember *lines*... they lead to *curves*... make *shapes* from the curves and it comes to life! It always worked that way! Why wasn't it working now? I had been awoken to draw by inspiration and love, given the soul of the artist by the emotions I felt and wanted to release upon paper rather than simply through all too common tears. But it was being pulled away from me, a skill lost. Had I not practised enough? I hadn't drawn properly in a little while. Had I been too lazy and not done as much as I should have?

Wiping the tears and wet spray from my damp coat over my face, I took up the charcoal and tried again. Draw just any normal pony, make it basic, make it simple!

The stick slid, gaining momentum. Yes... yes, yes! It flowed, her back and spinal shape. Then curve up into her neck... yes! A circle! Her head! I had her head! Two ears flicked over it, careful smooth triangles in *just* the right place. I even went back to the other end of her back, curving it around and down to her hind legs. I went over it a couple times, make it *just* right.

I sat back, wiping my brow with a hoof, breathing heavily with worry. Telling myself constantly how to draw, to not worry about what— yes, that was it! I saw her in many ways, how I felt, no matter how *stupid* it was, could be a part of it!

Now... now her face. I could see her face again. Determined and of goodwill, telling me through her eyes alone that everything would be fine. That she was still the good pony I had come to believe in and feel more than a little liking of after seeing. I was trapped in a stinking sewer under Fillydelphia, a million miles from any knowing home, while she was out saving Equestria. But I could still have faith to meet my own ends.

If I could... just... get her face right...

Gently, I began placing her muzzle in, using a cross across the circle I'd drawn to shape it all out. I could always erase that later! I just needed one drawing, one *little sketch* to prove I could still do this! I could still save her in my eyes, prove to myself she was good.

Muzzle... bring it out... a little line for the mouth for now. Back to her eyes... please let her eyes work, they would *make* it complete! Slowly... tentatively, I let two circles of charcoal form, shaped around her head... and... and...

A ridiculous wannabe of a pony stared back at me. The muzzle was at completely the wrong angle, her eyes not even shaped right in the perspective.

"No... *please!* Don't do this!"

My charcoal stick flew back down. I could fix this! Frantic, rushed fixes, add the proper mouth, I could work from its perspective instead! Add her mane, that was easy, right? But it covered her eyes. I tried redrawing them, again and again. The charcoal pressed harder each time, scraping and zigzagging across the paper in mad strokes born of utmost need and panic.

"Why can't I draw? Why can't I *draw!*"

I sat back, panting, looking at the mad mess of shapes and incredibly stupid-looking face that could have been drawn by a *foal* that looked back at me.

I had no words. Nothing but a wailing screech of sheer frustration and a welt of tears burst from me as I fell down on the journal, pressing the side of my face upon it and beating upon the hard cobblestone with my hoof. Savage coughing broke through, making my little skeleton-like body spasm and shake. Filled with anger at myself, the page was torn and ripped in half, tearing the perfectly finely drawn middle of her body down the centre, before they were thrown to the water.

Around it, the water just kept flowing. From the tunnels, the walls, and my eyes.

The shelves rattled as I hopped up and clambered all over them to reach my goal. Living as an outlaw in Fillydelphia, even for the short amount of time I had done, was proving to be a nightmare all unto itself. Everypony, from slave to slaver, could recognise me. Anypony might be a threat like Noose and her cronies had been. Merely finding enough food to see me by a few more hours had been an adventure unto itself.

My balance almost went, perched on the little ladder (Why ladders? We had *hooves!*) I felt my head spin and blur. The light panels above me seemed to burn like the sun, hurting my eyes and making my headache worse. But I kept searching.

I'd finally remembered that I'd dug into the container storage yard when I'd last been here and been seen by Slit. The moment I'd found a break in the rain, I'd galloped out to retrace my steps and enter through the hole she'd cut in the fence. One of these containers had to have something! Any RadAway would have been taken, but the ingredients might still be around! Weathervane could make some, he knew how!

The horror had struck my mind that I didn't remember what the fluid used to create it even looked like. I cursed my memory, along with my inability to read. The container I'd slunk into had been filled with row upon row of liquids and stored gels.

I had no idea what was what. I'd hoped that I might remember what it looked like, after fetching some for Weathervane in the crater before, but now I only realised they were like so many other things in the industrial cities of old Equestria. They were all standardised and brain-achingly similar to one another. In frustration, pushing my way around the shelves, I eventually just jumped off to land in the crowded mess that was the floor of the liquids container. Well, I only needed one RadAway to survive for *now*. The logical thing would be to take one of everything and let Weathervane figure it out! I could always come back for more once I knew.

Pausing, I heard somepony shift past the outside of the container. A heavy pallet was

being dragged behind them. Holding my breath, I simply prayed they didn't come inside this one. Gradually, after a moment of tension, the sound faded off. Assured that nopony was outside, I grabbed bag after bag of the gel-like fluids and stuffed them into my saddlebag. Grumbling, I found I had to take a lot out and store them in the many pockets of my fleece. My journal went underneath me in my belly pocket, various papers and plans that Protégé had given me of the Ministry were folded up and placed in my front leg pockets. The remaining pepper canister and a few scraps of old parchment found spots on my leg pockets too. Finally, gingerly, with the utmost respect, I lifted Twilight's visual memory orb out to very carefully store on the left of my torso. I had so many questions about that thing, mostly why such a personal item had still been in Aurora's office. Twilight had seemed to trust her to a certain extent as a colleague, but it hadn't seemed like a message anypony in power would want heard.

A mystery for another time, no doubt.

But it made enough space in the end that I could fit just about every sachet of the clear fluid in. Hopefully, it would be enough to give Weathervane a way to make things up with what ingredients he had left.

"Right, time to go, Murky. Just keep pushing."

Muttering to myself, feeling the mental and physical strain of being on the run, I took a slow breath. The rain could come back on any moment, with the storm lingering above for so long. I was hurt enough, limping and feeling my entire skull burn with rad-fever, without body burns from acidic rain to compete with too. I'd get out of here, get to Hearts and Hooves, and hide out in Weathervane's basement lab until he next came in.

It wasn't difficult to make my way out of the container area. The hole in the fence from Slit's pursuit was, of course, still there. I wrapped a piece of wafting cloth from the container around my head like a shawl. I'd taken to using such a tactic lately; griffon spotters were *everywhere*.

Before I even contemplated moving out of the container yard itself, I held myself low near the fence, watching the road that led between it and the industrial skyport Slit had chased me into. A few carts passed, mostly pulled by slaves. A column trudged by on the opposite side, whips cracking as some faltered on cracked hooves. Nothing massive, nothing that I couldn't wander with under my shawl. All the same, the sight of so many ponies being led to whatever form of work there was made even me in my battered state wince. Finally pushing myself through, I began to trot in the same direction as them, slowly working my way into the crush of sick and coughing ponies. I fitted right in with my own blood-spate coughs to—

"Get moving, worms!"

I was ducked between two ponies before my mind could even begin to *think*. Though all my illness, my medical condition, my injuries and even my crisis of faith, I felt it all overruled by an immediacy of terror that locked my muscles in place, giving me an awkward stumbling gait.

"You there! You! Three seconds to get up. One! Two! Three!"

A whip cracked, accompanied by the meaty slap of hard leather on flesh. A mare screamed out loud. She must have fallen. I heard him again.

"One! Two! Three!"

The scream came again... and again... and again... every time she failed to get up. I recognised the punishment all too clearly. Struck by overwhelming curiosity and worry, I

raised up my cowl, quinting out between the ponies I was travelling with.

The Master stood in the middle of the road, commanding the long line of slaves through the city. My eyes widened at the sight of him. He stood taller than that crazed hunch he'd once had, with a straighter neck, and outstretched legs telling of an authority he was *born* into now finally being handed to him. Around him, slaves cowered, obeying his every glance to look away or go on. I saw ponies with crippling injuries, burns, and festering infections cantering far faster than any hurt pony should be able to. The line went on for a long way. If this was for the Mall, he must have brought more in.

The same line I'd wandered into. Oh, this was bad.

I was seeing The Master in his real element at last. No longer just the overseer known for being harsh, he truly was his own *Master* now. It made sense why he was kept around, if this was the sort of brutal short term efficiency and result he could drive from ponies that Fillydelphia couldn't properly feed anyway. I thought of what Grizzly had said... that he had come from before Red Eye in Fillydelphia. What kind of life had he grown up with, to become this bastion of symbolic slavery?

Below him, the target of his attentions lay in a shivering heap, her back bleeding rapidly.

All the attention I might have had held to The Master was removed if but for a few seconds. In horror, saw that the mare that had been whipped was Sunny Days.

She was bucked from the ground a good four feet back into the line. A few bucks pulled her up as roughly as any slaver would. The fear on their faces was clear. If they didn't get her back on her feet, aggressive as it was, it would only be worse for her. But my once-saviour was in a very poor way. Even below the fresh blood, I could see long welts that would scar by the night's end. The Master's whip skills were a whole new world beyond what I'd ever seen before.

I'd felt them once. Never again... *never again*.

"Don't you all go get ideas of lazing off! You've got work to do, if we don't get another twenty feet today in the mines, you're *all* losing food rations."

The Master's whip slapped against the ground, sending pebbles pinging in every direction. One of them struck amidst the ponies I hid behind, giving me reason to squeak and drop back down.

"Master! Master!"

A galloping pony came up the road. I heard his sharp clip-clop above the low rumble of three dozen ponies in the column. Just keep moving, wait your chance, don't make eye contact with him. I was sweating, and breathing quickly.

"What is it?"

The galloping stopped. I poked my head around the side, close to the ground, to see that scrawny assistant, burdened down in scrolls and messenger bags. He bowed before The Master, before offering one scroll up.

"Master Grindstone reports that they may have discovered some of the blueprints for Aurora Star's projection orbs and—"

"This matters to me, how?" The Master glowered at the messenger. "Grindstone can chase side projects from his home in that Ministry all he wants."

"Well... you... you see, Master. In those blueprints there was a note. It mentioned something that he... he wants to tell all of you. He's called a meeting, later on tomorrow at the Ministry of Arcane Science. He... um... *requests* that you attend."

I saw The Master grin. "Good choice of wording to replace his message with, you're

learning. I'll speak with the ass later. For now, I want you to go back to the Mall. Keep those slaves working, the repairs aren't done nearly as fast as I'd like. Cancel the food supply for today. They'll survive till it's done, but it'll give them the shake up they need to work *faster*."

My heart leapt into my mouth. Glimmer, Brimstone, and Coral were still there... I hadn't seen them in the column. If the food was being cut out... oh no...

"In fact, tell the biggest slaver to start running the competition, I know he enjoys that. That'll get some unwarranted shifts out of 'em... heh."

"Y-yes, Master! Right away, Master!"

He didn't overstay his welcome, galloping off, despite his own tiredness. Biting my lip in worry, I looked back to The Master, shivering and trying to remain as still and quiet as I could. We were headed away from the Hospital, but I just needed to get to the other side of the road and use the mass of supply yards behind the skyport for cover. I could lose even a griffon in there. Up ahead I could see the long hill that moved down to the skyport, the one leading to that workshop I'd ran to before Barb caught me. If I could just get near it...

"Keep the pace up!" His voice bellowed forth, leading me to jump at the command and start cantering. I'd reacted before any of them...

That wasn't a very good sign...

But we advanced all the quicker. So much so, I hoped that we might pass right by him and turn a corner. The moment he couldn't see me, I'd *go*.

Something held me back from going all-out though. Just ahead of me through the crush, I could see Sunny pushing herself in the travel line with a pained look. Just a few words to let her know we were coming for her eventually, I had to try!

"Sunny!" I hissed, whispering as loudly as I dared. The Master was casting his eyes over the line. *"Sunny!"*

I saw her ear twitch. I pressed closer.

"Sunny... it's me. *Murky*."

Now wandering right beside her, almost using her for cover from The Master's sightline, I tapped her side to get her attention.

"M-Murk?" Her dry voice was breathless, like somepony talking in their sleep.

Pushing my shawl away slightly, I nodded lightly. Her pupils seemed to just shake as she saw me, somewhat disbelieving, and contracted until they were little more than just dots.

"Y... you have t-to... run. Stay away..." She gasped, and I recognised the signs of her being dehydrated.

"I'm on the run, he's after me, I know. But... but I had to let you know. We're *going* to get out. Me and a few others, my friends you saw, we're putting together a plan. Just hold on in there, we won't leave without you."

"He's a *monster*, Murky..."

"I know, but we will be coming for you! I pro—"

"Halt right there! All of you!"

The column juddered to a stop so quickly I ran into the rump of the mare in front of me. Silence fell. Some ponies looked over toward The Master. I joined them, peering around Sunny to see what he was doing.

"Now, something isn't right here. Whoever you are that slipped in, you think that a born slaver wouldn't spot a discrepancy in his stock? Somepony who **doesn't belong**?"

Pain flared on my forehead, that throbbing warning. My loose tooth quaked and stung. My cutie mark itched. Every sign of slavery and reminder in my mindset rang the warning

bells as the fear set in. Looking to every direction, there was at least twenty feet from any cover on either side, either the skyport or back to the container yard. Any attempt to gallop away would be noticed.

Behind me, The Master shoved into the column, throwing ponies out left and right, storming his way through it and pulling back shawls or staring into eyes deeply. Had he been *counting* his slaves or something? Oh this was bad... very, very bad. The cries of injured ponies being stallion-handled so roughly were just getting closer as he worked his way up. My covers may have hid me from his general perception, but he'd spot my size the moment he got close enough.

"Listen, Sunny, please. Just keep it together. Just hang in there..."

Unity's own advice to me days ago was all that rung to mind. The sting of guilt and fear as I began to feel the weight of impossibility to rescue her too only slammed home again and again. Oh... Unity...

"Feels like there's no escaping him..." Sunny's voice was strained.

"There *is*. Just find something or somepony to believe in. I did, I found—"

I stalled, my heart in my throat. Had I *really* anymore? Did I truly believe I could do this? It all felt so impossible now, we could plan and talk about it, but what had we really *done* yet? What if there truly wasn't a way out?

"Aha... up here, eh?"

I spun, keeping my shawl tightly over my face. The Master was barging his way through, that immense bulk towering over all the rest as he stomped directly toward me. With one horrible moment he stopped dead about twenty feet away down the column.

His eyes were fixed directly on mine.

Then he grinned.

I began to back away; to move as far as I could before the commands came.

"I'm sorry, Sunny..."

The Master advanced, stomping slowly.

"Knew I'd recognise my own eyes... **like father...**"

"I'm *so* sorry, Sunny... I didn't mean this for you..."

"...like son!"

"I'M SORRY!"

I broke off the moment The Master moved directly for me. Ducking beneath the other slaves, I galloped down the embankment toward the skyport.

"Get him! Everypony! Bring the born slave home!"

To my absolute horror, the thundering sound that was dozens of hooves galloping quickly built. A huge mass of ponies, driven by an indomitable will and terror of refusing an order, turned and commenced a grand charge down the slope after me like a wartime attack formation. Simply screaming, I pushed my hooves harder and harder, dashing over the broken metal and pipes that littered the edges of the runway. Turning my head back, my shawl flying off from the wind, I wasn't sure what horrified me more.

That The Master was leading the charge by some distance and still grinning.

Or the fact that Sunny was with them. I hoped with all my heart she was simply protecting herself by not being the one to refuse.

Already, exhaustion was kicking in. I was no sprinter, a lifetime of day long activities and toils had built a slow burn stamina into me (and even *that* was lower than most ponies) rather than the ability to quickly explode and run hell for leather. The sound only got

louder, the swarm of slaves closing in. Already, faster ponies at the flanks were beginning to arc ahead, as though seeking to enclose me entirely. The ground itself shook as they began to near, the thick thuds of The Master's hooves always audible over it all. I heard the clank of chains around his neck, the jingle of a collar dragging. There was nowhere to go! Any cover was *way* too far away!

I had... I had nothing... *literally nothing!*

My eyes misted up, finding it hard to see. I began to stumble, fall and trip over rocks and slippery sections of mud. Going around behind the runway, still littered with old sky chariots lashed to cracking bones, I finally collapsed. A harsh metal clang impacted on my side against the grapplegun.

Taking the first breath I had since I ran, I saw that I'd landed on a drain cover to wash rainwater from the runway. They lined both sides all the way down!

I'd already been trapped in a small hole once today. If this went wrong...

"That's it, Number Seven! You know it's worthless trying, you'll always be mine in the end."

I glared up, The Master had stopped, bringing the clatter of the slaves to circle around. I saw Sunny looking conflicted and pale. Only now I noticed that her back leg was bleeding terribly. Then, The Master began to trot forward.

"You've led me a merry chase, slave. Don't think you won't pay for that insult. You know there's nowhere for you to go. I *know* about your little hero, not anymore is she? You know the truth, just accept it. A slave is all you've ever been, it's all you ever will be! She didn't save you, and now you're seeing the reason why!"

Trying not to listen, I slowly let my hooves rest on the hinge of the drain cover. I'd only get one quick chance at this. He was *wrong*. One of the few things I could genuinely hear from his mouth and know in my heart was that he was *wrong!* Why couldn't ponies just see that she was right? That to be like her could help us! Why did they have to make up lies? *Heroes didn't do that!*

"Don't even think of pulling that!"

My hoof froze. Of *course* he'd spot it, he wasn't stupid! But I still tried to keep my muscles tensed... no, more than tensed. I had to do this! I couldn't get caught now! I... I had to escape, for Unity, for Sunny. To somehow find a way to prove to everypony that Littlepip was still worth believing in! I *couldn't get caught now!*

I pulled.

The drain cover lifted. The five seconds it took to pull it, to watch him break forward and bellow an order, to try and throw myself down, it felt like five minutes of constant worry and tension. Head first, I simply dived, the dark hole barely fitting my body before—

Stopping.

My back leg jarred in pain, something catching it. Crying out at the shock and harsh pull upon it, I twisted, but being unable to turn my head far enough in the thin pipe. Below me was nothing but a black void and the sound of rushing water. I had stopped...

He had grabbed my hind leg, pressing it under his hoof against the floor.

"You don't get away, Number Seven! Not this time!"

With crushing power, I felt my leg being dragged. The rainwater still draining in sloshed past my face and body, making it tough to breathe, the more I came out, the more it washed into my eyes and mouth, stinging and hissing. I was being dragged free, bit by bit. I couldn't even struggle, the hole was too small. I was terrified that if I did fall I would simply get

stuck upside down in a small pipe underground, but if I didn't...

"I got him! I got him for you!"

Sunny? I felt her bite my tail, pushing in to help pull me out, but knocking the others aside. Even The Master's hoof seemed to lessen off, just enough that my weight and a careful release from her mouth on my tail dropped me into the darkness.

In those scant half seconds before my descent, I only heard the rage filled roar of The Master.

Thank you, Sunny. You did it again for me. I wasn't without heroes around me in here after all. I hoped dearly that she wasn't punished for it, but I knew The Master all too well.

But there was little time to think on anything, as my life became nothing more than a painful scraping hell, falling vertically in a space that any normal sized pony would have been jammed in instantly. My skull bounced, my legs grazed, and my torso thudded from side to side. I felt it all closing in, becoming a thinner pipe as it went down. Panic set in, that this might grow too thin and I'd drown upside down, before finally, mercifully, I was thrown from it, falling blind.

In pitch darkness, I hit water. I kicked out, thrashing, my inability to swim at all leading me to simply flail. I hadn't gotten a breath in, there *was* no surface. I could only feel the pipe on all sides of me.

A current picked me up, swirling me onward and away. Over and over, tumbling, and feeling my sick lungs burn with the effort of holding my breath. My whole body juddered, lack of oxygen making me lose all sense of up and down as I was thrown this way and that by the current. A steady roar began to drift to my ears through the darkness, an accelerating speed before the sudden shock of being thrown free.

Above water, in the air, I tumbled. I tried to grab what breaths I could. The waterfall threw me out and forced me down. A hard wet slap across my belly dragging me underwater once again, and forcing the air from my lungs. A mouthful of water gulped down my throat, kicking off a coughing fit. Sucking down more and more water, drowning on the spot. I felt myself being spun over and over, unable to force my way up. I kicked out, throwing every effort to simply save my life. Yes, I was moving, I was...

...pushing my way to the bottom.

Disorientation was kicking in bad. My head throbbed, loss of consciousness beginning to become a very real danger. I pushed off the ground, feeling the force of the waterfall crushing down upon my head above. Moaning and fighting the urge to take one breath, I let it carry me further along before then trying again. I fought up... up... all four limbs wildly surging in the filthy water. My saddlebag dragged me down, the weight of my fleece soaking it all up making it hard to move. My lungs were empty, filled with dead air, my throat in agony as I held a full radiation-driven fever fit at bay to not take in more water. I considered dropping my saddlebag or my fleece, but I didn't have the time to even do that. I just kept kicking and kicking and—

The surface! I broke it and fell down again, lacking the ability to tread water. Again and again I broke the water, gulping air and feeling my entire inside body ache from the water intake. My eyes adjusted quickly; I could see bricks nearby! A ledge!

Fighting the current, my muscles heavy and sore, I kept pushing. Underwater, on the surface, underwater again, again, and again, a pathetic struggle against drowning until I finally felt the cold wet brick under my hooves. Surprising myself, the adrenaline and terror forced me to push myself up and roll onto it, finally out.

Retching, spinning onto my hooves, I threw up more water than I thought possible. Sucking air in between the convulsions, I felt my eyes stinging from the the water, and the tingle all over my body from the shivering fever that now wracked me. Finally, restlessly, I fell to my side, pausing only to draw out my items to let them dry on the higher brickwork. I could see a door, and some sort of workshop, but that could wait.

That was too close... too close... he had almost got me that time. If it hadn't been for Sunny...

All the worries... lies... guilt... it all just faded. I could do nothing but just concentrate on breathing.

To concentrate on not believing those same four words that echoed again and again...

She didn't save you.

But I could still save *her*.

So many ponies not believing in her, readily insulting her with all these *lies* on the radio! I could... I could show them! I'd draw her good, draw her heroic, and show them all how good she was!

I couldn't.

Every drawing, every sketch, rough draft and vague attempt turned to nothing but a pitiful mess. It never looked right! I'd tried everything I knew how. *Everything*. I must have used up a whole quarter of the thick journal, ripping page after page out to throw them across the room. I'd tried the walls, drawing over damp cobblestone, surrounding me in the failed attempts that stared back with their unreal proportions, messy outlines, and mismatched scales. None of them looked right.

The artist's nightmare. My mane had collapsed around my head in the damp environment, still soaking from dragging myself out of the water earlier.

I was livid. Terrified and in anguish of the mind, frenziedly tearing the charcoal across the paper so hard it sometimes tore. My shaky tooth ached, my entire face bulged from Noose's strike and made the very act of drawing hurt. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't... *I couldn't!*

It all came to one horrid lashing of my hooves in an explosion of feelings that I simply couldn't comprehend. The charcoal stick went flying as I simply sat and screamed at the blank pages, at why this had to happen to me. Why something as simple as a legend to believe in could be torn away. Everything felt conflicted. I wanted to believe, but everypony kept telling me otherwise. I wanted to be the one strong pony who didn't lose hope, who denied it all and believed that the truth would emerge later. But I couldn't deny that it had taken grip of me too.

The Stable Dweller had fallen to the wasteland like so many had before.

Simply sitting still, I closed my eyes, trying to remember her. To remember that look on her face as she defied Red Eye, and climbed from the Pit.

I could still see it, still believe in that memory. But *why couldn't I draw it?* My body began shaking, building with the frustration and sheer self anger at my inability to save her memories, back to the hero I once thought I knew. To fall in love with a *legend* and then have it shattered... it was just so... so...

"UNFAIR!"

Screeching the word, I picked up the journal, hurling it across the room to clatter against

the wall. It bounced, rolling on the spine back within reach. Simply furious, feeling the red mist of a cruel life and corrupting wasteland fall across my belief in heroes, I picked it up. If they weren't true then *nothing* was! What was life without ponies who could be better?

I carried it outside the workshop, near the frothing waterline that I'd come down. If I'd lost my ability to draw, then what was the point of owning this thing that would only serve to remind me of a lost hero? I'd just be rid of it. Lifting the journal, I drew back my front legs and... and...

Slowly, my hooves descended, and I hugged it to my chest. I couldn't bring myself to do it, to lose it all forever. As the anger faded, I realised that I never had really wanted to do it at all.

"Why won't you let me draw you?" I sniffled and spoke quietly, opening it to flick through them. "What's wrong?"

The pictures offered no response. Eventually reaching the latest, scrawled and pitiful attempt, I just scowled and yelled at nothing in particular, just from sheer frustration. Eventually, the hardship and tiredness of my body caught up to me, twisting the anger and bile in a hot fevered episode of retching and clutching my stomach. Blood speckled from my mouth, landing across the drawing. I just couldn't stop trying to fight some dreaded realisation that perhaps I was just a dying slave in Fillydelphia, desperately trying to end his life with some sort of hope by believing a lie.

Shivering, tightly hugging myself, I slowly drew my head up and pulled my mane from my eyes. Above me, a noise had ceased, the slow thudding of the rain above ground had eased off. It was time to move. I needed to get to Weathervane and have my ingredients mixed up into RadAway. Moving slowly, carefully, I simply packed and left, leaving all the ruined paper to slowly mould and dissolve behind me forever.

Keep moving... just keep moving and believing. They were wrong, even if I was worried... they were *wrong*. I'd show them all someday. I would.

Flowerpot greeted me in his usual fashion. The lack of the oncoming tirade of cursing to shut him up gave rise to the thought that Weathervane wasn't down here at the moment. As such, I let myself in, the radiation of the trip into the basement had already made my chest feel swollen and painful. Flowerpot's howling screams and slams on the reinforced door only made my head hurt worse.

His lab was much barer than I had last seen it. Presumably Weathervane had to have used his supplies to aid ponies from the Mall. I searched in vain for any RadAway or even RadPurge, but none were kept down here any longer. Just a mass of beakers and glasses filled with liquids I didn't dare touch. The silver magic orb was still sat upon the research table, sparkling and gently glowing with barely contained medical power. If only it could have healed me...

My legs were weakening. I'd had to gallop twice on the way over to avoid groups of ponies who'd heard me and come to investigate. They hadn't spotted me, but it'd been terrifying enough. As such, I simply pulled myself onto the main stretcher and lay down on my side, wheezing hard on an enclosed throat. Still dripping wet, I felt the blanket soak under me and drip off the sides onto the vinyl flooring.

My eyes spotted the photoframe of Sundial and his father on Weathervane's desk. I tried

to just focus on that, on better times. He looked so happy, innocent under that overgrown blonde mane, a lot like Caduceus' had been, only bushier, and clean. It was enough to make me want to forget everything. Forget I was sick and dying in slave labour two hundred years into his future amidst a ruined damn *wasteland*. Why couldn't I have had his life?

My eyes felt heavy, the dizziness kicking in even worse. Even as I felt my exhaustion and injuries catching up, I just kept looking at him. At least for now I could believe in his fun times and pretend that when I woke up, I'd be just awakening from this whole nightmare once and for all.

Instead, I had a sharp pain in my front left leg to startle me away from sleep.

Colour and light flashed back to me so quickly I actually jerked and choked on a bit of saliva that went down the wrong way. Firm hooves kept me pinned down.

"Fucking calm it! Stay down!" The raspy tone was recognisable, oddly comforting and expected by now. I took a deep breath, before settling down and raising my leg.

"Had to put you on intravenous RadAway drip from that stuff you brought in, it'll do more for you than just ingesting the drinkable version, but it won't be as comfortable. You needed the rest, so just take it. Stay lying there till the drip's done. Now roll over and let me get a look at those wings."

Wiping the sweat of fear from my brow, I nodded, lethargically pulling myself onto my front. The drip feed was injected into my leg all right, giving an uncomfortably painful swelling in my veins as the liquid passed into me. Weathervane trotted around to where I could see him. The doctor looked haggard, no doubt run off his hooves. Rubbing my eyes, I blinked and focused on him.

"T-thank you... for before and... and for now." I wasn't sure what else to bring up. Really, I still felt empty and rotten at my failed drawing attempts.

"In the job description when I signed on to that Ministry in the first place, kid. You've done me good bringing that stuff though, and that swamp donkey in the stores told me they had none of it fucking left either. I'll go crack some heads up their own arses later about it. Now, how are you coping?"

I sniffed. "N-not well. I can barely get food, they keep it so locked up! Every slave wants me, The Master almost caught me, I lost a friend, and the high ranking slavers got me involved in some big game of theirs now. I can't do this! I can't live like a rat in a sewer from day to day, perpetually running away!"

One of my wings was painfully yanked out. Squeaking loudly, I looked around to see Weathervane moving each feather in turn, swivelling it in the base joint. The wing was dead, I couldn't do anything with its movement. That said, it didn't hurt as much as it once might have.

"Well, for all that activity, these have settled the atrophied muscles pretty damn well."

He quickly jerked it to one side, making me yell. I shot him a harsh glance.

"Apparently not completely yet. Well, this sort of shitty injury so early will take a lot of effort to heal up. That bastard must have really done a number on you. Speaking of, you aren't the only winged one I've treated recently..."

I felt confused for a second. Another pegasus? The thought quickly settled, as I realised who he meant.

"Ragini?"

"That's her. Those fucknuggets in the Mall didn't mess around. I could repair the damage, similar to yours. But, I'm sorry to say she'll never fly again. Too much trauma in too short a

time, plus one of the fuckers actually struck her wing base and tore it apart so badly the only thing connecting it to her body was her skin.”

I felt my torso shiver. Ragini was a foul creature who clearly hated me, but anyone with wings could relate to that sort of hurt. I certainly could. The feeling of being held down and my wing stretched over a cold anvil still was far too icy and real for comfort.

I spent the next half hour under Weathervane’s care; telling him, often through tears, about what had happened to me and just letting it all out. The doctor didn’t often seem to care, but he at least listened. He gave me something that made me throw up again and again, ejecting dull water into a pan and making my lungs feel a little clearer. An ointment-smothered cloth was rubbed against my bruises, taking the edge off the injury. To my surprise, he even permitted me a small healing potion to keep my ribs from bruising over.

Eventually, I found myself explaining about Unity. That caught his attention more.

“Mm, well, I can certainly relate there, kid. Sending Sundial off to that Stable was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. Watching him go and knowing that it was the last time. It’s not easy, but at least you got to say goodbye.”

The double impact of discussing Unity and hearing him referring to Sundial hit me hard. I wanted to tell him how I’d not given up on her yet, but I simply couldn’t find it in myself to continue that line of questioning. Instead, I just sighed and lay down, finding *any* way to change the subject from a potentially dangerous one about his son.

“Doctor... have... have you ever believed in somepony really *really* strongly... and then just had it taken away from you?”

The ghoul had been moving back to his desk to wait out my drip feed. But he stopped, turning his head and lowering his eyes.

“You heard that one, huh?” His voice was, for once, oddly soft and caring. I simply nodded.

Sighing, Weathervane turned and sat in his chair.

“Yes, you could say that. Most ponies like me could. Two hundred fucking years and you’ll see a lot of ponies rise and fall, see the wasteland corrupt them or force them to do things that no good pony would ever dare. But that’s not the ones I mean, for me it came *long* before.”

His horn lit, dragging a cabinet open and pulling from it an old rotted piece of paper on a wooden backboard, bearing a pink ribbon. I couldn’t read any of it, but I saw the symbol of three butterflies emblazoned upon it.

“My certificate to become one of the leads at the Fillydelphia Ministry of Peace. Signed by one of them. Means a lot, to go up and shake the hoof of somepony who looks just as nervous, just as real as anypony you’ll ever meet. To see a hero face to face and hear them thank you for what you’ve done. To see two of her friends, two other heroes of Equestria, waiting in the background and attending the ceremony. Makes you really start to think you can make a difference if you just keep believing in them. Not just those three either...”

His milky eyes seemed to waver in their sockets, before he blinked and reasserted them.

“Six times, even. Six ponies, who told us they would save us all and stop the war. Not necessarily win, just *stop*. Every single day, as I treated pegasi who’d had their wings torn off or eyes shattered under cracking visors, I thought of them. Every time I pulled closed the zip on one more lost young soul, I thought of them. *Every. Fucking. Time*, that I had to go to the parents and explain to them why I couldn’t save their *child*, I thought of those six. Trusted them, believed in them. We had faith in the medical units, we all did. Fluttershy

was, at least from what I saw, the most determined of them all to do better. You know, one day she brought us into this hall in Canterlot's Ministry of Peace hub, stood up and told such a speech that if anypony who cared today heard it... it'd change their entire fucking life. About how we had to do *better*. To be the good ponies in a world turning bad. We believed it. We strived for years believing it, taking comfort in that they were always doing the right thing."

Weathervane turned, looking at the certificate for a long time. Before, without warning, he simply hurled it across the room to clatter into the darkness.

"Bunch of piss damned nonsense. In the end, one of them turned our lives into a non-stop worry over who was watching. One built even *more* weapons. One banned books and learning from our schools if they didn't fit the 'image' they wanted. One did near enough fucking *nothing*. Even Twilight Sparkle got involved in some serious shit nopony wanted to be a part of. When my colleagues and I got calls to rush out and help somepony with 'unidentified alterations' at the Arcane Ministry then told to keep quiet about the shit that we saw, that was bad enough. But there were always rumours, stuff to make you wanna go feral to just forget it. But Fluttershy..."

He stopped, as though realising something he was about to say. Then he just shook his head and inclined a hoof to the silver orb, the healing megaspell we'd recovered from the crater.

"I helped work on the spells to amplify magic for healing. We all knew it could be used for other things. Let's just say, even if I wasn't one of the core team and even if I'm not sure who exactly created the megaspells, I know my own projects when I see them."

The ghoul glanced in the mirror.

"And I saw it pretty fucking well. Point is, kid, legends don't last. They're only legendary for the time it takes for people to see the shit that comes with being that important. We all had to endure the downfall of six great ponies, ones I'd watched save my world numerous times before. If you want my advice, put the girl out your mind, son. It'll only come back again and again to clamp down on your ass until it drives you insane. Learn to let go, believe in what you have around you."

His magic pulled the drip from my leg. I hadn't even noticed it finished, so the sudden stinging made me squeak. Wandering over, Weathervane wrapped the bleeding hole in gauze.

"I've seen it enough times in these wastes. Take it from somepony who's seen a dozen bright sparks turn into bastards, a hundred believers become ruined fucking shells. If you're proven right about believing in her, then it happens, but don't hold hope for the impossible. You're trying for enough insane shit with your life as it is."

"But I—"

"Murk."

His steely gaze met mine as I twisted painfully off the stretcher. My complaint was lost in my throat.

"Six of the greatest mares in Equestrian history, ones who saved the world more than once... they fell, made mistakes, became what they weren't. If they couldn't maintain what they were, what hope does one little mare from a Stable stand? Legends have to end eventually. Take comfort in what she gave you, no more. Rely on those still with you. Now, speaking of them, there are ponies close to you who need your presence."

"H-huh?"

"Your friend, Glimmerlight. She asked if I could send you to her at the Mall if I ever saw

you. Shackles has them all camping outside till it's repaired, so you should be able to get in to her no problem."

"The Master said he would be seeing Grindstone or something..."

"Even better. I think it's about your plan. I imagine you'll want to see her anyway."

Yes! I really did. *She* would know what to say to help me! Glimmerlight always knew the best things to keep us all optimistic and happy, even if I'd likely have to be embarrassed to make it happen. That at least brought a small surge of hope to me.

"I'll... I'll go right now! Before the rain starts!"

Weathervane nodded gently. Wandering into the corner, I saw him lift the certificate and unbend the crease. The pink ribbon had fallen off.

"Harmony fell... Harmony failed. The faith of an entire *realm* destroyed. Don't make the same mistake we did by staking everything on idols, Murk. I don't want to see that pain hit you hard if it turns out to be true in the same way it did for me. Even now I feel it at the back of my mind, making me angrier than I used to be, more... feral. An animal inside trying to make me remember it all and fall into the darkness, to get angry enough that I'll just stop caring about anything and become one of *them*."

I didn't move. It was the first time I'd ever heard him talk of any real danger of falling to the feral mindset. I just bit my lip, unsure what to say. The way he spoke, it was like even just one more horrid event or truth could drive him over that edge. That caring and sticking to his goals was all that kept him going these days. I couldn't ever tell him. It hurt, but I couldn't let him know. It would break him.

"Now get the hell out of here, much less radiation in the lab but that doesn't mean you should stay here any longer than you should with that nap earlier. And you don't want Shackles coming back to the Mall on you."

I was about to leave, but one thing came to my mind, making me turn back and start digging in my pockets. Weathervane, sat amongst his picture frames, almost looked angry at my insistence to stay. But I kept digging, before I brought out the Twilight orb, placing it upon its stand. The ghoul's eyes widened as the sparkling illuminations forming in the air intertwined and shifted together into star shapes, and projected the form of one of the ponies he had once believed in.

"I don't know who you are or where you found this, nor how long has passed since I recorded it. Aurora Star has promised that they do not break easily, so this could be as far as I might imagine into the future. So please, allow me to introduce myself..."

I backed away as I saw the old father stand and lower his head a little in respect. I left him to the message, praying that it might do something, *anything* to help him find some way to push back the fall into a feral a little more...

Around the Mall lay a hasty mesh fence and shanty town of tents and old shacks. Apparently, everypony was living out here now that the inside was under repairs to prevent entire floors from collapsing or ensure better security. I could see work teams on the roof edges, hoisting up materials via shackled groups on the ground pulling as beasts of burden. Others dragged slates of rubble out the front doors. Many others simply lay under flimsy cover, shivering and sniffing after the drenching they no doubt had to endure. They had wrapped themselves in anything they could to stave off the burning rain. The guards

observed the new perimeter, observing from quick built towers above the slave grounds. The new slave camp seemed to extend right around the Mall.

But the Mall itself... it had already changed. From the dull yet grand scale of concrete and sheet metal, it had now been repaired and rebuilt using all a manner of rusted metals that now covered the holes. Multiple layers of pipes formed barriers to the scaffold walks that ran around the entire building, topped with mesh as a crude roof. Pits had been dug in the earth surrounding it, covered over with corrugated steel and weighed down by thick slabs of rock. I could hear the cries of those who had been left in them. Solitary confinement, I guessed. From many of the holes in the Mall, red ash belched forth from incinerators, and I dreaded to think why The Master needed *those*. I hadn't really thought about how much the Mall had begun to mean something to me as a better place under Protégé, with its shelter and more regular food. But now to see it becoming the same red hell of steel, pipe, ash, and chainlink fencing as the rest of Fillydelphia made the city feel all the more cramped than it already was.

It quickly became clear to me, viewing from a nearby second floor of a building, that The Master had brought his own hidden stock out to join the Mall. There were far more slaves here than had survived the riots. At least it afforded me better cover. It wasn't a difficult matter to get in, now I had my battle saddle's grappling hook.

Glimmerlight wasn't hard to spot in such a slave containment, sitting towards a corner of the enclosed area. I could see two tents, one large beside her and the other much smaller, set up just beside it where she now rested, fiddling with something in her hooves. Hobbling for all I was worth through the stodgy remains of the Mall's decorative garden, I moved toward her.

The huge cheer, however, grabbed my attention.

Off toward the Mall, closer to the entrance, there was a large congregation of slaves and slavers. The cheer had been preceded by a sharp *tunk* of something striking a wooden surface hard. I noticed it was only the slavers whooping. What was going on over there?

I saw The Master's assistant, that wiry pony. A group of burly earth pony slavers had many of the slaves lined up beside him near a small table. The slaver sitting beside it in tattered green barding was grinning like a lunatic. A rather exhausted looking earth pony slave wandered away from him, dejected.

"Who's *next*?" His voice rattled out, loud and tinged with malicious glee. The slaves seemed to look at one another, before one of them gulped and moved forward to sit opposite the slaver. Oh Goddesses, please tell me the guards hadn't gotten a taste for Six Shooter Surprise! With a thump, I saw him rest one hoof on the table to...

...hoof wrestle?

"Well, all right then..." I muttered softly, feeling a sense of relief.

As far as slavers went, that seemed fairly benign, which of course only gave rise to me feeling like I'd missed something here. I continued toward Glimmerlight, aiming to duck into the tent and hide from them as soon as I could.

My friend was sat alone, her initiate robes pulled close. Her head wasn't up as I approached, instead it just hung low, toying with a clear little sphere between her hooves. Beside her, hooked to an old sign was an odd contraption made out of some rubber hose, rusted piping and what seemed to be a few layers of cloth. Water still dripped into a small mug below it. Had Glimmer managed to rig up something to purify the rain of its acid? She still didn't seem too happy though, occasionally lifting the sphere before sighing and letting

it drop again. Even from here, I could hear her stomach growling and see the weary look of a pony been thrown through the grind far too many times in too short a period.

"Hey, sis?" I used our little shared acknowledgement, feeling a surge of delight when she sharply looked up and smiled at me approaching. It didn't take long for me to rush forward into her embrace, before she pulled me inside the tent to hide. Holding me by the shoulders, her tired face lit up a little as she glanced me over.

"A grapplegun and a disguise. You really are coming into your own, Murky. It's such a relief to know you're all right. You know I don't like to act all... well, nervous, but I've been worried sick! I heard they were hunting you. Hell, even when I saw you fall in the Mall I swear my heart stopped. I didn't even know you'd gone up to fight Barb with Protégé."

She hesitated, before kissing me on the forehead.

"I'm so proud of you, taking him out probably saved all our lives."

I flushed a little, but gladly accepted the happiness in knowing that merely visiting her from my outlaw status was something to help cheer her up too. But the more I looked at her, the more it began to settle in. Her stomach was drawn, her limbs thin, and small flecks around her lips betrayed a lack of proper sustenance and aid. After a moment, I could see she was clearly thinking the same about me.

Somehow, it made us both chuckle and lie together once again. Just having her here, knowing that for these few minutes we could be reassured the other was, broadly, fine, made things seem a little better. We spent a little time talking, letting me get out a lot of what I wouldn't dare tell Weathervane or feel he'd understand. I told her about Unity and The Master. About Sunny and my desperate attempts to survive. Glimmerlight seemed interested in Unity being unable to remember, suggesting if it was anything like her own problems. But I shook my head, Unity didn't seem to know those spells.

Something wasn't right with Glimmer's voice as she talked, though. It lacked that spark the moment we crossed onto the issue of memory. Where were the embarrassing jokes? The old stories of rampant casual pleasure? Shifting around, I tried to force a little assertiveness into me, I couldn't let friendship be a one way thing here. I watched her sit back, toying with that orb again in her hooves and occasionally staring at it, biting her lip as though fighting some temptation.

Then it struck me, something that in such a rush and having Unity to talk to about it had slowly lessened for me. She hadn't had anypony to really talk about losing Caduceus with yet...

"Sis? I... I'm sorry about—"

She interrupted me, her eyes not leaving the orb.

"I know, I know. I've just been trying to think on it, well, a little peripherally. I don't think I'm ready to really talk about it yet. Trying to avoid the orbs."

I just nodded slowly, feeling a little upset that I'd asked something she didn't want to discuss. Instead, I heard her sigh and look across to me.

"There's a bit of a giant elephant in the room here, Murky. You... you heard the radio?"

Gradually, she began to catch my eye and clearly see the sadness within. I nodded, clutching my belly, feeling both the journal and my Littlepip Statuette in their pockets.

"It's not the end of you believing in her, y'know? Like the DJ said, they still don't know quite what happened."

Sighing, I lowered my head onto my front hooves and nodded. If I could get through this without crying, I'd be happy.

"I know, but nopony else does. They keep saying that she's turned bad! That the wasteland got to her and really messed her up, and that she slaughtered an entire settlement! I keep telling myself that it's a lie and I try to draw her and make it all better but I j-just... just can't..."

Well, so much for getting through it without crying. I felt her hoof wrap around me.

"We've still got each other, Murky. You can trust in us. If it's worth anything, I don't think she's gone yet. It's too... sudden, y'know? I'd rather wait and know everything."

Her hoof lifted my head up gently, she leaned in, forehead to forehead and speaking quietly.

"No matter what, you *saw* her escape that Pit. You *saw* her defy Red Eye and escape Fillydelphia. That's the bit that matters to you and *no one* will ever take that away from you."

Just as I'd hoped, Glimmerlight *always* knew what to say. Feeling a smile creep onto my face, my tears were more of relief and a little happiness than outright mental anguish anymore. I pressed my head against her neck, hugging her briefly.

"Thank you..." I simply murmured it. The pain wasn't gone, the worry and turmoil the news report had stirred in my heart was still present. But Glimmer's words had taken the edge off it for now.

"Now, we've got other stuff to worry about. Get comfy at the back and I'll explain. We've not got any food. Shackles took all of it and I can't get to our hidden stash inside yet, but I've got some purified water from the little doodad I hooked up. You look like you need some..."

She wandered to the entrance, humming to herself. The transition from somber pony trying to help me to the swaggering mare I knew seemed almost shocking, like she was just shoving everything to the back of her mind briefly. Either that, or looking at some of the memory orbs hanging from her bags, I began to worry over what details of the Mall might already have been put away for good. I remembered what Coral had said, that I would come back here to find Glimmer doing the same things all over again...

"Took a little work to get it going, really. You wouldn't *believe* how hard it is to get a hold of a rubber hose in this place. First person I asked said I could have one if he could use a rubber with me, if you know what I mean."

I really didn't.

"Well, all he got for that was a hoof across the cheek! Had to frame him and steal it from behind his back later. Anyway, so! While we get this thing working, I've been looking through those metro plans and comparing them to the map we found in Protégé's office. That station that Aurora bought out for the Ministry to keep underground? Turns out it's actually a bit of a weird one, not really in the inner *or* outer circles. It's sort of between them, hence why I thought it was in the, uh, inner. Doesn't change the plan though, that we need to get down there, find the place this unfinished station was placed, dig through to it from the inner, then dig into the outer from the Ministry Station and escape! Simple, eh?"

"I hope so..."

"I *know* so. Just perfect, even gives us a staging post, y'know? We could get you, me, Brim, Coral and her son; Unity and her buck, even Sunny. Hell, you can even bring Protégé if you seduce him in time."

The metal mug I'd been fetching to give to her dropped from my hooves and clattered off the rocks upon the ground.

"I... I... but... what... *huh?*"

"Oh don't *worry*, I can give you all the advice you'll need on just where bucks like to be —"

"But... but I don't... I like mares..."

The look she gave me was very homely. Unspoken. 'I know, just go with the humour, stay bright.' Picking up the mug in her magic, she began squeezing the filthy looking water into it. I guess 'purified' was all a matter of scale in this place. All the same, I eagerly accepted a chance to get some real fluid into me. Even the metallic and sickly taste wasn't enough to keep the lukewarm water from settling a lot of the dryness in my throat. Rejoining me, Glimmer pulled over the metro map and pointed to a symbol a little distance away, toward the edges of the industrial zone.

"You know where this is in Fillydelphia?"

"Mhm..."

"Well," she began, "this is what I needed you here for. I can't be sure, but I think this is perhaps the closest metro station to what I guess we'll call 'The Ministry Station.' You being an outlaw actually works out for us, keeps you out of harm's way underground and gives you a chance to scout out our route ahead of time. I was hoping you could use your sneaky-sneakiness to sneak into the metro and sneak around a bit, real sneaky like, see?"

Glancing my eyes along the map, I could see that the station was the closest to the Ministry itself. No wonder Glimmer had chosen it. It did seem the most likely place that Aurora would have chosen, if there was anything at all. Already I felt a little scared, but I'd done worse by now. Underground, where it was all dark, seemed much my sort of place to sneak around in. Not to mention, the feeling of actively preparing for our escape was beginning to come back.

We'd get out—get *everypony* out—then I'd go find Littlepip and prove it was all wrong.

My attention however, was drawn to another slam of hoof on wood and the rowdy cheer of the slavers.

"Next *victim!*" The slaver's voice bellowed above it all. Another pony wandered off with a despairing face.

"What are they doing over there?" I poked my head out to look at them, seeing the ponies involved looking wretched, drawn out and staggering. Glimmerlight sighed, shaking her head.

"Hoof wrestling with stakes. If they win they get a free break from a shift and an extra meal; something many of us need to survive right now. Shackles has thrown us on triple shifts, I just got off an eight hour one and I'm back on in another twenty minutes. Trying to win at their little game is his way of taunting us to try and get slapped down again..."

She clutched her own stomach with a hoof. I could heard the gurgling quite clearly, if the ragged expression on her face wasn't obvious enough. Indeed, Glimmer looked a little weak on her hooves.

"If they lose...?"

Glimmerlight bit her lip, as though pondering whether to tell me or not. Eventually, watching the one pony drop under his corrugated shelter after losing, she looked down to me.

"The losers have to pull an extra shift under somepony else, chosen by *Shackles* of all ponies. He sometimes mentions mining. The ones that return just looked wasted, more than most of us, but a lot of them seem to stay there. I knew I wanted a slim waistline, but even

I'm starting to want to put on a few pounds, Murky."

The joke fell a little flat between us, but took the edge off the extortion The Master had going through his teams.

Glimmerlight filled another mug for herself, before telekinetically drawing it across. The teasing of sustenance was only making my own drawn underside groan in need, though. Pressing a hoof to it, feeling my own ribs far more than anypony should, I just fell to the side. Oh, what I'd do for another apple stew from Protégé right about now...

I looked up at Glimmer, toying with her scrap-built filter again. Her eyes were focused, as though trying to forget her own hunger and deteriorating body by stint of just getting on with it. How could this mare have sold out a village to raiders? I had to ask Brimstone on the side sometime. He'd know something about it if he'd led the clan. Had somepony lied to Coral about what she'd done? But then why did she erase the memory?

Moreover, I began to worry if the same light that she was in my life would remain the same without her coping mechanism. To imagine her falling from being anything other than an energetic radiance of goodness in my life hurt terribly to imagine. She saw me looking up as she had her front hooves above her with the filter. Trying to force a smile on, she leaned down to ruffle my head once more.

"You get any news on Protégé? Rather have him in charge than, well, you know."

I nodded gently. "He's lost command of the Mall. Weathervane says he's really badly hurt..."

"So I saw when they wheeled him out. I guess he really is a nicer guy than I maybe gave credit. The way he tried to keep you in the game or defend you once he made his move. He seems like he has this absolute determination to protect slaves, you in particular. Reminds me, he said something about spending two years to know about that breaking wall? Any idea? You think he was—"

Again, I nodded curtly, cutting her off. Quietly, I explained what I now knew, much to Glimmerlight's surprise. Clearly, she hadn't anticipated much from the chances of actually succeeding in the two year task. To think how much Protégé had pushed through it and judging by the way he seemed only slightly older than me, he must have been a little younger when it started too.

Glimmer sat mystified, but oddly relaxed. Finally, rubbing her chin, she shrugged a little, looking down at me.

"Well, if anything... good sign, right? He knows the problems we have. Makes it a little easier to want him back in power. Heck, part of me even wonders if he'd even be willing to offer what inside help he could. We've got more ponies than we thought to get out now."

That was true. Coral had said as much as well. Herself and her son. There were at least two other ponies I knew I needed to fetch at some point too. Clearly Glimmerlight was still building water supplies for us here, and I'd have been surprised if Brimstone wasn't up to something, but we'd need much more supplies the more ponies we brought into this.

"I think I'd like Protégé on top of the Mall operations again. At least he got us food inside our stomachs, you agree?" She clutched her stomach again.

Sadly, I just nodded, sighing. "Mhm... yeah, I'd like him on top, so I can get something inside me too."

There was a rather sudden pause from Glimmerlight. Curious, I looked up to find her straining to clearly not erupt into laughter, snorting gently and biting her lip while looking at me. Eventually, she could hold it no longer, falling to the side and roaring with laughter.

"Oh, you are *too easy* sometimes! Haha! Oh, that's just classic!"

"What!? *WHAT!?*" I stood up in the tent, protesting. What? It was about food! What had I—

Oh. Very quickly, I found myself blushing fiercely.

Under the almost ear-splitting sound of my friend at least acting a little more joyful again, I took refuge in the mug of water instead. Still snorting to herself, thanking me for helping her to at least laugh properly for the first time since the battle, she went back to work on her contraption.

"Just finish your drink before you go anywhere, Murky. Truth be told, I'd rather you be here for all you could be while *he's* away. I hate thinking of you all alone out there."

For the next few minutes, accompanied only by the cheers of those slaves desperate for food, trying to take on The Master, we were left to ourselves.

The thick stomping of somepony very big was all that eventually brought us up to take notice when Brimstone Blitz returned from his shift hauling the pulley systems to the roof.

Trotting toward the larger tent, he dumped a bag of large tools from his back and thumped the ground with his four hooves, stretching them out. Dour faced, he just gruffly nodded to me about my return. Apparently, that was all I'd get from him. But by now I knew even an acknowledgement meant a lot from the big guy. I nodded back, a little hesitantly. Smiling thinly to her hulking protector, Glimmerlight came back into the tent to tinker with a piece of machinery. Carefully watching around, I crept over to Brimstone's tent a few feet away instead.

I was pretty sure Brimstone spotted me wanting to talk, shaking the dust and ash out of his tent flooring by tossing the ragged thin cotton blanket around, he just glanced back over again. Clearly, he read something on my face about some apprehension to ask this.

"Somethin' got you skittish about me, kid?"

Squeaking on the spot, prompting a confused little glance from Glimmer, I shook my head frantically.

"No! No, no... nothing! Just..."

My head wandered over to Glimmerlight, still humming away to herself and working on the filter to eek out whatever liquid she could from it. Her eyes, I noticed, kept glancing down to that one empty orb beside her pack. I dearly wanted to talk about it with her, but I couldn't force the subject. She may not have loved Caduceus, but those two had been, as far as newly met friends could be, close. In here, that counted for a lot. Shaking my head, I looked back at Brimstone again.

"Just... you... you destroyed her village."

"My *clan* did that. I just turned up to get the best loot. Clan was bloody big, kid, hundred-plus ponies, and other folks too. Not to mention any raider groups we knocked into line. That village was one of half a dozen places in the area we turned over that day, wasn't my raid to lead. Recognised her only *after* I'd saved her the first time. Didn't know her name before that. Just another lass in a cage far as I cared in the wastes."

His words slowed, a little more painful as he reminisced on how he had seen her before Fillydelphia.

"So if you're wondering if I know what that other unicorn means about her betraying them, I'm not the one to go to. All I heard was they found the place, not how. That was enough for me to tell them to go nut it over."

"Hey, you two done swapping stories of drunken adventures over there?" Glimmerlight

dropped from the filter, turning back to us. “Cos you know, I’m not exactly *excluded* from that club, remember? I’ve still to tell you the time I climbed Friendship City’s spires, drunk off my ass and singing the Carol of Hearth’s Warming Eve!”

I *prayed* my face didn’t look too suspicious. She likely would understand, but I couldn’t bring it up for her. Not now.

“No! No, uh... I was just asking Brimstone about the past!” There, that was still kinda true. “Like, um, how he lost his ear!”

The look Brimstone gave me spoke volumes.

“Oh? Huh, I’ve not heard that one either. Well, come on, out with it big guy!”

He shrugged, turning away from me and sitting down with a dull thump, apparently consigned to tell the story to pass the time.

“Good while back now... bunch of the clan and I were off teaching a small gang a lesson for claiming they owned a part of *our* territory near Ponyville. Dealt with those wee arseholes easy enough, but on the way back, the dozen of us on the trip thought we’d make a run at a settlement, see what we could pick off. New Appleloosa, that was it.”

“That’s a bit out of your way...” Glimmer cocked his head, making her still damp mane slide over her face. “New Appleloosa’s a fair distance from Ponyville.”

“Not for us. Could gallop for a whole day and still pound somepony into red paste. Anyway, we never went near it, but we did spy this one little caravan coming from the town over a gulley, figured we’d just take it. Well, that was a mistake.”

“Oh?” I couldn’t help but feel curious... any story of the wastes interested me. The place I always wanted to be free in...

“Sniper. Some little arse with a dual shot rifle, probably a saddle, playing hero from on high, higher than any hill I can tell you that. Never did see nopony, but the first bullet went right between my armour plates, the second took off my ear. Two hits at long range, damn’ good shot. Put me right down, scared off the rest of them when I went to the ground. We pulled back. Was fightin’ off challengers for leadership for a whole damned month after that.”

“Damn, Brim...” Glimmer muttered, whistling lightly, “can’t say I particularly feel the sympathy, but sniping with a twin-gunned battle saddle? Impressive stuff.”

Brimstone just grunted. “Guess it’s good they kept me from doing something I’d regret today. Just not sure if I want to shake his hoof for stopping me or nut the bastard into oblivion for giving me hearing problems the rest of my life.”

I tilted my head, speaking up. “I didn’t know you had hearing problems...”

“What?”

“I said, I didn’t know you had... oh.”

Spotting Brimstone grinning and winking down at me as well, I just rolled my eyes and dropped onto my knees, realisation setting in. Oh come on, why couldn’t I be smart and witty too?

Only then did I spot Glimmerlight snorting, mouthing ‘too easy’ once again.

Thunk! “Ha! Next up!”

The slaver’s voice echoed up, accompanied by another of the regular cheers from the slavers. Their game was still going. I saw Brimstone raise his head to watch them, before grinning and getting up.

“I’ll be right back...”

Trotting his way down the gentle slope toward the walls of the Mall, I found

Glimmerlight and I watching each other. A slow grin came over her face before we both upped and began following at a fair distance. She followed Brim, while I lightly hopped between tents, eventually settling in an unoccupied one close by to the commotion. Pulling the cover over, I held my eyes up to a small gap left over, with Glimmerlight just outside the entrance. Really, I felt a little proud. I could really *do* this sneaky stuff sometimes...

They were still cheering, slapping hooves on the burly slaver's back while he grinned around. Others had joined, forcing some slaves forward who were meekly determined to try for the food that would keep them in a healthier state. Many were crying in the queue, knowing that the obvious hope of the slaver being tired out by the time they arrived for their turn was looking unlikely. But the moment Brimstone stomped in, the cheering fell to simple silence. In a moment of satisfaction, I saw the slaver turn a little pale. Without even waiting a turn, Brimstone sat himself down at the table.

"Hold it right there!"

Any positive hope I'd had jarred in my mind. The Master's voice cracked across the yard, before I saw him approach from the main gate, his immense bulk flanked by numerous weedy looking assistants that dragged checklists. Moving around the hoof wrestling table, he let his gaze fall to Brimstone. Shivering, I backed into the tent a little more. Oh Goddesses, he was meant to be somewhere! Or was that tomorrow? I couldn't remember... oh dear... oh dear...

"The great heroes of the Mall come try their luck at the food-hoof wrestle, eh? Big guy still think he's got it? Good for you. Oh, and don't think I can't see you standing at the back there, Ranger. Don't you worry, I'll find something for you to do soon enough. Could always use a *personal* assistant while I'm hunting for my pet... hehe..."

No! Even I could feel the shot of fear go through Glimmerlight. Imagining what he'd done to Sunny, but to my best friend! To my sis'!

"Hold on one second."

Brimstone's voice slid right in, effortlessly sharing the authority of the scene. I saw at least a dozen ponies step back from the two of them, the two largest ponies in the area when one had defied the other.

"You set this up, this gamble for a free shift and food. I'm not doing this for *me*." Brimstone cast a glance back, right toward my friend. "I'm doing it for her. I win and she stays away from *you* for a day longer."

Brimstone's glance threw a stare back at Shackles behind the wrestling slaver.

The Master didn't even stop grinning, a hoof tapping the slaver before him on the shoulder. "And if she loses she gets the shift too, I think you conveniently forgot to mention. I know all too well you'd work as many as you need without caring. Win or lose is on her. Could say that's bending the rules there, eh? In that case let us make a substitution..."

The hoof hurled the slaver off the chair as though it weighed nothing, along with the chair. With a sharp thump, he moved his own massive body into the space instead.

"Me."

That was it. Around us, dozens of slaves and slavers were even dropping their work to cluster around. Very soon, I felt trapped. Masses of ponies were crowding around the tent to see the table where the two largest ponies I'd ever seen stared each other down. Was he really doing this? I had every confidence in Brimstone's strength, but The Master would abuse every ounce of the winnings if he came out on top. Oh Brim, please know what you're doing...

Glimmerlight trotted forward to Brimstone.

"Brim... are you sure? Look, you *know* how Shackles works, he'll have something planned or you know he would—"

"Glim." The syllable didn't even include his eyes moving from the light green of his opponent. "Back off. You're hiding it well, but I know the first signs of starvation when I see it. You need the food and the time off after your injuries in the riots. Besides..."

His eyes squinted.

"I've wanted to do this for a *long* time..."

"Sure you still have what it takes, old stallion? Hehe..." The Master cackled.

One of the slavers stepped up, signalling them to move their hooves forward. The Master did so first, slamming one front leg on the table with a sick grin. Brim's slapped into his to make a savage and tight grip immediately, accompanied by a sharp crack from their large bony hooves meeting. After Barb, I'd had *enough* of games to decide my friend's futures, even with it being Brim, part of me couldn't help but worry. Above, some slavers swung their searchlights from the scaffolding down onto the table, highlighting them under the hot rays. Cast in contrast, the crowd of slaves and slavers equally beginning to build up a frenzy for the expectant match were blacked out in the darkness of post-storm Fillydelphia, me amongst their horrid, singular, moving black shadows.

"First hoof to hit the table loses! You go on three, no other limb movement and any interdiction from outside seen by me disqualifies the one benefiting! Take the strain!"

Muscles crunched, the judder of movement between the two set the tight strain prior to the start. Brimstone looked like an unmoving rock, his entire body still and staring from a blank face. The Master just licked his pock marked lips with his tongue, grinning through yellowed teeth while shaking off his shoulders. The chain around his neck jingled... that metal collar he had attached to it swinging loosely to the side. As though sensing me watching, his other hoof just stroked it gently. I felt my stomach turn.

"One!" The crowd joined in. "*Two!*" The pair matched a hard glance.

"...*THREE!*"

The table actually shook from the sudden rush of power going under their legs up to the hooves on their ends. The crowd began screaming out, every slaver for The Master, most slaves just a general cheer. They didn't dare support The Master's opponent directly. I saw Glimmerlight stomp a hoof and smile as Brimstone's hoof gained the immediate advantage, getting the first push in to knock The Master's back a good few inches already. But it had stopped there, where they now strained and matched strengths.

"Come on raider, is a cheap first push all you have? Perhaps you're still wounded?"

Brimstone gave no reaction, simply keeping up the pressure. Despite his boast, The Master's hoof was slowly being pushed down. Shaking and gradual, Brimstone was like an advancing unstoppable *wall* of power that gave no ground. Muscles and veins bulged on both their legs as Brimstone brought him halfway to the table, forcing on the advantage.

"Hgn... not bad... not bad..." To my horror, The Master just grinned. "...for a pony long past his prime. You're just an old stallion now, 'warlord,' a relic of your own... sssh... history! Me? I'm still part of the present, headed to a future you can't stop!"

Their hooves ceased, before with a warping of his face and twitching of an eyebrow in strain, The Master began exerting his power. My mouth slowly began falling open as I saw him actually resist, match, and then *push* backward, returning the battle closer to the middle. The slavers were deafening, stomping the thick mud up to splash my eyes and coat,

my... well... coat, with wet muck that flew in through the tent entrance. Squinting, I felt Glimmerlight wrap her hoof around mine in silent support under the flap. Brimstone wouldn't want us distracting him with cheers... but *come on...*

No... no... the denial entered my head as I saw Brimstone's hoof move past the centre, slowly losing ground. The Master's shoulders and body seemed larger than I'd ever imagined, bringing forth *far* more power than I'd ever thought that wide body ever possessed. Brimstone was taller and ripped upon every muscle on his body, while The Master was simply broad and had a certain squat power that belied his own large height and thickset torso. It dawned on me that though Brimstone was clearly stronger, The Master's physical stature may actually place him at a huge advantage in this particular game.

He *knew* that going in, of course, he never did anything without absolutely knowing. Whimpering, I just watched as Brimstone's huge muscles shook and strained to try and stop the gradual pressure of The Master's hoof pressing him past the halfway point to losing.

"You're trying to protect the little whore with this, warlord?" The Master eyed Brimstone, receiving a harsh look in response. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy having her *all* to myself the moment I'm done here. I'm sure you know the feeling... raider. Hehehe..."

Oh boy, that did it. *That* did it.

Brimstone's hoof stopped on the spot, six inches from the table. Brimstone's eyes widened, baring his teeth as he reversed the momentum, stopping just short of the point of no return.

"She won't be yours, nor will *he*, not while I can change *anything* to try and keep anypony away from you, Shackles."

A growing strength began building in his body. It became clear how much more he still had left to give as he began to lift The Master's hoof up, round past the halfway point with apparent ease as he threw what seemed to be every bit of power he had into the game. Two of the biggest and strongest ponies together, but one showing just how outrageously powerful he could suddenly be. The Master seemed to be cut short of a comeback, sweat beading off of his head when his hoof was bent over, being forced down toward the table on the other side. Around me, the cheering had wisely stopped from the slaves, the slavers decrying Brimstone and stomping for their leader to up his game. To 'crush the raider.'

I began to feel a little elation, Brimstone was doing it! Glimmerlight was fearlessly cheering for him, hopping up on her hind legs to stomp with both front hooves.

Then I saw The Master's eyes once more, and I saw the truth.

He wasn't desperate and losing, not at all. He'd wanted to give us *hope*.

"Not... bad... warlord..." His eyes remained on mine, grinning wider and wider as he struggled to keep Brimstone's power back. The raider was almost leaning over, snorting to finish this now. "Not... bad... at all... pity I've been holding back... *nopony* beats me at this..."

The tables turned on the spot. His back seemed to arch, those massive shoulders under the plate armour twisting, and bellowing out loud, The Master threw every ounce of his real untapped strength behind the game. Under the cheering of the slaves, Brimstone's hoof came back, back, and back at a horrible rate. Struggling, I saw a drop of sweat actually drip from his forehead. The Master's new assault stalled, stammered, but then crushed down with unceasing power. Laughing out loud, he brought Brimstone's hoof over to the other side of the table... holding it above it...

"Last chance to win out, warlord! How's it feel to know you're past your time? All

downhill from here!"

I saw Brimstone offer one last push... but The Master's hoof slammed down, dropping his weight and strength to throw Brimstone's hoof right down.

There was a sound of a hoof on wood.

The crowd exploded in cheering. Bets that had been made changed hooves upon that one sound of the table being struck. I saw Glimmerlight stagger backward, feeling myself already trying to pull her away into the tent... to get her *away* from the Master before he came to claim my sister. She was... she was... *his*... for the day. No... no, *how* could Brimstone have lost?

"Hey, wait, what the fuck?"

The shout of the slaver overseeing the match sent a jolt of silence around, as everypony looked back at the pair. The Master was still straining, frowning, sweating and giving it his all.

Brimstone's hoof had simply *ceased to move* a half inch from the table. The noise had been his other hoof, tapping on the tabletop as though bored. Letting my eyes glance up, I saw him just staring with calm eyes. Had he just been *toying* with The Master? Then, he cleared his throat.

"So, we done warming up? You ready to play for real, Shackles?"

"What... you..."

"Three, two, one, go." Brimstone deadpanned, before actually trying for the first time all along.

The muscles along his leg swelled, bulging like I'd never seen as the legendary warlord let a life's worth of grown strength and raw power flow. Snarling, letting that primal instinct take over to reach heights of irresistible energy combined with that massive earth pony spirit, he let fly with his real strength. Their hooves snapped over almost too fast for me to even follow, slamming down on the table hard enough to snap the entire thing in half and shatter pieces of wood across the crowd. Shackles was flung from his protesting chair, dumped on his side below Brimstone to collapse in the mud.

That... oh... *that* made the crowd go silent. The Master had just been defied. In public.

He swirled, roaring with rage to get to his hooves and stamp the floor, shoving a slaver who tried to help him away. I could hear him muttering below his breath as dozens of ponies decided to make themselves scarce, both slavers and slaves.

"Oh, you fool... daring to do that... to try **embarrassing** your Master!?"

Rounding off to stare at Brimstone, he found the raider's steely gaze simply looking him in the eye. No pony was near them, anticipating the outbreak of a serious incident. The Master looked ready to simply destroy him, but Brimstone didn't even blink. I saw my friend lean closer, almost whispering.

"You're going to *what* then? Punish me? You just *lost*, Shackles. Take it from a veteran... you don't hold your end of the bargain, you throw the toy out the pram? You'll lose more respect of your position than you'll ever recover with anger and fear alone."

The Master met his eyes, glowering.

"So you 'protected' the mare. Grand job, but I still have *you* to order around. Don't think you're free of 'repercussions' here, raider!"

I doubted many could hear them. I stood rock still, watching two of the most lethal ponies I knew in the middle of a heated argument. Oh this could be bad, this could be very bad...

"Give me extra shifts? I welcome them, Shackles! Execute me? I *deserve* it. You want to damage my body? Go ahead, you'll get nothing out of me. Make me work and I'll get the job done happily. Face it, Shackles."

Their faces came close together.

"I'm the one pony you'll *never* be able to hurt. So you're going to have to just accept that. Back off... and get the order to get Glim some food and a free day if you want to claw back *any* respect from your underlings."

The Master was seething with an underlying rage I'd never seen him exude. This was no mere show of force, for once he was truly and utterly angry. But Brimstone merely met it with a cold glare. Slowly, against all my belief, I saw The Master step to the side, snarling at Brimstone before barking to one of his subordinates to fetch some oatmeal for their tent. Sensing the real entertainment had passed, many of the ponies around had returned to work or shoving others to work. No pony dared go near him.

Brimstone turned, trotting back toward us with his eyes firmly (smartly, I presumed) set on the departing slaver. The Master simply continued to growl in response, his eyes occasionally glancing to the pale Glimmer, like she was a toy denied.

"Only until I *find* a way to hurt you, slave... hurt you *bad*. Oh I'll find a way. Just you wait, you've made a mistake that will cost you someday with this..."

With that, he turned his thick bulk around, stomping off. I highly pitied whoever was next on his schedule. But what he'd said. That sounded like a threat, but The Master didn't make threats. Slit had told me as much.

Somehow, that only made it worse.

We were left alone until the food came, past a quick attempt to congratulate Brimstone from Glimmer. The moment we had some much needed sustenance to share, even if it was sloppy and milky out of date oatmeal, we began to make plans. Brimstone and Glimmerlight detailed what we still had. The stashes inside were allegedly safe, just too important to risk bringing to the outdoor temporary camp. That meant we still had some food and drink, plus whatever Glimmerlight's filter could make from the last rainfall. Added into that were three spell-orbs that Glimmer had stolen from Protégé's desk and hidden deep in her own robes between the seams. In the rush for medical support, no pony had really searched us. That, and we'd been seen to be helping the slavers, so I guessed that afforded some trust.

Including Barb's death and the pacification of the raiders, we might have called this a complete success, now that we ended with more materials than we'd gone in with. But the looming depression of having lost somepony who said they'd help us kept reality in firm check. We were slaves, prone to punishment, labour, and accident more than anypony.

But we did come to one conclusion: I still had a little space to work in, being on the run. Before too long had passed, it became clear I needed to make myself scarce. I couldn't hide in their tents forever before *somepony* came to fetch them for a shift.

"You remember the way? Just look for anything you can in that metro, Murky. Be it hiding spots, loose walls, locked doors... scout anything, draw it out, if you can, to a map."

A pang of hurt shot down my spine. I couldn't draw *anything* right now, but I nodded, allowing Glimmer to saddle me up for leaving. But even as I approached the wall to grapple over it into the darkness, I felt her lunge forward to embrace me once more. I returned it, holding it for just a little while longer. I could see her pushing the tragic events of late down hard. It was so obvious.

"You going to be okay, sis?"

I could see she appreciated that, and nodded.

"Maybe... maybe when you're back I can talk, Murky. Just give me time, we can start on trying to help me remember then, perhaps. I think that'd help. Thanks for coming back."

"I'll help you. I promised. Cross my heart."

"Hope to fly." She finished for me, leaning back to smile lightly, before ruffling my mane. "We'll see you around, Murky. Stay safe out there."

Stepping back, I separated from her. Brimstone gave another curt nod, as impassive as ever.

I looked behind me at Glimmer, before whispering to Brimstone.

"Take care of her, please?"

I regretted asking, expecting him to chide me for stating the obvious. But the big earth pony just nodded.

"Always. We'll get by. You just concentrate on finding us a path to escape."

It took a lot of effort to turn around, fire that grapple, and leave them behind under The Master's rule. But yet conversely, I felt the trust they had in me now.

Especially now, in what felt like our darkest hours, I had to live up to that.

The metro station lay before me. The journey across had been fairly easy, what with most slaves and slavers inside out of the rain earlier. Now, I hid in an overturned food cart across the street and cast my eyes to the metro itself. A skeleton of metal and rotted wood, it had clearly once been a building made almost entirely of glass that had been blown out. The street and floor were covered in shards that had been broken time and time again. It left behind a strangely empty looking shell of a cover for the metro station entrance. I could hear ponies inside, mostly chatting calmly, likely slavers then. Two more patrolled outside, just calmly keeping an eye on the street. They wouldn't be any trouble to avoid; even from here I could see a building by the side that would let me creep in, now that the windows were all gone.

I thought while I made my way around, trying to avoid splashing through puddles and making a noise. Protégé had told me that the inner metro circle was simply used as a shelter for some slaves now, or to house supplies where they might be more preserved. It was all too likely I was wandering my way into a slaver den. That would explain the low security...

Why couldn't I ever go any place nice?

Carefully pulling my (still rather sore) body around tumbled furniture, I dropped into the alley through a window of the adjoining building. Glass tinkled below me, leading me to freeze on the spot. Had they heard me?

They hadn't. Sticking around, a few minutes later I heard no change in their patrols.

Sticking to hopping between fallen rocks to avoid the glass covered floor, I made my way into the metro station from the side. I emerged into a small cafeteria, surrounded by a low wall bearing dead plant life atop it. Immediately, it became apparent how new this place must have been before the balefire hit. Many of the chromed metal turnstyles and benches were still somewhat shiny; whatever process that had created them preserving their coat. Beside the wooden slots for small kiosks and rotted plants, it created a very strange duality of old and new. I saw closed shutters on the windows for tickets, a higher level with offices

(probably management), and a few tunnels leading to overground railroads near the back of this area. In the middle of the hub was a large opening with long and shallow steps that led underground. That *had* to be it.

Unfortunately, there were plenty enough slavers lazing around on the benches that to try and get by would be an exercise in futility. A couple were playing an odd game on a checkered board while others cleaned some rather unclean looking weapons. One snoozed off even as I watched her. There was *no* going down from the normal route. There had to be a way! This station was likely our best bet to find the Ministry Station and our ticket to the outer circle. Glimmer and Brimstone were relying on me to scout this out and find us a way to sneak past all this! Ducking back into the cafeteria, I had a thought.

Metro lines were underground. This had been a world that lived in perpetual fear of zebra strikes. Even if it wasn't a megaspell, even I'd heard tales of zebra terror attacks upon Equestria. A cramped metro seemed, to me, a likely target. If I could figure that out, likely so could the architects of old. If *I* were designing this place, I'd want to have alternate entrances and exits to the underground to help give ponies a way out should the worst happen.

Taking my time, emboldened by the thought, I began to sneak around the edge. Sticking to the cafeteria, I hopped out of it and hid behind a large marble square that had once housed an interior tree. Bit by bit, I jumped from square to square, heading for the ticket kiosk. If there were any way down, surely the staff would have control of it? One of the toughened glass windows lay around the corner from the sight of the slavers, so I rolled toward it instead. Tugging my saddlebag off, I pushed it through the thin gap where caps would have been exchanged. (Pre-war used caps too, right? I would have. They were so shiny and colourful!) After that, I squeezed my own body through, trying not to let the obvious worry about how thin I had to be to even *permit* that take hold in my mind. I didn't get stuck, but it was a bit of a tug, before I finally popped out and landed on the other side, knocking the revolving chair flying. I landed with a grunt of pain, failing to stop the chair before it fell.

"You hear that?"

Immediately, the sound of trotting emerged. I stuffed myself into the shelves below the counter, pulling my saddlebag into my belly as tightly as I could. The trotting came closer, followed by another. A vibration went through the counter as they tapped on the glass of the kiosk.

"The hell are you doin'?"

"Makin' noise. Scares radroaches off if it's them."

An argument about what radroaches were really scared of or not took place, followed by more tapping on the window. I really wished they'd stop; every 'thunk' was only making my hypersensitive ears twitch and my head pound from the noise. After a while, I heard somepony sniffing at the gap.

"Urgh... yeah, radroaches. Stinks in there..."

Oh come on...

"Well, I ain't getting it. They'll just come back anyway. C'mon, it's your move. By the way, you hear that on the radio? 'Bout the Dweller?"

"Shit, man! Quiet! You want them to know you've been listening to that banned station? Yes, I heard. About fucking time she realised there's not any point after giving us such a hard time."

They trotted away slowly. Trying to force the *insults* they laid at her hooves out of my mind, I dropped back out of the shelf and stretched my legs. Almost to my shock, the mouthpiece of my saddle sprung out the moment I did. Grumbling, I flicked it away again. Someday I'd get used to this thing. Not that it made me any less gleeful to have it. Sometimes, I found myself just looking back at it around me and smiling like a foal with a present. It had helped keep my mind off the pressures of being an outlaw.

A little quiet exploration found a back office. I'd feared for any remains, but there was nothing but someplace that had clearly been left in a hurry. Well, if you have a metro nearby, of course you'd run there the moment those deathly sirens had started. There were, surprisingly, no desks (a first for everything...) but rather just one long work surface that ran around the edge of the room, covered in old tickets and a few faulty looking terminals. I spotted another holstered set of audio diaries beside one. A single diary lay on the floor, a little red light still blinking. Glancing around me, I pulled out my PipBuck and adjusted the volume to low before picking up the diary and clipping it on. It took a few seconds of fiddling and remembering which buttons did what, but I eventually got it to play, hearing the busy sounds of an office behind a mare's voice.

"End of day list for Friday, assistant manager Creamy Pop. Hey, Bulb? When you get this tomorrow, I'm real sorry, but the terminals went down today so the cash up hasn't been sent to HQ yet. That's about it, other than that there may be a complaint coming into you tomorrow too. Nothing big, just some idiot who can't read the rules. Oh, and... I know you had family in Manehattan, so... lemme know how it all is, okay? Everyone's talking about the rumours that they got hit a few minutes ago by some sort of terror strike. Just let me know, okay? We're going to head to the news desks to wait for information, hopefully we won't—"

I felt my entire body clench tightly. In the background of the diary, a low and wailing note was beginning to pick up and gain in volume. Ever-present and immediately controlling the atmosphere, the siren began to sound.

"Oh Goddesses, is that... is that a drill? Hey, everypony, you heard of any drills? Please tell me it's just a drill!"

"Terminal doesn't say, but they were planning on having a surprise one this month. My brother works at Stable-Tec; says they keep requesting them for Stable ticket holders. Hey, listen!"

The sound in the background didn't change, what were they listening for...?

"It's still going..."

"So?"

"Don't you read the brochures, Creamy? A long one that doesn't change is 'alert,' one that warbles and goes up and down is 'attack.' It'll be the drill, they wouldn't dare use 'attack' for one. We should treat it like it's real though, you know what Bulb's like for following Ministry Law for drill practice..."

"All right, we'll go by the book. Everypony! Pack up and get underground now! Get the PA system to the public and move to the service stairs at the back! Oh horseapples, those sirens creep me out, that's the third time this year already..."

"I think that's the point, boss. Let's go."

The diary hit the desk before falling to the ground, I could hear the clacks as it was dropped.

"Ah, damn! Broke the record button... well that's this one done in. C'mon! Move it! I

don't want to be up here with those things longer than I have to. Chills down my spine, you'd think they could make a nicer—"

Click.

"End of day recording limit reached."

My entire body was shivering. Drill or not, that noise had elicited a reaction in me. Like in my escape attempt when they had sounded it as an alarm. As though the knowledge that it *had actually happened* was enough to biologically condition all newborns of the pony race with the same blood-freezing terror of that deathly wail. Those same ponies in the drill would have heard the real thing, the 'attack' variant. They knew the difference. They'd have known on the spot their world was over.

But it had at least confirmed what I sought. That there were some alternate ways down back here. Still trying to fight that sound from my memory, I limped on. It wasn't far, just through past some old toilets and down into the back area for all the shops and staff members. A spiral stairway, almost too short for four legged ponies, was built into the corner. Glancing around, I could see each of the shop back doors had been flung open, items strewn everywhere from the last rush for the *real* siren. Very quickly, I began to fear what I might find below ground. As though unwilling, I spent a little time hunting around the debris. I located a few old plastic bottles for Glimmer to fill up inside a long non-functional fridge as well as, to my delight, a single can of unopened food.

It took a little working with one of my grappling gun's hooks, but I finally managed to break open the seal. Inside, I found a thick white mush. Potato!

Sticking my muzzle in as far as I could to lap it all out, I found it to be powdery, dry, and lacking in any real taste. But it was sustenance. It was *something*, and my growling stomach was all the more grateful. Pulling the tin off, feeling my muzzle's rad sores stinging from the rub, I let out as much of a satisfied breath as I could. Unfortunately, this seemed to just have been somepony's old lunch. Everything else was rotted or long spilled. Without venturing too close to the shop windows, (I could still hear the slavers outside) I took one last look around and pocketed an old mouth-torch before finally moving to the stairs. Casting a glance down, I saw a rather shocking drop beneath me. My eyes turned briefly to my PipBuck. Likely I would be hearing from Sundial soon, as well.

"Well, here goes."

I took a slow breath. Time to find the next steps of my way home.

Taking my time, I began to realise that underground was not perhaps what I was expecting. Things had been fine and isolated upon my descent, but I had stopped now.

I'd heard something.

A low noise, like background hum and ambience that rippled up the long vertical walls of the service stairwell. Unpredictable, bereft of any pattern, it continued its low and undulating groan that picked up the deeper I went. Remembering Protégé's tales of the metro, I could only bite my lip and almost hope that this was something as simple as a slaver den. Occasionally, louder sounds would spike up, higher pitched and sharper. But it was, all of it, simply cast into an unidentifiable drifting mess by the shape of the tunnels and height that I was hearing it from.

Gradually, I began to continue, my ears twitching and my mind worrying. The noise kept

eating away at my already frayed nerves, growing and then dropping. Always there in the background, just waiting to—

Beep!

My hooves scrambled, falling against the wall and covering my head with a squeal that dropped off into a whimper.

Beep!

Quickly, I began to realise. I'd been so high strung that even Sundial's messages startled me. Quickly digging the PipBuck out and tying it to my hoof to listen, I continued. At least he could keep me distracted from the growing volume.

Click.

Instead, I got a mare's voice, fast talking and playful, one I recognised from before.

"Hi there, Sundial's nightly update! So sorry he can't do it himself, so I guess I'll do it for him. I just know he'd have wanted to say, 'Hi there! I'm Sundial and I have the greatest marefriend in history, she's so perfect in every way! She is soooo understanding that she even saw the magazines I had under my bed and didn't mind a—"

"H-hey! Are you recording on that!?"

"Oh, hello sweetie! Just offering the 'Sky-eye-view' on your life!"

"Aw, come on, Sky! They don't need to hear about... oh..."

"Just realised what I said, huh?"

"Yeah..."

I heard Skydancer giggle, before a soft sound of somepony kissing another was heard.

"You are so cute when you blush, you know that? Fiiiine, I'll let you have your little toy back, I've got to head home to get ready anyway. So, bye-bye, ponies of the future!"

"You really are crazy, Sky..."

"You know you love it. If the feisty looks in those photos of the magazine are anything to go by—"

"Hey! Gimme that, please, Sky!"

"Gotta take iiit!"

A little playful scuffle broke out, in which I could hear the PipBuck being tugged away behind Skydancer, giggling madly, and Sundial's pleading. Sometimes his words were interrupted with the altogether more loving sound of a quick peck on the lips. Finally, with a little exhale of air, I heard somepony pinned down.

"Hah! Some earth pony! Pinned by a little pegasus like me? Here you go, hun. I'll see you tomorrow after work, flying the night shift tonight."

"Phew... yeah... okay. I'll see you then."

They said their goodbyes, the wonderful sound of them interacting as buck and mare with such a light hearted *fun* to their relationship making me both feel warmed inside as much as it hit home like a sharp envy in my heart.

Sundial seemed to dust himself off, muttering about 'that crazy mare' and laughing to himself, before sitting down again (I presumed) with the PipBuck.

"Uh, sorry about all that. I might delete it... dunno. Anyway, for the proper update. I've made a choice. I can't let her go, I can't even risk having to let her go again. There are more and more drills, like somepony up top's beginning to fear we need the practice. I... I'm going to sell something to the zebras. The money they're offering is just too large to ignore—with it, I could afford another ticket in under a few months! I... I've decided to try something that seems important... an old design of armour we

abandoned before the current project. They'll think it's all high tech, but it was way over-designed and barely worked at all, so it won't hurt Equestria, right?"

Beneath me, the sound was only getting louder. I felt I recognised the sounds... what were they? Everything was so distorted in this strange spiral shaft.

"So long as somepony else doesn't give up the good stuff, they won't ever know I'm feeding them long out of date info. Maybe... maybe this could work for Equestria in the end, huh? Like, counter espionage or something. Oh I don't know, the Ministry of Morale's gonna take me away if they ever find out! But the meeting's tonight, I've already got the blueprints copied to hand over. This entire city just feels lethal now. We've all heard the reports of ponies being taken from the refugee camps, disappearing into the night with no trace. The Ministry of Peace has been running all over the place trying to find them, even investigating a few workers who went missing from our factory last month. I figure they just bailed and went to the country. The cities aren't what they once were."

Suddenly, one of the noises from below me got much louder, more clarity coming to it as I neared the bottom.

Oh Goddesses, I knew what that sound was. I'd heard it a million times in my life.

"I best be going. The zebras were very specific. Ten at night, around the back of the factory complex. I have to admit, them being here and a bunch of refugees going missing? Seems way too much of a coincidence. It'd be just like the stripes to kill off a few defenceless refugees to keep them spreading fear and worry amongst another populace. Urgh. Right, they're getting their plans, I'm getting my money, and then Sky and I will be off to a Stable to be safe forever. That's all that matters now to me. Wish me luck..."

"Good luck..."

"Heh, I guess I'll get around to telling this thing about how I got my cutie mark someday, huh? Goodnight."

"Night, Sundial..."

Click.

Biting my lip, I wanted to sit and think for a pony that was quickly, through all of time, becoming like another friend to me. But the noise was too great, *far* too great now, and I knew what it was.

It was the sound of ponies in misery.

Slowly, like the reveal of a grand hall upon entering the gates, the metro came to light before me through a fallen section of wall near the bottom of the shaft. Massive, spreading in all directions, the opening into the main trainstop filled my gaze. Dual layered, with the platforms beneath and an open plan suspended waiting area at the top, it almost felt like an outdoor site. An old and chipped mosaic lined the roof, depicting the great cycle of night and day between the great Goddesses. In the middle, lined along the twilight between times, lay the six symbols of the Ministries.

But it was no longer a metro station.

It was a gate into hell.

Under the symbols of the past, lay the horror of the future laid bare. Opposite the entranceway, had I taken the normal route, there lay a large doorway from which a dull red light pulsed and radiated. Outside it lay lines of slaves in neck-chains, kept standing by a will seeking to dominate their life. Many of them were tugging full converted metro trains that were laid low on their suspensions with thick rock and wreckage. Others advanced into

the tunnels bearing tools across their backs, pickaxes, auto axes, and spades. Those coming in off their work were dragged ruthlessly into the gate, disappearing into the red light to join the commotion that seemed to drift out of it and up the shaft I had descended. The looks on their faces... I knew it from my own, the day I had been put in that collar.

Below Fillydelphia itself, the slavery only went on, even more brutal than on the surface...

It all flowed outward from a central point that explained everything, absolutely everything, as to why this was such a nightmare made real for ponies like me. At the centre of the raised platform, I could see one pony overseeing everything, standing before it all.

The Master.

This was the entrance to The Master's personal slave camp.

Fear told me to go back, to report that this was not a way out.

Hope told me that this was the only known link we had to find evidence of a way out.

Courage was silent. In the wake of the Mall riots, I had proven myself to at least have some. But it had been drawn from examples and determination to protect. The last day had already proven one of those examples had been corrupted in my mind.

But loyalty, that still drove me. Loyalty to find a way home for my friends. The same loyalty that Protégé had proven and shown to me.

I had to go on.

At least an element of logic comforted me. I wouldn't have to go into his camp. The tunnels left in many more directions than that, with enough of a crowd and large trains being carted down them that being able to sneak along wouldn't be impossible.

But even with all of that, it was tough to keep going and descend those stairs knowing that *he* was observing the area. Everywhere I had gone today, he'd been waiting, like something was keeping us within a hundred metres or one another.

Thankfully, the service stairwell I'd descended opened out into the metro tunnels from the very side, deep in shadows. I had a little space to choose my chance to exit.

Pressing my front hooves against the stairwell's door, the rusting locks almost seemed to crust apart under being moved at all. But all the sounds here were reverberating off the walls, pounding into my head far worse than they should. A mare's cries shot above it all amongst the crack of a whip. A buck weeping openly in the chain gang had the sound of sobbing echoing back and forward. They were, all of them, like the ponies I'd seen earlier around Sunny. Blackened, choking, sick, and covered in burns or crudely healed injuries. I'd seen such things on many slaves above ground, but it was *everypony* down here.

I fell back inside the door for a second to get my bearings, drawing the map to think about directions and which tunnel would go closest to the Ministry.

"Why are you lying down? You will stand, slave! Stand and await your cart!"

Everypony around who even was slightly kneeling shot to their hooves, whether or not they were the ones being called out. I did too.

That wasn't a good sign. Why was I obeying? *Why was I obeying!?*

"The second shift of the night shall begin! Slavers! Take them back to their cages, their third shift will begin in one hour."

A chorus of slavers chanted out in agreement, as willingly obedient as the slaves. Forcing

my legs to crouch again in the service room, I used my PipBuck light on the map. If I was reading it right (something I highly doubted), the closest tunnel to the Ministry was the one on the same side as my stairwell, but the one on the other side of the platform from the way the door opened. I'd need to briefly go out there to make it in...

Folding up the map, I bit my lip. The Master could spot me in a crowd *instantly*. He knew my every movement, shape and size. He was far too observant to just hide in a box or something either. If I moved, I'd have to do it with absolute stealth. Why was he even *here* anyway? Didn't he have the Mall to take care of? It was like he knew where to just wait and terrify me from. I wondered if he knew I'd been so close, if he was just messing with me, screwing up my head by always being in the right place to make me scared before the collar would suddenly clamp around my neck when I least expected it.

Right... Murky... be brave. Just be brave, you can do this. Be brave like Brim and Glimmer and Protégé and Littlepi—

My train of thought jarred, feeling a welling of emotion that I had to almost beat back down. I couldn't let it affect me now.

It was perhaps the most terrifying twenty feet of my entire life up till now.

Sticking low to the ground, I slid around the corner and into the main station itself. Immediately, I rushed up and crouched behind a series of seats. Drawing my mirror, I angled it to watch for The Master to look away each time. The rest of the slavers I'd just have to pray didn't care as much to look. Slaves glanced at me with dead and hopeless eyes, their mouths hanging open like mentally damaged patients who had been stripped of all personality. Oh, look away! You'll give me away!

"Eyes front! Back in line!"

Their heads snapped around. *Please* don't look at what they saw. The mirror showed his head turning to snap at some others while speaking to another of his seemingly many assistants. Over the cacophony, I couldn't detect the individual words, just his rumbling and scraggly voice. Taking the opportunity, I leapt forward to behind an old advertisement board. Pinkie Pie stared down at me from the other side of it, seemingly advertising a new brand of singing party sprite-bot, judging by the little song notes coming out of it. I recognised the design; I'd seen those odd ones with video screens now and again around Fillydelphia.

Part of me found a little respite in thinking about them. Anything other than concentrating on the ongoing, never-screams of anguish emerging from that hateful gateway...

I made the jump to the next one, catching The Master's face *whipping* around the moment I did. Pulling my tail in quickly, I sat and huddled up behind the next bench, the last one before the next tunnel! I didn't even dare put my mirror around the corner, but I could feel his gaze witheringly directed at this one spot, feel it chilling my body more than any siren could.

"Get off the bench! Not your place! Now get back to work, I expect to see another ten feet by the time I'm back!"

He was leaving. I could hear his stomping coming down, passing by the entrance to his den and across the platforms toward the stairs. Then he stopped.

"Somepony close that door, who opened it?"

I heard chains clatter as he drove toward the area. Figuring his attention was away, I dashed forward and hopped around the corner. Behind me, glancing out, I saw a group of

slaves point my way.

“S-slave...”

The Master’s hoof crunched upon the buck’s face, throwing him back in line.

“Wrong answer, wretch. **What. Slave?**”

The buck pointed this way. I leapt back and immediately began galloping down the tunnel, not even caring about the other slaves that looked up, surprised at one of their number moving as fast. But I could hear the thumping sound of The Master approaching, seeking out the rebellious one of his number. If he even got a clue it was me, the entire place would go on lockdown! The tunnel was uneven, hard to run down with the rail tracks overlapping one another and interspersed with debris and old slippery puddles. I ran alongside a huge metro-train cart that was loaded up with tools to go back in. The sides were barricaded up with scrap metal, making it impossible to leap up and hide! So I ran on, into the darkness. Down the tunnel, the groans and sniffs of dozens of ponies echoed and solidified even more. Crimson hazes washed down from behind us, giving the darkness a thick quality that mixed with the bloodstained slaves. Behind me I could see the massive silhouette against his den’s red light standing at the entranceway.

Praying that the darkness hid me enough, I spotted one indent into the side wall of the cramped metro tunnel. Hopping between lines of automaton-like slaves, I tripped over their chains, landing face down on the tracks. The solid impact on my chin dizzied me, making the remainder of my stagger into the gap all the more haphazard. My teeth shook, my loose one wobbling in the gums from the impact. The gap was fairly large, surrounded with wire fencing, probably an old maintenance cubby hole. Jamming myself against the nearest side of the wall I could, I listened for The Master approaching.

Nothing...

Eventually, I dared to risk peeking my head out. Focusing my eyes past the procession of slaves heading into the same tunnel on part of his ongoing operations down here, I saw no silhouette in the tunnel entrance forty feet back at the station itself. Phew...

Turning back into the cubby hole, I took a second to rest. Allowing my eyes to move around. Yet as I saw what was there, I had to cover my mouth to stop the scream.

It was a dumping ground for slaves. Piled high, those that had passed out in the tunnels had simply been thrown in here to be dealt with later. Still ‘fresh,’ many lay with open eyes or mouths, every one of them simply looking tired and drawn. I could see ribs, leg joints and pelvises protruding through threadbare coats and thin skin. They had simply been worked to death.

Backing off, I fell into the main tunnel again, my eyes not leaving the grotesque heap. Amongst the smells of rancid slaves and thick dust I could still smell that sweet sickly flavour in the air, the one I’d so wretchedly had to be immersed in once long ago.

Why... just...just why? What was the purpose of all this? Why did he want to do this to ponies?

Behind me, the slaves offered no answer, trudging onward on the commands that they had been given, not willing to look or see for anything better for fear of being singled out. Unable to take it all on board, I merely continued galloping into the tunnel, sticking to the edges and ignoring every one of the foul stinking corpse dens from then on...

The sound of rock chipping and the whine of auto axes began to waft up the tunnels. I had slowed down to take the next hundred metres carefully. Occasionally having to join the slaves or hide behind a moving cart as a slaver trotted past, I nervously kept advancing. So far, this wasn't looking much like a good route to the Ministry Station, even if it *were* down here. The proximity of The Master's own personal den just behind me was a threat enough, but the tunnels were active and seemingly in constant use. This one workforce that was down here seemed to be perpetually on the job. Those coming back down the tunnel were dust covered and choking, staggering by sheer exhaustion. The ones going in bore a look that could only be described as harsh acceptance of their place in life. For the first time, I began to get a sense of what it was like to look at me from the outside sometimes...

I reached a junction, where the tunnels split off into about four others. No doubt service tunnels or older routes. Some of them bore shattered wooden planks along the ground like they'd been reopened. In the hazy darkness, the heavy dust, and strong heat down here, slavers washed dim torches back and forth, lighting the reality of work down here.

They were mining.

Along every stretch of wall, slaves were chipping and picking away at the solid rock or concrete. Swung by weary heads or flickering weak magic, the axes seemed to only graze a little off at a time. Clearly, The Master preferred to work by a 'slow but constant' method down here. Moving away from the entrance, I ducked behind one of the many waiting carts where slaves were heaving scraps of rock in for removal. In this darkness it was easy to simply lie low.

Something still made me itch though. The Master never just 'gave up' like before. Had I really given him the slip again or was he just waiting back there at my way out?

Shaking my head, I tried to clear the horrid thoughts that being so close to (or within) his den were giving me. I could *still* hear the sounds from back there, the low moan drifting through the metro from his own little corner of depraved practice. I could see many of the slaves here bearing obvious scars. No way were that buck's lash scars from just a mistake... that mare was likely walking with a limp for another reason...

This was... *sick*, even by Fillydelphia's standards. These ponies were literally working themselves to death down here, trapped in whatever horrors went on behind those gates. The stench of rancid sweat and the horrid conditions around their own filth while not being allowed to cease mining gave a reason to why the slavers trotted with their gas masks firmly on. Catching a draft down one tunnel in a bad way almost made me throw up on the spot. Ponies had to *work* in this...

But really, my other thought was what they were *doing* here anyway. What was there to mine in a metro?

The thought slapped me across like a leather whip. It was so obvious.

They *knew* about the Ministry Station.

The Master was in league with Grindstone. No doubt the old donkey had seen the same things I did in Aurora's office and made the same conclusions as Glimmer. He had wanted Aurora's research from Stable Ninety-Three. He was trying to make her inventions work. Now he and The Master wanted her hidden stash of whatever it was they were putting together down here. I began to wonder if even Red Eye knew of their real intentions, outside of trying to locate Ministry secrets. Would they 'do a Sundial' and perhaps only give him the things they didn't want to keep secret? Grizzly had mentioned some great political game going on. Was I seeing one of the more covert large operations?

Even as I watched, one slave collapsed from the wall. Falling backward, she landed on the tracks and seemed to have a spasm on the spot. A filthy yellow infection on her belly looked distended, weeping pus across the floor. Slavers immediately galloped over, hauling the poor mare to her feet. To my horror, they simply set her, at gunpoint, to work again. She cried even as she kept striking the wall, her stomach visibly weeping infectious fluids still. Across the junction, another mare was set upon by a second slaver for pausing. A baton cracked across her neck, leaving thick lumps after only a few seconds. Her screams of pain only joined the others echoing in the air. Along the walls, occasionally I saw whole groups of ponies lying together? Dead? No, resting. They weren't even allowed to leave the mining wall to sleep. Many twitched, clearly in the throes of the same nightmare they would soon be woken to again.

Shivering, I pulled myself tighter. This really was a truly proper hell for slaves down here. Trapped in the dark, forced to work at a blank face, seemingly almost all day.

Carefully, I began to pull myself through the busy intersections in the middle. Carts were being pulled along the rails and swivelled on some large turntable (pulled by slaves, of course) until they faced down another tunnel where other teams worked. Trying the old trick of getting under one of them, I managed to make it to the far side fairly easily. Really, the hardest thing was trying to not let my emotions and fears get the better of my tearducts. This was such an atrocity against ponies.

The further I crept down the tunnels, the more I got a sense of just how long this had lasted. Wall after wall had been chipped away at for a few feet, before being given up on. This entire tunnel past a certain point bore the markings. They had to have been at this for *months!*

No... I needed somewhere to hide for a moment. This was just too much.

Checking around me, I slid into the nearest maintenance room, noting an odd scrawled sign by the door. Immediately inside, I gagged. Coughing out hard enough that I had to kneel down, I dropped to my side and dug out a section of cloth to cover my mouth with. There was nothing in here but the sad sight of a great many dead ponies, long rotting. By now, it almost felt routine in this place. I was filled with all sorts of sudden emotion. Sadness at their plight, fury and anger at the same, and a heavy frustration that I could do *nothing* to help them mixed in with the terror of being trapped within it all myself. That I had kept going down here in the darkness to blend in and sneak well was a testament to that I *really* still wanted out. I still had some courage to work with.

"Still... still able..." I breathed out.

"Still able to what, hairball?"

The rough voice made me scream, spinning to see the corpses *standing up!* Memories of a janitor in the Mall almost made me run madly for the door, before I saw the light of intelligence in their eyes. Ghouls! It was just ghouls.

Looking at the chains that linked them all together, it became apparent to me that they were slaves.

"Asked you a question, hairball, still able to what?"

"Answer him, come on. Not like we get much talk down here..."

"Mm..."

"Yes..."

Talking almost like a committee, the ghouls formed an arc around me, all staring with yellowed or bleeding eyes over their blackened and rotten skin or muscle. Whimpering, I

looked up at them.

"Still able to go on. To keep hopeful that I... I'll get out..."

They laughed. Ghouls laughing were rather unsettling sounds, filled with a dry and cracked wheeze of air.

"Get out of Shackles' tunnels? You don't get out! You just keep workin' till you drop. Pity for us we can't."

"W-who are you?"

The lead ghoul glanced at his comrades. Most of them wandered back to the rear wall to settle down again. Clearly they didn't get to rest much, but four remained. Looking back at me, I was told to lie down. I obeyed rather immediately. They settled, weariness showing in their movements. Many were carrying injuries that seeped oddly coloured blood.

He indicated a mare to his left with a few very long strands of hair left in her mane and tail.

"Nurse Splint. She keeps us going best she can, worked for the last few hundred years..."

Another mare on the same side, bearing a wrap around where her eyes, I guessed, used to be.

"Nurse Bedlay Bloom, bastards took her eyes for looking at them wrong."

He then indicated a buck on the other side of him, the last one.

"Lastly, the rookie, if you could call him that these days. Windtail Breeze was the student doctor when the bombs hit. And I'm Baton Round, was head of security at Hearts and Hooves Hospital; we all worked there."

Hearts and Hooves! I sprang up, finding a middle subject we might all know! Perhaps these ghouls had some good information if I could get on their side!

"Hearts and Hooves Hospital? You must know Doctor Weathervane!"

There was a sudden silence, before Baton Round finally stopped blinking. His chipped horn lit with a wavy yellow to close the door behind me.

"Weathervane... been a long time since I last heard of that cranky old bastard. Been a long time under Shackles... too long. Yes, we know him. Was a friend of mine, actually. I took care of a war trauma patient about to gut him and he healed the gutting that I got given instead. Sort of forges a bond, that sort of thing. The rest worked under him. Good terms, right?"

There was a murmuring. Nurse Bedlay Bloom looked up, her face not even looking directly at me, the wrap around her eyes staring at the wall instead.

"He helped me deliver my first foal when there were complications. I was so proud to work under him."

Splint nodded and smiled. "Deliver your child? He delivered *me*. Good stallion, he is... good stallion. He really liked us being around... good days... good days..."

Very quickly, I sensed the scale of this conversation flying way beyond my ability to relate. These ponies had all worked with Weathervane back before the bombs. Hell, they'd seen old Equestria in the same way Weathervane had. Now they were slaves in their own city.

But something didn't make sense.

"If... if you're all ghouls. Why don't you sign onto the crater duty? A few months and you're free, no way The Master could stop you, that's Red Eye's rules!"

Windtail Breeze shook his head sadly.

"You think Shackles plays by the rules? Well, you're right in this case, that he couldn't

stop us. But... this is our city. We were all born here, worked here... died here. We rose again together and we survived together. Now we're rebuilding it together. We won't abandon Fillydelphia to the balefire. We'll do what we can to repair it before we go. Even if it means this... it's what kept us sane. That thought that we could one day see it proper again before we let go and fall to the feral..."

"You... *chose* to stay!?"

"Yes," muttered Baton Round, "we did. It's our home. Means a lot to a ghoul, that does... out there? We wouldn't recognise it. Never left Filly even before the megaspells. I'd just be in a place where I'd fall to the feral all the faster. Here at least I got something to cling to, to keep me alive and going. Just wish it weren't in here though. Shackles wouldn't let us get any word out to join somethin' else if we tried. No pony else comes down here, either..."

"What keeps you going, little one?" Bedlam Bloom turned vaguely in my direction. "Your voice sounds so small... weak. You are scared..."

"I... I am. It's terrible down here..."

"It's terrible everywhere. Here... worse, yes. I try... I try to forget what they are doing to us. The last few months have been bad. Even many of the unlife ponies like us are passing. Their games, their experiments killing us gradually off. Behind those gates lies nothing but pain, young one. Your words betray that you do not know it yet. I am sorry that you are here with us now."

I considered she must have been an incredible nurse with such a calming tone. I could see the horrid injuries across her body. Deep cuts, infections to her very body visible without her skin and a mangled back right hoof. I wondered just how long these ghouls had left. They all looked about ready to fall apart in a few days. It probably explained their rather drifting nostalgia about the past.

"I'm not a slave down here. I'm... I'm on the run. Trying to find a way out. C-can you help me? I could, well, see about helping you too..."

"How, murky pony?"

"My name's Murky Number Seven..."

"Appropriate and scary..." muttered Windtail.

"How could you help us then, Murky Number Seven?" Baton Round cut in.

I took a slow breath, then regretted it instantly in the cramped room with so many ghouls. Outside, I could hear the slavers moving around. But this was sort of what I'd hoped for, some inside intelligence on the tunnels!

"Some of us, we're planning to use the tunnels to get out. To find the Ministry Station and get to the outer circle. If we can, we could maybe get you away from The Master at least. Somewhere you could do *proper* work to help repair your city. We... um... we just need help down here. It's too heavily guarded to get lots of ponies down."

They seemed to glance at one another, before Baton Round, their obvious leader by stint of (apparent) maturity, nodded.

"We are nearing our end down here, Murky. I'd... I'd quite like to see old Weathervane again before it comes to my time. Please, if you could get us topside in your escape... we will give you all the help you want. We're all scared, Murky. We try to deny it, but we're terrified. Two hundred years is a long time to feel wasted with death down here. Please, Weathervane needs us back too. Before we were sent down here, I was fearing he was turning. Getting angrier..."

"He told me to 'shut the Goddesses damned hell the fucking shit fuck up' last time..." Windtail murmured off to the side. "But I don't wanna die down here... so much left to do. Lots of bad fates for ghouls below ground when they become useless. Please, if you can get us out, get us to Weathervane. He knows how to treat ghouls. He could save us, I know it. We're his friends, Murk. We need him to live, he needs us to help him through his pain. Please..."

It took all my effort to control my emotions for these tragic figures, gulping in the musty atmosphere, before nodding.

"I'll try!"

Baton Round seemed pleased, he turned me toward the doorway.

"Shackles has us all mining down here, looking for something in the walls. But these tunnels go on for a long way. I don't know where this Ministry Station is, but I can tell you that you don't need to use the entrance you did through this hellhole. Along this tunnel is another service shaft that leads to the surface. It's shaky... unstable, but a few ponies could go up or down it with a little effort. You can use it to get back out. The mining never stops, but we're here about this time each day between our shifts. There's a radioactive water leak at the back of this room we use to heal up as best we can."

He indicated further down the tunnel, where he'd mentioned.

"Plenty of hiding spots down here. Why, if we weren't in chains, we'd break for them. Just keep following the inner circle service line and you'll avoid most of Red Eye's storage areas in the metro. Nopony really uses the service line since it was collapsed away from the outer circle."

I tried to keep all this information in my mind. This was *crucial*. Our way out could very well depend on being able to survive down here for a few days. Baton Round and the help of his ghouls could make this go a lot faster if we could figure out just *where* to mine that The Master hadn't. Frankly, I trusted Glimmer's ability to read memory orbs and the past a lot more than I did Grindstone's.

"Th-thank you, sir. I'll make sure to try and come back. I'll... I'll tell Weathervane about you. Let him know you're still alive. I hope you can come with us. We all have our reasons to want to go. Like one of my friends, she wants to get her son free. Another wants to help repair her life and get back to her parents."

Splint nodded, as though feeling the sting of long lost parents herself, but then she looked closely at me.

"What about you, young Murky? What's your reason?"

The question caught me by surprise, making me hesitate. Gulping, I lowered my voice.

"I... I've never been free..."

The ghouls seemed to share a moment of sadness for me. No doubt their medically driven mindsets still at work, somewhere deep inside those broken bodies. Even as I watched, I could see Baton Round's muzzle seem to slip and move in ways no muzzle should be able to. Had it been... snapped? Splint sighed, patting my fleece lightly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry..."

Taking a deeper breath, I felt it deserved a little explanation.

"I *want* to be though, it's all I've tried for since the Pit. Since the Stable Dweller escaped. She's like my inspiration!"

There was an odd silence amongst the ghouls. They cast looks to one another. In the background, many of the other ghouls looked over at the group speaking to me. I could see

one of them held a radio.

"The fallen mare..."

Bedlay Bloom frowned, shivering and sitting down. Baton Round lay a hoof over her back before turning to me.

"I despair to be the one to bring you foul news, young slave. But—"

"*It's not true!*" I blurted forth, interrupting them long before they could speak the *lies* I had been dealing with since that one report. "She didn't do that! It's... it's somepony just using her name to ruin her reputation! She would *never!*"

The ghouls glanced to one another, I could *feel* the unspoken conversation. Baton looked back at me, like one might look at an idiot child barely grown.

"You have a rather frighteningly short-sighted faith in her, Murky Number Seven. This is how the wastelands go. If you've never been free to know, then I don't blame you for—"

"I know! All right? I know it's not her! She saved... she saved me from the Pit! Showed me what it meant to be free! I don't care what you say, she's a good pony! *A good pony!* Why can't anypony but me see that?"

I settled down, turning my head away. These were good ponies, these ghouls, but they actually bought into this stuff?

"Murk, allow me to tell you a story..." Baton sat down. "You know, I know how it feels to watch your hero be taken by the morality and horror of the wastes like this. I really do. Remember, I've been in Fillydelphia since it happened. It used to be even worse, no order at all. We hid from gangs who wanted to commit genocide on ghouls. We watched ponies nailed to beams and held skyward for all to see and fear from. There was no authority, no organisation, just an unending war between gangs and slave traders. Slaves themselves were handed guns and forced into the fires that raged uncontrollably. Some blazes normal, some balefire. Horrors emerged from the metro and found a lush hunting ground. Hellhounds came in from the wastes. It was the culmination of everything the wasteland had to offer. Murk, we lived within a nightmare. An inferno of violence, depravity and pointless agony on anypony still within the borders."

He glanced at his friends.

"We lost most of those who survived with us, either early on, or as ghouls. Falls to the feral side were regular, consumed by the hate rising from that crater. It seemed Fillydelphia would extinguish itself in the brutality that wracked every street and tunnel. Chainlink Shackles was born into this, Murk. Why do you think he turned out like he did? I watched him go from a commanding infant to a brutal up-and-coming slaver who has believed *since birth* that those his family owned were his property. That *everypony* was just another waiting addition to his collection. Raised by hate and living in the flames bred a pony the likes of which terrifies me to the core, Murk. But he wasn't the only pony of note..."

The mentions of The Master made me shiver. I couldn't imagine him as a young pony, but it was such a perfect duality, like The Master had said. I had been born an accident... a tribute to slavery's demands on a young mare. He had been born on the other side of the fence, forever the symbol against what innocence I possessed.

"Th-then who else?"

Baton smiled.

"A pony from across the wastes. He came to Fillydelphia and we laughed at him. He didn't shoot or hurt ponies, he just talked to them. But oh, when he talked. I remember he approached our shelter, calmly drawing us out with a helping of his own supplies and food.

We sat with him and he told us of how things could be better. This stallion aided us, providing us with other allies he had found amongst the madness. What a pony! Kind, generous, and a great dreamer, he set about organising us to help work and create safe zones. Under his direction, we fought to defend those he cared for. He led us, even pulled me from a burning building once. Together, we saved lives. Eventually, we realised that a greater Equestria to come about, if only we would all pull together and work for it. He had inspired us. He was our hero."

The smile vanished. I sat with an open mouth, beginning to catch up to what he was gearing toward.

"His name was Red Eye. We were the first 'workers,' Murk. Don't place all your hope in legends. You never know what they'll become. At least you weren't around to be hurt by what yours did."

I simply huddled my front legs close to my body, sniffing. No, she was different from him. She was *different*.

"She wouldn't..."

"Legends don't last. Somepony wiser than me told me that hundreds of years ago. Don't let it get to you. These things happen to ponies in the wasteland."

How could they be so flippant and disillusioned about it? Was being alive that long what made them so willing to forget the good? Maybe even Red Eye could be good again! Or his ideals picked up by somepony else like Protégé! Was I really being too naïve? Believing in heroes and legends in a world that adamantly believed they didn't exist?

Any answer wasn't given a chance to be said. The slavers were shouting from the tunnels.

"All right, you slags! Next section of wall! Come on! Where's the rots? Get them out here now, they've had enough rest in their little rad-den!"

The ghouls began to get up. Baton looked toward the door and immediately moved over to me.

"Don't give up hope, but trust in who's around you. Not in who's out there. But all the same, *I* hope that you'll come back. I don't wanna rot down here until I die. That's my city up there needs rebuilding. Get going, Murky Number Seven. We'll wait for you."

The ghouls began to filter past in their chained up order. Baton Round and Bedlay Bloom shimmied forward first, Windtail and Splint a little afterward. The 'younger' Windtail looked at me almost pleadingly. The massive metal collar far too large for his neck, where it left weighty marks from years of servitude...

"We'll wait for you..."

The ghouls trooped past the door and toward the mining tunnels. Keeping back, I hid in the darkness before making off to find the service shaft. But I kept watching backward as they disappeared around the corner, limping and slowly dying. I wondered how many times they'd let their hope rise, and whether I was simply giving them another last hope before I too would turn out to let them down.

Leaving the metro was difficult. Not in the physical sense, for my grappling hook let me climb the stairwell Baton had mentioned with ease, suffering only a few squealing falls onto my rump. (To be fair, I hadn't had much chance to practice with this thing yet...)

No, it was difficult because I remembered everything The Master had said before. About

wanting twenty feet ‘done’ while marching Sunny’s column in this direction.

I was knowingly leaving my twice hero behind to the metro.

Rather slowly, it began to dawn on me that any hope she saw in me was as likely misplaced as many found in their own heroes throughout time.

The Mall was quiet. Or rather, the camp around it was. No doubt in The Master’s absence to the tunnels, the slaves not on shifts took what time they could to rest and relax. Those on the job were still clambering across the Mall, sliding new twisting lengths of razorwire onto the window ledges and scaffold tops. Using the same method as before, I dropped down behind the fence and immediately took cover. My eyes found Glimmerlight’s rather pitiful looking and leaky tent. Brimstone wasn’t present, but I could see a shadow on Glimmer’s tent of somepony inside. She was here. Oh thank Celestia...

Quietly hoofing it over, I ducked behind crude shelters and hid in old craters to close the distance. Oh, how I wanted to simply gallop to her side again and report that we had a potential way out if we could rig climbing equipment to get down that shaft again. Moving up to the area, I started creeping from cover to move into the—

Somepony quickly looked up from nearby toward me. Were they a slaver? I couldn’t take the chance, I rushed forward and *dove* into Glimmerlight’s tent. Tumbling through the flap, I fell against somepony, hearing a feminine yelp of surprise. Then a second feminine cry. Then a third.

Oh, wait... the last one had been me.

Covers tussled, I felt two ponies struggling out from under them on either side of me in the cramped little tent. I’d fallen between two resting ponies. Lying on my back, I now found Glimmerlight to one side of me and her... new friend, on the other. An earth pony mare with a lavender mane and soft blue coat sat up in shock out of the blanket. If it weren’t for Glimmerlight seeming at ease (if surprised) I figured she might have been out of the tent. Instead, Glimmer reached over to gently stroke her mane and look down at me lying half snuggled (by accident, I swear) between them.

“Oh, hello there!” Glimmer was entirely too cheery. I could only *imagine* why.

“You... you invited a buck too?” The mare leaned over me to speak to my friend, glancing down at me on my back with my hooves in the air. She seemed uncertain of my presence. “So, who’s your friend?”

“Oh, this is Murky!” Glimmerlight shimmied in, pressing herself against me in a little half hug. I felt my face turn a hasty shade of beetroot as I felt Glimmer’s ‘bed buddy’ do the same.

“Nah, didn’t *invite* him, not in *that* sense. He’s just back way earlier than I thought!” Glimmerlight continued, winking at me as she ruffled my mane. “He’s also just the most adorably little innocent buck around, just look at that blush, Leafshine! Just can’t resist a little hug for him, can you?”

They giggled together. Clearly of the same type of humour to embarrass me shamelessly by snuggling in on either side.

“I... I... I scouted...”

“Ah, business later, Murky. Comfy rest time now. Good thing you weren’t five minutes earlier. Leafshine and I were just, hmm, taking the edge off developments.”

"You're lucky to have Glimmerlight, Murk." Leafshine chuckled in her clipped accent, stroking a hoof around Glimmer's jawline. "Just a wonderful pony who knows how to make things seem nicer."

"Y-y-yes... s-s-she d-does..." I could feel my ears *burning* with embarrassment as I saw Leafshine lean over to lightly kiss my, uh... friend. "In other ways, mostly..."

"Mhm! Like my little bro, you are, Murky! Hey, Leafshine! You wanna take a peek at his journal? Come on, Murky, let's all have a look. We're all somewhat mature ponies here!"

"Ooooh... the one you said you got that pose from? Yes, lets!"

The pair leaned in, grinning eagerly.

I just covered my face with my hooves. Why, oh why, did it always have to be me?

Oh my...

Leafshine departed soon after the monolithically embarrassing art showcase. I might have taken at least some pride in it... but looking at the imagery I had once drawn so fluidly, it only reminded me of my *inability* to do the same now.

Another part of me felt somewhat annoyed at myself after Leafshine had offered to pose for me. Not in any sort of improper manner; instead, she had wanted to see herself drawn to look like she wasn't a bedraggled slave. I wished I could have, but I had only politely declined, citing that I didn't want to do her an injustice with my skills. The words seemed to make Glimmerlight look at me with a worried expression.

It raised my curiosity, that somepony as in grief over Caduceus' death would find another mare so fast to help cheer herself up with. I guessed it was just one way of her coping.

I forced it to the back of my mind, concentrating instead on explaining everything about the tunnels, den, and the ghouls to Glimmerlight. The news that The Master had knowledge of Ministry Station was bad enough, leading her to think for some time. She concluded that we could still go ahead, but that we needed to find some sort of edge to locate the Ministry Station *first*, and then be able to hide our progress. We would make a little den of our own inside it and slowly smuggle ponies inside to hiding before making our break into the lethal outer circle.

But right now, plans updated, I heard the report from Glimmerlight's side of things. The first news wasn't great.

"Brim's gone."

"What!?" I almost dropped the blanket I'd been forced to cover myself with in my short visit to here. The tent wasn't very warm and the rain threatened to tear it off. When was this storm going to end!?

"The Master... his revenge, I guess. He couldn't hurt Brimstone, but he could still send him away. He's been sent on a temporary posting to the mustering yards to haul heavy weaponry onto the trains and caravans. Brute work to keep him busy and away from The Master, I guess. He'll be back in a while, Shackles wouldn't dare lose him and he can't make such a prize too Red Eye disappear, but we're on our own again for now, Murky."

The thought just struck up every annoyance in my mind. Every single *one* of them. Every time we made a hoof forward, we were knocked back by something stupid like this. Why was The Master even doing that? Petty revenge wasn't his thing, even I knew that! Brimstone would likely *enjoy* the work.

"B-but you... will you be alright without him?"

"I'll get by, lil'bro. I managed for a while before Brimstone too, and most of the worst ponies were taken out with the riots. Sure wish Caduceus was here to help, though..."

The atmosphere seemed to chill a little. I edged forward, looking at her azure eyes as seriously as I could.

"You... you want to talk about him, now?"

"I guess so." Glimmer's face went a little void. "I've gotta talk sometime. Just... just wish he was still here. Poor Caddy... he didn't deserve that. I just... I keep feeling temptations..."

"Temptations to what?"

She glanced to me, before her horn lit and carried a small orb to me, the one I'd seen her toying with earlier. It was unspoken, we both knew what she meant. Again and again, I heard Coral's warning and words from the hospital. Glimmer didn't know how to deal with consequence, how to commit to her actions.

"Please, you can't. You said—"

"I know what I said, Murky! But I've been doing everything I can to just try and not think about it! To shut it out, to immerse myself in research, to build gemlights and purifiers. Hell, I even spent half an hour with Leafshine to get my mind off losing somepony like that! I just keep seeing him, Murky... keep seeing him putting that revolver in his mouth and *blowing his own fucking face off*! I can't handle that. I'm remembering why I kept forgetting things."

She wasn't crying, but it wasn't far off. Feeling a little pushing influence to my mind, I moved forward, wrapping the blanket around her as well as myself.

"It'll... it'll, um, get better..."

"So I keep telling myself. I could just take those few seconds. The moment where he pulled the trigger and get rid of that, couldn't I? But that's how this all started. Just a few horrible minutes... then maybe an afternoon I didn't like... a day isn't too much, right? It all builds like some sort of ridiculous addiction to chipping and smoothing my life into the one I want. The one where I'm just happy... maybe Coral's right..."

"She... she said—"

Glimmerlight looked up, almost falling out our blanket as she spun to face me.

"You talked to her?"

Her eyes seemed desperate, her hooves grabbing me around the shoulders.

"You spoke to Coral? I... I probably shouldn't ask this, but what about?"

Nervously, I bit my lip before replying. "A-about you, mostly. She wanted me to pass on a message. That she's..."

I paused.

"Grateful. She's grateful that you saved her. She... she said that you did it, proved you are willing t-to do something about your life. You did it, you got her interest, Glimmer. She's... she's wanting you to know that she does want you to try to be better. To be the friend you used to be to her..."

I was taking liberties a little, but Glimmerlight *needed* this. I couldn't let her fall back into her 'orb addictions,' Caduceus didn't die to be forgotten piece by piece until he was nothing but a series of chosen moments! I knew Coral needed it too, she hadn't said it, but I could see the need for somepony to be there for her too. She was truly alone without her family, friends, or even her own *son*.

Glimmerlight simply sat still, before tears started draining from her eyes. I'd seen her cry, seen her upset, but now I simply saw an empty pony *really* needing others around.

"Murky..."

"Yes, sis?"

"Help me. I... I want to do it. I want to remember. Will you help me do it? Before you go?"

I could barely survive. I couldn't save all the ponies I wanted. Sunny, Weathervane's sanity, his friends in the tunnels, Unity... they had all been taken or were in danger of being lost. But here, in this moment, I could do this. I would help Glimmerlight repair her *life*.

"I will."

Glimmerlight pulled the blanket around us tighter, before her magic started pulling her bag across to dig through the *mounds* of orbs. She slowly examined each at a time, speaking slowly and lowly. The mood had gone dark, neither of us knew what we'd find.

"Coral is a better pony than I ever can be, Murky. She didn't forget any of what happened to her. Whatever they did to her, whatever they did to her family in front of her eyes. Her son being dragged away. She *remembers* it, and she's still got it together enough to be a strong pony and... and look to offer me at least a *chance* to prove myself by facing what I did. If any pony deserves to be known for forgiveness... it's her, Murky. Not me."

Eventually, one dull blue orb hung out of the mass she had placed down around us. We were surrounded in the windswept tent by glittering memories... the chosen one hanging in the air.

"This... this is older. Maybe before it all happened but... but I'll need to start slow, okay? I don't know what this'll contain..."

I laid my hoof over hers.

"I... I'm here."

Her horn lit. I felt her tense up. She was so fragile right now. I could feel her ready to shout at me, tell me to stop agreeing with her to do this. But then the sparkles flew from her horn, the orb glowed, and we drifted away.

The world spun, my 'self' quickly faded to be replaced by foreign feelings. A sense of stretching, of being taller, better built, and healthier. Before I knew it, I was in the wasteland again. That unsettling sense of being trapped within my own body settled home hard. I tried to ignore it, to simply watch what was happening.

I was Glimmerlight. Her mane still felt much longer than it was these days. She was trotting under a forest of dead trees, the same one I'd seen surrounding her new home, Creaky Hollow. The light wasteland wind drifted and made her long pink mane flow and blow across her face, while the light seemed almost blinding compared to the storm-swept Fillydelphia.

She wasn't alone. Beside her I could see somepony else. A wasteland weathered and tattooed stallion. He had a slightly dopey expression under a face that held a few scars below his eyes. His voice seemed relatively informal.

"Thanks fer walkin' me out, Glim. Always means a lot to get a chance to see you in between caravan trips. Sure you can't take me home? We'd make a good trade for you lot, wherever you are in these woods."

I... sorry... *Glimmer* laughed. She shook her head.

"Sorry, hun. Village rules and all. We stay out the way. Hell, I don't think I'm even meant to be out here seeing *you*, never mind take you back to meet the town. You know I'm always gonna bring a few caps to get stuff with you. Try to come back this way again soon, huh?"

She stepped forward, hugging him tightly. I could feel his coat was rough, but thick and the sort of one I *wished* I could possess.

"You betcha, Glim. S'all I think about on the road, getting back to my little pink dreamer for a couple days out in the woods."

"Don't I look forward to it? Never gonna take me to see the caravan, though? I could trade on the village's behalf..."

The stallion shook his head. As he stepped back, I got a better look at him. Clad in tied leather armour with a heavy fabric undershirt. His body looked a lot like a rougher, darker coloured version of Caduceus, with the same proportions. Briefly, it occurred to me that Glimmer's preferences were looking pretty clear. On his flanks I could see a cutie mark of a marred, dirty and chipped diamond beside a small pickaxe. Wait, I was looking at his flanks? No, that meant she was! Oh, come on, Glimmer, the guy's trying to say goodbye here.

"Fraid not, Glim. They don't like dealing like that. Please, it's best if you don't come to them. We'll just stick one to one, okay? I got your needs for gems and orbs anyway. I'll see you later, pink dream."

"See you later, Diamond. Take care out there in the wastes, all right? I don't want to have to come save your flank."

They shared a giggle, before Glimmer cut it short with a rather aggressively assertive kiss right to his lips. My mind barely had a moment to think before the reality hit home that I was *kissing a stallion*. Oh, please, Glimmer! Have a little restraint, don't use your—

She did. Ooooh boy...

With her eyes thankfully closed, I just kept trying to distract myself by thinking about the situation. Thus far, this memory didn't seem to hold anything particularly traumatic, (by her standards, anyway) so why get rid of this?

I could feel myself—rather *her*—beginning to blush as they shared the ongoing intimacy of their mouths. Glimmer *really* didn't hold back. It took him to gasp for air and lightly push her off to stop it. I felt her grin cheekily and lower her eyes. *That* look. He seemed to flush.

"Oh don't tempt me..."

Please, sis. Don't.

"...cause I've gotta get on the way. See ya roun', Glim!"

She waved as he trotted off into the dry bushes and away, licking her lips and grinning to herself. He was quiet on his hooves, or was that just the dull hearing of ponies other than me?

Apparently not, I heard a crack behind her from a twig breaking. Swinging, I felt her mane wash around. I *wished* could see her mane like this. She would look *amazing*. But her eyes now found the newcomer now emerging up a path through bracken, pushing it away with a hoof.

"Glimmer, was that him again?"

Her voice was a world apart. I saw her better fed and kept. Coral Eve was dressed in a light dress stitched from wool, a basket over her back. Most surprisingly, she had none of

the bitter resentment and anger that I saw in her eyes.

"Yeah, I figure you saw him anyway. Don't worry, we just met out in the woods."

"I know Glimmer, I know. Here, c'mon, we need to get back before the elder comes looking. You do remember what I said, right?"

The pair began to trot home. I saw Glimmer's eyes focus on the thicker innards of the forest. I couldn't even vaguely see the village. It really was well hidden.

"To be careful? Don't worry, I got a couple in my shack! Brought them from Bucklyn, the Rangers don't like unintentional reproduction in a low population bridge base after—"

"I don't mean *that!*" Coral laughed, knocking Glimmer's side. "I mean about *him*. Did you see those tattoos? The scars? He's had a rough life in the wastes. I don't want you to get hurt, dear. Caravanner types lead harsh lives, lots of inter-company rivalries and stuff."

"Aw, c'mon, he's not like that! You should meet him, then you'll see. He's really lovely! Look what he brought me?"

Glimmer pulled a small bag from her own saddle. Opening it, I saw a luminous shine that seemed to *glow* on its own accord. It was full of gemstones of all types! Despite her worry, I could see Coral's eyes go wide at the sight.

"Wow... generous for a wastelander..."

"I know, right? Plus, he's a real sweet one in the throes of the moment, I'll tell you that."

She leaned close, whispering something I really wished I hadn't heard. They shared a friendly chuckle, holding one another over the shoulders at the cheeky bit of gossip. They had stopped briefly, leaning on a seemingly random part of fence still standing. I could see the rest fallen through the browned bushes around them. Their laughter grew, but Coral stifled hers first, patting her friend on the shoulders.

"That's all lovely, Glim. Just take care, all right? You know I love you like family. And that means I just don't want anything to happen to you. You've been a world of good to the village, even if you are a little..."

"Friendly?"

"...I was going to say naive. Look, if this stallion gives you someone to commit to, I'm happy for you. But just take care. Maybe we'll bring it up to the elder at the next meeting, okay? Now, let's get going. I don't wanna leave Chirpy too long alone."

Glimmerlight breathed a sigh of relief, I imagined this had been worrying her as to what Coral might think. She leaned forward, giving her friend a quick, friendly peck on the cheek. I felt it returned.

"Thanks, Coral. Love you."

They shared a hug, before cantering on down the trail. They raced, laughing as they went, running into the darkness that began to surround my viewpoint from Glimmer's eyes... the darkness that...

...faded into the black tent. The light had gone out while we were under. The calm wasteland day was replaced with the howling wind that seared through the open flaps and washed over our bodies hidden beneath the blanket. Rubbing my eyes, dizzy and groaning, I sat up. Glimmer seemed less affected than I, already crouched over, holding the orb carefully.

"Diamond..." She barely whispered it. "I... I don't remember a Diamond, but it was like

I *really* liked him. He's the only thing I'd want to forget from that, nothing else was out of place! But he seemed nice..."

She hugged the orb close.

"It's something about him, it has to be. What did I do? Did... did I break the rules? Did I sell them out to him for something? Was he really not nice? Coral seemed wary, and I know I was always a bit reckless."

She sighed.

"Oh Murky, what have I *done*? What if I was the one who led those who destroyed Creaky Hollow in? If he was a *raider*. I lay down with a fucking *raider* and sold them out to him!"

"Maybe it's not that!"

"What else *could* it be, Murky?"

Her voice snapped, swivelling her head around at me. I recoiled, seeing the hard stare. Glimmer's voice turned self deprecative, ranting about herself.

"Glimmerlight! Slapping flanks with a torturing and raping *beast* because he wanted to get her home out of her! I'm an *idiot*, Murky. A naive idiot! Coral's got every reason to hate me for... for not hearing her warning. Oh... oh, Murky, I'm sorry..."

She clearly saw the shock in my eyes from her outburst. Really, it had been seeing my friend hurting herself so much with her own words. Moving over, she hugged me tightly.

"I'm sorry... it's just..."

"It's... it's okay. You knew it'd be hard. But... but maybe there's still a lot to see, we'll take our time, okay? I'm... I'm with you. Always."

Glimmerlight sniffed, squeezing me once and not letting go. We simply sat and shook, both our minds running over theories and ideas. But it all kept coming back to the one horrid fact over just who this Diamond really was...

"A toast!"

"A TOAST! YEAH!"

Only now, the ambient sound was beginning to come to my mind. We could hear a lot more commotion outside from the slaves. Hooves pounded on the ground. Voices roared. We looked at each other, before immediately moving to poke our heads out.

A congregation of slaves had gathered. Weak, diseased, yet still showing a sudden surge of strength together. They had brought what water they could from the rain, many of them trying to copy Glimmer's purifier (with varying success, I saw one with a *sock*), to get what they could into mugs and waterskins. Some even just held bowls in their telekinesis. But they were clustered around a fallen trolley rack, surrounding a fire barrel. The wind blew the sooty smoke through the tents as they chanted and stomped. What was going on?

"What do we toast to?"

"THE FALLEN!"

"To WHAT?"

"THE FALLEN!"

Many of them swilled the foul water. What did they mean by the fallen? What was...

Oh... no they did *not*.

A slave raised a hoof, aiming for silence.

"We got the shit end of the stick, but what did we get then? Some pony galloping around, thinking she was the fucking messiah or something? Causing trouble in Filly and getting dozens of us shot for her escape? Well, did we see her helping us?"

"NO!" The crowd cheered.

"So drink, fellow slaves of the great shit end! Finally, an end to all that lording-it-up bullshit as we find out she's *just like the rest of us!* She gonna shoot me because I stole from farms to survive? Gonna kill Skippy over there cos he had to give his clients a beating if they couldn't pay? You know she wasn't gonna stop at raiders!"

"NOT STOP!" They picked up the line with a raising of mugs.

"Not any more! She's guilty, and now somepony can give her some of her own method! No more gun-happy mare shooting up the place!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"No more stupid Dweller riling up the raiders and giving us hell!"

How... how *dare* they...

All day, I'd found ponies who didn't believe in heroes, ponies who had lost faith in legends. I'd fought and driven myself to near insanity in an effort to keep clinging onto some hope. I was *not* hearing this now!

"No more false 'hero' only making things *worse!*"

Why did everypony think that? No, she... wasn't! Legends *could* exist! They could! THEY COULD! What was wrong with everypony to stay so bad?

"Nothing but a murderer herself! Red Eye should get her back in here! The corrupted pony!"

Well I had had *enough* of it.

"*HOW DARE YOU!*"

The words screamed from my throat so hard that I felt my vocal chords go raw and sore. But they heard me, heads turned. I rushed forward, feeling Glimmerlight fail to restrain me. Galloping between the tents, I ran into the crowd, standing near the barrels amongst a hundred staring eyes.

"How can you all say that!? Can't *anypony* see? Everypony keeps saying she's turned or gone bad. She's good! She is! You should trust in her!"

They regarded me with distaste.

"Shut up, runt!"

"Get lost! She's just a shitty shade of grey like any of us! Get over yourself!"

I hopped onto the base of the trolley rack, moving up its bend roof until I was slightly above them, shouting to merely be heard above their voices. The arc of scowling slaves surrounded me, all looking up at me screaming at them.

"I... I saw her! How can you all just sit here and cheer about this? The Stable Dweller is trying to help the world to make this sort of stuff stop! Why can't you all see that? She's trying to help you! She's trying to help everypony! Please, listen to me!"

I looked left and right, but I saw ponies just wave their hooves and jeer. An empty can flew past my head. Seething, I tried again.

"The wasteland just wants everypony to give in and be horrible to one another! She tried to do something about it. But you all, while in this hellhole, keep saying that's the wrong thing? She's stopped raiders! She saved slaves!"

"I don't see my life changing, did she stop to save us? She just ran away for herself and a fucking *stripe!*"

"*She's trying!* She..."

The words were soul crushing to have to admit, that I wasn't under her protection...

"...she can't save everypony." I forced myself to go on, feeling those words sting. "Not if

they don't want to be saved! I heard you all in the Pit, screaming for her to be killed like some bloodsport! Why can't you all just see that she's trying to be good and you all need to help out? She's the one last good pony really doing something out there and you all belittle her for it! How is that anything like Equestria? HOW!?"

That got their attention, and a silence followed. Stomping a hoof, tears in my eyes, I kept going, feeling my whole body shaking with nerves, fear, and outright adrenaline.

"So many ponies have died trying to save our world. They all try so hard, and sometimes they fail or go bad! I've seen them, I've seen the past! I've heard the stories of Red Eye. How many could have gone further if other people, not just ponies, had stood together instead of always fighting? They... they cried like me, they fought so hard, and it didn't matter! Because it's not one pony who changes everything. They can only show the way and *inspire!* Like she inspired me! Gave me a life I never had before! She showed you all the same thing! Why can't you see that? Why can't you see anything beyond just yourselves!?"

I sniffed, tears dripping off the pillar, falling below into the burning smoke that stung my eyes.

"Why can't we all just be better ponies? The Stable Dweller, she's... she's what we should be! How can you celebrate the bad and try to knock down the good? We're all ponies inside. Can't you feel that longing to be a part of a good Equestria again? That need we all have? That little spark in all of us that knows this is wrong? Ponies like The Master try to turn us against one another, and feed the fires of hatred and discord to all of us. She is trying to restore what we once were!"

"She murdered a whole fucking village!"

"I knew ponies there!"

"She's just a fucking psychopath! Least now we know it!"

I screamed back, feeling this quickly becoming a trading of barbs and denials.

"No she isn't!"

"SHE IS!"

"She wouldn't! I believe she wouldn't!"

From within the smoke, a half brick clanged off the metal beneath me.

"You're just talkin' bullshit, kid! She's a fucking raider now! Always was and just lying!"

"But she's good! She's trying to save all of— OW!"

A pebble, propelled by telekinesis, struck my forehead. A mug hit the lip of the trolley rack, and sloshed filthy water on me. More items pinged or struck off me. Another rock hit my chest, making me almost fall. I was simply shrieking, hollering. The wind swirled the ash and smoke around, making the crowd seem like one horrible entity, shifting and heaving as a singular force. Like I was seeing the physical manifestation of the wasteland itself before my eyes, recoiling and sneering at any effort to fight it.

"She's trying to save all of us! ALL OF US! PLEASE, BELIEVE ME, SHE— ARGH!"

Flaming wood crashed again upon the pillar, I almost tripped. Terror was overtaking the faithful will to try and convince the crowd.

I had to believe, to have faith that this would work.

"I... I'LL PROVE IT! IT'S ALL A LIE! That all this stuff on the radio is just a mistake!"

They stopped only briefly, my bruised but defiant body standing above them. I pulled my PipBuck from my bag, strapped it to my hoof and began pressing the buttons to get to the radio, whispering gently to myself.

"Please, please Littlepip. I *believe* in you. Have this be solved, have the truth come out

now. Please DJ, please Goddesses... I *need* this as much as anypony else..."

I took a deep breath, and threw my hoof in the air, cranking the volume to maximum.

"Now, all of you just LISTEN!"

A straggly static washed across the area, before I heard the DJ's wonderful voice break through.

"—Wastelanders. We have, right now for the first time since Arbu... an update on the incident for all those who missed my last news..."

Yes! The newscast at the perfect time, this could work!

Everypony beneath seemed stunned at the seemingly prophetic timing, glancing upward with wide eyes.

"News is slow filtering back but... but I'm sorry to say..."

My heart stopped.

"It's happened again. Another settlement has gone lights out, close to Arbu. But this time it's no defenceless village. It's that bastion of the Steel Rangers themselves, Bucklyn Cross. Lost with all ponies, they're saying. No pony got out alive after the Stable Dweller's band were seen heading there..."

All the sound in the world stopped, the crowd didn't matter as I felt every emotion in my heart collapse. But one thought forced my head to turn away from the slowly angering crowd. Beside the tents, at the side, through the fires, I saw Glimmerlight standing in abject shock, looking at my PipBuck. Her eyes filled with tears immediately, her legs trembling, the horror upon her face actually painful to take in.

"Ah don't know what to think of this, my little ponies. Another whole group of folks, Rangers or not... it's just not right. All reports say it simple. Far as we know right now, no pony in Bucklyn Cross survived the massacre."

I could see her mouth moving...

"Bucklyn Cross... Mom... Dad..."

Every ounce of motivation was sucked clean out of me at that sight.

She took off, running through the crowds into the darkness. At the same time, a pain exploded across my face as a halfbrick slammed into my temple. The shock threw me off, almost falling into a fiery barrel until I grabbed the edge and swung myself clear. The jeering, the shouting and betrayed horror that drove their anger was worse than ever, and I had just offered myself as a target.

Under a barrage of projectiles, I covered my face as everything from stones to old boots clanged and whizzed past me.

I could have worried about them... I could have feared for my life at being seen. But all I knew was that Glimmer needed somepony. I saw her galloping, away into the Mall to escape everything. Shouting, I pulled myself to my feet, muscles aching... running after her, tearing away from the angry slaves.

"Glimmer!" There was no reply. "GLIMMER!"

Passing inside, I saw her stumble on the stairs, grief driving her to be barely able to see through misted eyes. I rushed up to her side.

"I... I'm sorry! There's some mistake or... or lies or—"

"NO!" Her hoof pushed me off, a face filled with anguish and furious sadness spinning on me. "That's it! That is... it! Once is something to be wary about, but a second time!? Murky, that's the proof. It had to have been her!"

"She wouldn't!"

"She damn well did, Murk!"

I wasn't sure what stung me more: that my friend believed this, or that in her anger she'd reverted to... to what *others* called me...

"Bucklyn Cross was a *fortress*! My... my mom wouldn't be killed off by some random raider, she was a *Paladin*! It had to have been her! They were too powerful to go down! Twice in a row... can't you see? I'm so sorry, Murky... she's fallen..."

I stomped my two front hooves, refusing to let her believe this.

"No she hasn't! Littlepip wouldn't—"

"You can say that all you like but it doesn't *change* anything, Murky! Wake up and smell the ashes, don't try to defend her to me here! She's just murdered my fucking parents! You can't follow somepony like this! That mare isn't what you thought, I'm sorry—"

"I don't believe that!"

We stood facing each other, her higher on the stairs than myself. The dull glow of Fillydelphia, lingering crimson and reflecting everything that came forth... the conflicted belief and anger.

"She's the one that gave me hope, Glimmer! She saved my life!"

"She saved *herself*. You just got caught up in it, believe in *us*, Murky! Not some mare out there! How can... how can you *dare* speak good of her after what she did? Two settlements, dozens of innocents, and my own mom and dad? Oh no..."

We both stopped, breathing heavily. Our eyes wouldn't blink, wouldn't move from the other. But finally, I saw Glimmer step back and snort.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be around me for a while. If you're going to praise high and fucking mighty the mare that just killed my folk. Too many times to be a coincidence now, and while you wear that PipBuck *like* her and carry a statue *of* her with that childish belief... I don't think I *want* to be around you. Not for now, at any rate, not till you... not till you realise what you're..."

Her voice trailed off, and I saw just how torn up she was inside.

"But—"

I stopped myself as her words only just hit home.

She shook her heads, her soaked cheeks glinting in the red light.

"I know you're still trying figure things out and... and to go through, but no, I can't just... not now. Look at it from my side, Murky. I'm seeing somepony I considered a friend telling me my parents' killer is some perfect pony. But till then I think you should just *go*."

She turned past me to walk onward.

"Go hide and s-stay safe, because so help me I can't bring myself to want anything bad to happen to you. I don't want to be the one that hurts you if you stay around, preaching her name to my face when I just lost my parents! We'll... maybe we'll meet later but... but for now just... just... go."

Glimmerlight began to trot on into the Mall, her voice cracking under wracking sobs on the last few words. I... I didn't... what did I... what could I say? I...

"...Sis?"

"Don't even think of calling me that right now."

Her head low, filled with tears, she galloped off into the musky corridors. Somehow, seeing her go, feeling the weight of the argument with her, I found myself falling to the stairs in great sobs. My front hooves wrapped around my head, I could only remember the times we had laughed together, played and bantered. The times we'd saved one another's

lives and... and been chosen siblings...

Was it gone?

Silence lay across the lonely stairwell, populated only by me.

Instead of helping an ally, I'd just lost a sister.

I don't know how long I lay, crying into my hooves. I'd... I'd hurt her, somehow and I didn't even know how. I had to believe in Littlepip. If I stopped, then that was it. She was my *foundation*, but... but my belief in her was hurting a pony near me who thought otherwise.

Hooves approached, from back the way Glimmer had gone. Trotting close, I felt the presence of somepony above me.

Gently... slowly, I felt a hoof ruffle my mane, exactly as she did. She... she was...

"I'm sorry!" I wailed with my eyes closed. "I... I'm so sorry!"

Then I opened my eyes and looked up... to see my own staring back at me. Light green... my mouth began to widen to scream.

"Oh, *you will be*." The Master leered down from above me.

My hooves screamed into action, but it was far too late. A weight descended as I felt it clamp around my neck, the collar dropping hard and snapping shut before locking. Kicking out, I ran anyway, before my neck tugged and jarred to a halt, throwing my hooves from below me.

Lying on my side, thrashing, but being dragged all the same across the ground into the Mall, I could only scream and scream, accompanied by the triumphant laughter of My Master.

"Please... if anypony out there knows something, anything, let us here at the radio know. You know I don't like sounding emotional on here, wastelanders, but hope's been taken from us. I imagine there's a lot of folks out there clustering around their radios, waiting for it to be renewed. There'll be a lot of hurt ponies who need her back, need that light in their lives..."

I don't pretend to ignore that some poor little wishful pony's life out there might rely on it.

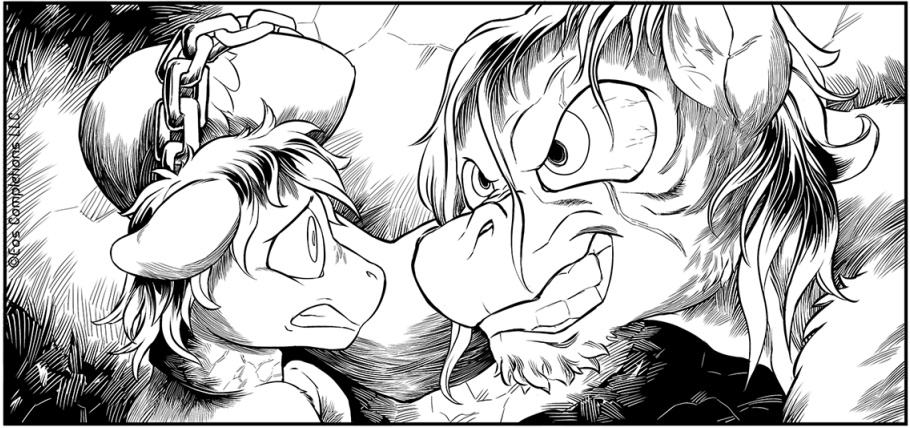
So I plead of you, wasteland. Find anypony... anypony with a little information on what happened. Because I'll wager there's a lot of folks depending on it right about now to save them.

Let me bring them the truth, no matter how bad it hurts."

Footnote: Perk lost...

Path of the Lightbringer – Something has fallen in you, a faith shaken to the point of great loss. Somehow, you just can't muster the same unwavering hope to keep you going any longer. You no longer receive the adrenaline rush when low on health.

Like Father, Like Son



“Does The Master really want progress, or does he just want slavery?”

“What... what is it like to be *his* slave?”

My greatest fear. To be trapped forever. It was finally coming true.

The collar snapped shut and with it, so did many of my hopes and dreams. The weight around my neck only drew the slave in my mind to the fore. He had me. His. His *own*. But I just... I couldn't think about anything other than how I'd managed to hurt one of my friends the moment that she'd needed me to be there for her most. Hearing Glimmerlight tell me to just... go. That wracked my heart in ways no slaver ever could.

Very quickly, everything was beginning to fall away from me. Every step after that one glorious moment of feeling like I'd *done* something by ending Barb's riot had only led me farther and farther away from the ponies I knew and loved. With them leaving, being taken from me, or turning out to... to not be what I thought they were.

That's all I could think of, amidst all of my screaming and begging, I could only feel the pain of losing the friendships I'd worked and suffered so hard to attain. All the toil, constant running, and desperate attempts to survive had been taking their toll. By the time he found me, I was already weak with a lack of proper rest and ripe for him to... to...

Sorry... I... I just need a minute...

“It's alright, sorry. You probably don't want to—”

No! I... I want to, I'm just... scared. I said before how scared I am of him, the way he's always there in my life in some way or another.

But this was it. I was now his... his...

“Slave?”

Yes.

Just a wretched trophy, the born slave, the crippled pegasus, the pony with a set of shackles as his cutie mark. The ultimate symbol to all those around him of what I

represented, to all his peers of why *he* was the real slaver and a reminder to all ponies in Fillydelphia of just how they were trapped. That even those with *wings* were grounded and held deep within the bowels of the fiery industry. You couldn't escape Fillydelphia. Never *ever* could. Not unless you were already outside the Wall, or some sort of legendary figure like Littlepip.

Of course... the idea of legends was fast fading from my mind, held only by a tenuous belief, one born of hope.

I had fallen so far. Bereft of friends and weak of body, he saw the momentary weakness and pounced. He *knew* it wouldn't take much, that he only needed to push a little, get into my head and start to mould me back into what I had once been. I didn't want it, the idea of the chains snapping shut once again and casting me into the never ending blur of true slavery makes my heart beat and my head pound... it always does. I was about to be thrown through his world, subject to his whims and fancies and little more than a living *toy* with which he could sate his appetite for control and power over all others around him. But... I was so vulnerable... crying out for a purpose and a direction that... that I...

"...no... you didn't."

I started to believe him.

"I..."

I'm sorry. I'm *so, so sorry*, but this is the truth of it! You ask what it's like under him? Well this is the reality! The darkest days, as I said. He wouldn't let my life be anything but controlled.

But there was one little hope in my mind. Just... just one direction that mattered. The one thing I would *not* let him take from my dreams. Glimmerlight. I needed to... to get to her, say whatever I needed to and... and just do something to make it all fine again! I didn't know how. I hadn't known what it was like to lose somepony until the day before then with Caduceus and even then... much as it hurts to say, I hadn't really 'known' him. I just had to try.

That's... that's all that I had to go on.

"But, what about your escape? Didn't you want to escape? That driving force? Surely you didn't forget about..."

He... he told me to...

"...oh no..."

My neck was jerked, the bones of my neck along my spine jumped and felt like the gaps were separating far further than they should have as the collar tugged hard enough to pull me from all four hooves.

"Keep up!"

Choking out a strangled gasp, my front hooves pawed helplessly at the thick metal as it pulled again...

"I said KEEP UP, SLAVE!"

The chain jolted, biting upward into my neck and cutting off my windpipe. Thrashing, fighting to get my hooves under me, he gave me no quarter to think. Pulling me again and again, dragging me, pull by pull, down the corridors against all my efforts.

He would stride ahead, stomping his way through the Mall and yank the chain every

time my weakened body fell behind. My head swam with terror, both for Glimmerlight and myself. We'd been in circles multiple times as he toured the Mall, observing the slaves. My only breaks were when he'd stopped to punish somepony else. Gradually, bit by bit, it had all become a blur. A couple desperate steps... followed always by that tug of my collar. My neck was already reddened and sore, bruising badly and becoming ever more painful to simply have on. Sores blistered over around where it hung.

There was no purpose to it other than the continual reminder of who I was and to demonstrate to everypony else that he had me. The entire time, I simply watched for Glimmer when I could, desperate to at least be able to shout two words, the two words I knew I had to say...

"Keep up!"

I *was* moving quickly, but only choked as I was pulled onto my face again, before being dragged another twenty feet for falling. My Master was just a giant blurry form to my oxygen starved and dizzied perception now. Occasionally I'd just see those light green eyes staring and try to get back up.

How... how long were we going to go on? I couldn't... I... I couldn't cope with...

"Keep UP!"

The chain tugged, my neck whiplashed and pulled me to my hooves to begin another circuit... carried along for no reason other than to remind me of my place.

"Inside, Number Seven! Go!"

"W-what's in— ARRGH!"

I cried from being picked up by the chain and hurled through a door. I hit something hard and wooden, collapsing upside down onto my head. My fleece caught on something and tore, the saddlebag landing beneath me as I rolled to the side and scampered backward into a desk before curling up, trying to pull the collar away from my rapidly worsening throat.

It was his office. I... I'd seen this before! My eyes spotted the ventilation duct above I'd once spied Barb and My Master from. The same heavy desk that I'd landed on... the same low and filthy bed... but now I could see more. Filing cabinets, taken from other places, were now ranked along the sides. Another two doors went away from the old office, leading to two private interview rooms, I guessed. A metal grated and heavily locked cage cupboard bore the weapons I had seen him use now and again. The walls were of rotted old wood and peeling wallpaper while I saw chains hanging from sharp hooks alongside a mass of items. All entrapment, all to restrict and prevent somepony moving in some way. The corners bore simple refuse and old clothing. This was as far from the calm library of Protégé as I could ever be...

But my eyes quickly turned back to him as I scrambled away from the desk, breathing hard and fast as I scampered for the back of the room... pressing myself into a little ball in the corner to be as far away from *him* as possible.

My Master strode into his own office. He was wearing a grin of absolute satisfaction as he advanced to the centre and kept his eyes trained at me. Chains swung from around his neck, attached to me. A thick whip hung from his armour. Slowly, with delight, he closed the door behind us.

Filling my vision in the smaller office, he advanced on those giant hooves until his bulk covered the meagre green lamp in the corner. Then he... he just *stood* there... watching as I shivered and felt more and more afraid as the length went on. For minutes or... was it an hour? How did time work here? *I didn't know!* He just kept staring and making me afraid every time he took a breath that he might speak or do something to me. Oh Goddesses help me!

"I'll let you off for forgetting the word 'Master' this **once**, Number Seven. Finally... oh, finally... you're right *here*."

The words slid from his mouth like creeping touches to my skin, making me whine and plea under my breath as he began to move forward. With a retch of my aching throat, I was pulled upward, his hoof wrapping around the chains to lift me up before him right off the ground. I struggled in the air, my hooves holding the collar to lift my neck up from it to... to be able to *breathe!* He... he was hanging me with my own collar! My hind legs kicked out fruitlessly off the floor, seeing little silver spots in my vision before I closed my eyes.

"You've defied me... ran from me... tried to keep other ponies from me. Oh you will be sorry for this, slave. Oh... you will. Eventually."

He dropped me. I fell at his hooves, coughing and spluttering before just curling up at his hooves, gasping and retching. The reality of it all was sinking in. Please... somepony be there! Brimstone could come back or... or Protégé could turn up at the door or... or *anypony please!*

"Look at your Master when he is talking, Number Seven!"

A hoof swung backward and caught me across the face, throwing me back into the wall as My Master advanced. I felt my cheek bleed, and I obeyed. My eyes shot upward to gaze upon him... and I felt sick at the mere sight.

"Well... it may come as a surprise to you, Number Seven. But I don't torture ponies..."
...h-huh?

"Surprised?"

I nodded, then squeaked, remembering. "Yes, Master!"

"No... no... I don't *torture* ponies. I'm a slaver, Number Seven. I only *punish* them. Now that we finally have a little, heh, *private* time... knowing you're *mine*. So we can get along with making you into what you're meant to be. Wouldn't you like to finally find your destiny? Accepting your punishment like a good little pony and coming back home where you know your place, eh? Don't you want to feel the comfort of knowing who you are again?"

He moved around the desk, his eyes never leaving me. Soaked by my own tears, I kept moving away, until I found myself pressed up against the bed.

"I... want to be free, Master..." My voice felt tiny, a shrill whisper against his commanding tone.

"So selfish. Want doesn't get, Number Seven. Oh no... this is your destiny right **here!**" His hoof thundered onto the desk, making it shake terribly. "By my side! My little *pet!* Don't you like that?"

"Please just let me—"

"BE QUIET, SLAVE!" The chain tugged hard, and my scream was cut short by the pressure on my neck. Trying to turn over, a gigantic hoof pressed down across my chest and belly, forcing me onto my back as his face leered down from above and slowly grew closer with every word. His other hoof slapped against one of my cutie marks, demeaning and

invasive upon my body and hard enough that I cried out every time. **“THIS IS WHAT YOU ARE!”**

My ears burned, the bellowing inches from my face. I couldn't close my eyes, feeling my chest crushed under his weight. I shivered at the horrid sensation of spittle dripping or being spat over my face. The stench of rancid sweat and rotten breath wafted over me. But his face softened, losing its anger. Eventually, he even eased off my chest.

Harsh and then backing off for a few seconds. I was being toyed with.

“Perhaps we just need to find the best way for you to realise it, little Number Seven. You've drifted from your place in life. You've let the raider and the whore fill your brain with ideas you were never meant for. Let some little mare out there give you hope that was always going to be crushed. Perhaps we should let you see what life I can give you...”

He raised up, allowing me to once again retreat away. I could feel something dripping near the pain on my neck. A stray tear? Spit? *Blood!?*

My Master wandered back to his desk, his hoof touching objects across it idly, before his eyes snapped back.

“Did I say you could lie down, slave?”

“No, Master!” I actually cried in pain as I pushed injured limbs under me, driven past pain by obedience to stand up rock still.

“Better... now, as I was saying, Number Seven. You probably think I'm going to torture you, be some sadistic slaver that hurts you every day for his own sick amusement. But you'd be wrong. Your punishment will come eventually. For now, you are going to begin your time as my *personal* slave.”

My mind was hurting. Well, my *skull* was hurting, but it pretty much meant the same thing. What kind of trick was this? I had expected the water torture again... or... or to be sent to his mines. Or worse. But I could barely think straight. My vision kept hazing, my fears for Glimmerlight still aching away in my head alongside the gut clenching terror that I was locked to My Master.

“Nooo... no. As I said, Number Seven, I'm not a torturer. I just...” He paused, before cackling and sneering at me, staring down from his massive height. “...command. I only punish those who don't *follow*. Everypony is a slave, Number Seven, some just don't know it yet. So you **will** follow what I say. Now, admit what you are, and perhaps we might lessen your punishment for disobeying me and running away.”

It hurt more than I could ever imagine to let the words come out, but I had no choice here.

“A... a slave, Master...”

Crack! I stumbled and screamed, the wooden floor chipping as the whip struck it. How did he use it so fast?

“You are not ANYPONY'S slave! WHAT ARE YOU?”

“Your slave! Your... your slave, Master! Your...” I felt the tears keep rolling down my cheeks, the bitter words coming out as hatefully as if I were throwing up. “...slave.”

My Master's smile only increased... his chest swelling as he heard the reference to ownership. I wanted to be sick. The feel of a whip cracking had thrown me back in line, making me say what I'd thought for a moment was true. I was so scared that my teeth ached from being pressed together.

“Then it is time you began to act it. You are mine now. You will follow me, be my personal slave. You will keep your collar on at all times! You will remain in my office. You

will sleep here when I tell you that you may. You will only eat what I give you. Your life is mine now. But at some point, you-**REMAIN STILL!**"

I bolted upright from where I had been dizzily swaying, standing almost to attention.

"So first, you're going to perform a task for me while I finish the rounds for the day. I didn't expect you to so kindly return to me, Number Seven, so you've interrupted my schedule. Get over here."

Trembling, I started to—

"NOW!"

I galloped forward, stopping short of the desk, shivering and sore. The chain jangled no matter when I moved. Literally every movement of my own was reminding me that I was *attached* to him. That thought alone turned my stomach.

What he had for me was completely beyond anything I could have predicted, of all the horrible imagined pains, it defied every one of them.

"I want you to organise this room, Number Seven. Before I come back, I want everything back somewhere that makes sense. All the spare ammo on the ground sorted, the chains stacked on their rings, and the papers organised on the desk. You will clean for me and you will do it promptly. We'll break you in softly, eh? Hehe..."

"I... I understand, Master..." The words stammered out weakly, caught by the pressure around my throat. It was a constant fight to not pull at it even while I stared, confused at the, well, *easy* task.

My Master leered down, before his hoof settled on my head. Gently running over an ear and curving across my scar down to my cheek, he lifted my head.

"You're where you should be, slave. Where you were always meant to be. Fillydelphia was always to be the climax of your life, where you would finally find your true Master. You can rest now. Relax and know you've found your true role in life. You've made it home."

The other hoof came up, grasping my other cheek and squeezing as his face leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine. My body twitched. I wanted to struggle, but those eyes just stared and stared, holding me still.

"Now we're finally together, whether by blood or by destiny, you're where you always were meant to be. Just like when I found this city, I found where I was *meant* to be. We're bonded, you and I. You've turned out just how I always wished a pony would while I grew up. A little pony to own for myself, the one I wanted when I *took* her."

Tears were beginning to drop from my eyes. How... how dare he talk of that! The words alone stung and disgusted me. I didn't remember her but... but...

I... just wanted to cry alone. It wasn't true, I just couldn't face the thought of it. *It wasn't true. I wasn't his!*

His rancid breath washed over my face and made me oh-so-glad for my blocked nose. I just breathed shortly and sharply, not daring to speak out of turn to My Master. Finally, he leaned back, removing the chain from his armour and locking it to a thick hoop welded to a plate on the floor.

"Now... I'll leave you to your duty."

Chuckling, almost muttering a little tune to himself, he turned to the door before drawing a sealed box, from which he took a deep bowl. Immediately, I was hit with a waft of steam and a small wash of heat.

A smell hit my nostrils... even through the mucus blocking them I could detect it. A warm smell... rich and thick and fruity and... *real* food...

My Master pushed it toward me, right up to my hooves.

"I will return in under an hour. Get this task done."

There was no other response. "Yes, Master!"

"Good..."

With that, he turned, his massive bulk a poor fit for his own room as he blew out the lamp, sidled through the doorway, and slammed it behind him. The room fell into darkness and remained still. I heard at least three locks on the outside slam shut... and I was left alone in my collar... chained to the room itself. My ears heard him move away, stomping down the creaky floors to the stairwell and descending.

I waited only till I could not hear him before I leapt to the one providence. It killed me to obey him to eat when he told me to... but I couldn't turn it down.

Only, I had to. To eat was to put myself in danger.

Even as I lifted the bowl up, even as I smelled its wonderful contents and felt the radiating heat, I knew I had to refuse. It was a trap. He hadn't told me to eat it. He was just the sort to omit that on purpose.

Briefly, I was tempted anyway. I was starving. My stomach felt shrunk, and growled eagerly. My mind raced, could I take a lashing just to get food? Was it worth it? The thought lingered, feeling more and more alluring, until I placed the bowl exactly where it had been left.

That quaking thought of having to consider such drastic measures to merely eat let a lot of my situation really sink in.

The smell would haunt me all the while. A torture even in avoiding his ploy. I moved as far as I could from it. Technically, I should have started my work right away, but I just couldn't. Not... not after so much in so short a time. Gently lifting the heavy chain, almost as thick as one of my skeletal little legs itself, I just sighed and curled up on the spot, hearing the dull clanking of metal every time I moved. The entire situation was driving me to keep closing and opening my eyes in a desperate attempt to find that this nightmare wasn't real. I didn't want to do it... to do his work and fall into his world. Any minute now I'd wake up again. I'd scream and fall out of bed beside... beside Glimmer! She'd hug me and we'd feel better because we were... together...

...Glimmer...

Already, I missed her. Not like before... now I missed the knowledge that she'd be waiting with a tight hug and a teasy joke to make me smile through a blush. I missed the reassurance she brought to my life and the reminders of how we were all going to escape! I missed the knowledge that, no matter how bad it got, no matter what pain I endured, she'd always be there at the end.

I missed the feeling of being on the brink of freedom...

I missed my sister even more...

My eyes were already streaming before I even realised it. I didn't even fully understand what had happened. I kept playing the argument over and over in my mind. I'd tried to reassure her that Littlepip was good and that we'd all figure out this was just a mistake.

The chain clanked and dragged below my hooves as I pulled myself over to the first pile of cloth to sort out, fold, and place, well, somewhere. Part of me wondered why I'd been allowed to keep my PipBuck, saddle, and other possessions, but such things were trivial. Even if I could have fired my grapple to the airduct, I was still chained and collared to the floor with no method of breaking such thick locks and metal rings. Shivering in disgust, I

began to pile and sort the warm, musty clothes and rags. I could already see tiny things crawling over them as I lifted them, making me whimper even as I shook them off.

My mind kept revolving about everything, finally settling on trying to think about the confrontation with Glimmer to get away from thinking about My Master. I had to figure out what to say first. I just wanted her to be happy and... and to feel better about things. Like she'd made me feel better when I told of how I'd lost my own moth—

That's when it finally made sense.

Pausing, I groaned and felt like a complete idiot. In my own frustration and desperation to have an idol, I'd been trying to calm her over Littlepip when she'd just lost friends and family! When I had mentioned my mother, she had hugged me and comforted me about my own grief. Guilt shot through me.

Glimmerlight had just likely lost everypony outside these walls that she'd ever known to go back to. It wasn't impossible they'd escaped, but it hardly mattered. Glimmer was only days out from losing Caduceus, and now this. Coral Eve's story was coming back to me. She too had lost her hope because everypony she knew or loved was either dead or now enslaved.

I threw my grief, guilt, and pain into the efforts, seeking anything to keep my mind off of losing my best friend *ever* because I'd been so... so *stupid* and out of touch with how *normal* ponies who aren't *born damned slaves* work! The chain in my hooves was thrown upward with force, bouncing from the wall and dropping. Again and again I threw it, screaming and shouting my anger and feelings at it. Exhausting myself, letting it all out, I eventually fell back against the wall and held my head.

I wished I could go back... go back and say it all differently. Littlepip meant so much to me, but I hadn't realised how it would feel to lose something I'd never *had*. My home.

Glimmer was going through something I couldn't possibly imagine right now, and I'd just completely ignored it.

Was... was this it then? Was this how it ended? All of us driven apart?

No, she wouldn't just... leave me, would she? They wouldn't go on their plan without me...

I summoned up all the courage I could to throw that feeling away. I wasn't going to stay here! I was scared, alone in a dark room and being kept like some sick pet, but step one was... was to find Glimmerlight. Find my sister, and... and somehow make it all better to get her back! I wasn't the same pony My Master had found in the FunFarm so long ago. I wouldn't just lie down and accept it this time! There were still some routes to get back in the saddle.

No. This was a... a set back.

I'd get out...

I turned back to the room filled with filthy and untidy objects. I'd been tasked to clean all of this up, but I knew my life wouldn't stay like this. The thought of being his *forever* simply enough to make me want to curl up, cry and do nothing until I simply died.

I'd make this work somehow.

I had to...

Even through the thick concrete walls and multiple floors above me, I could still hear the

roar of thunder and the washing drone of the rain. Whatever storm was blanketing Fillydelphia was still more than present, shaking the very foundations of the Mall as it renewed itself in fury, casting its wrath down upon the darkened city. If I listened very carefully I could almost believe I heard the hissing as the water struck the forge fires surrounding the Mall. Trapped in a small room within darkness, I felt like it was all just crushing in from every side, with the cold seeping through the stone.

I couldn't simply remain still, though. My task was finished fairly quickly as I directed my rekindled heart into staying active. I'd often been instructed to do such menial work in the past, and compared to what I'd seen My Master's other slaves doing, I'd happily clean up his filthy office. I couldn't read his papers on the desk, but I had looked for patterns in their formats and gathered them together in a rough order before stacking them in little piles. I'd, with some degree of disgust, straightened out his bed and hung any stinking clothing in the cupboard he kept at the back. Out of curiosity, I'd tried the two doors, but both had been kept locked. At the time, it had only seemed like something less for me to actually clean.

To and fro, clanking my way on that chain across the floor again and again. Muttering ideas on how to apologise to her. The words felt difficult. Not to say sorry, but how to make it mean the right things. Every time I found one idea, I lost the others or they no longer made sense. I wished somepony was here to help me with them...

Caduceus would likely have known. He'd been a smart pony.

In desperation, I pulled out my journal to try and... and do *anything*. For long minutes, I trembled and hopelessly attempted to make even a vague pony shape. But it just wasn't happening. Every leg was too long, every eye mismatched with the other one. Problems that just wouldn't go away. A feral ghoul would have looked more like a normal pony... let alone who I really wanted to draw.

It... it just wasn't happening. So it was true then... I'd lost the one little talent I'd always sought refuge in. In a sudden rage, I threw the journal closed and stuffed it deep into my saddlebag before turning my back on it. At... at least I could still cry to let it out...

The thought to try the radio came to me, but I didn't even get to my PipBuck before the fear of what I might hear began to ring in my mind. What if it was Tenpony Tower next? Or Friendship City? What if I heard news that a slave camp near Shattered Hoof had been slaughtered by the Stable Dweller with... with all ponies dead?

A thick stomping began to echo around the hallways. My ears twitched gently at the sound before shivers began to roll through me. There was only one place he could be coming...

I'd finished the work well on time, not even realising how long I'd spent rubbing a cloth over everything with numb, bleach-stained hooves. The shock of finding how easily I'd slipped into the blurry routine of slavery was like a bucket of cold water being dropped over me. But now I only had to wait, hope, pray, and fear for what came next. The thick clank of heavy locks thudded in through the door. Reasserting myself, I fixed up a crease at the end of his bed, hid away everything I'd been using, and painfully galloped to the middle of the room to stand upright and ready like every good slave should when his Master approaches. The feeling of having to do so sickened me. My own body lay in ruin from my throat, sickness, weariness, and bleeding cheek... yet his office was now tidy and clean.

At least I could still consciously know I hated it. That was *something*. If I were to survive what was... oh Goddesses... what was coming, I'd need every little thing I could to hold onto in my head.

Light flooded the room amongst an ear-splitting creak of the oak door's old metal hinges. I lowered my head and bowed slightly as I saw the massive shape in the corridor light.

My Master walked in. I fought down the urge to shiver, as he immediately locked the door behind him. It was a silent little conflict against the crawling I felt under my skin, not helped by his eyes swinging back to me. As he passed around me, I didn't dare move my head. I heard him fuss over his desk... smooth a hoof on his bed... check the cupboards and rattle the jars I'd used to sort the spare shotgun shells he'd left lying around. Please... please be satisfied... please be okay with it, Master...

The trotting carried on behind me, moving close enough that I could almost feel him against me. Screwing my eyes shut against his uncomfortable closeness, I just stifled the growing whimper in my throat.

"I see you haven't forgotten how to do *basic* slave work, Number Seven." The words were low, almost muttered and carrying a quietly stern tone, "You work well with my things. Hmm, almost like you were *meant* to be doing this, eh?"

My Master finished his tour of the room, coming to stand before me. I'd wanted to protest that last sentence... tell him that I'd never be a slave again. But the instinctive slave in my mind knew far better what I was supposed to say...

"I... tried my best, Master..."

"Mm... that you did. Good... good."

His eyes travelled back to me, before passing to something on the floor.

"Then..." his voice took a terrifying drop in tone, "...would you explain to me why you disobeyed me already?"

A cold stab of fear shot through my spine. I staggered back, hearing the chain clatter around.

"I... I didn't! I did it all as you asked, Master! I— ARGH!"

He had grabbed the chain, wrapping it around a hoof and dragging me toward him, before simply hurling me into the far wall. Screaming, I slapped against it, cracking the plaster and falling to the ground in a shower of paint flakes and dust. Seconds later, something was thrown across the room, impacting on my hooves as they covered my face before I felt myself lifted and pushed against the wall by my chest. My Master's face glowered closely.

The thrown item was lifted in his other hoof... held before my eyes. The... the stew bowl...

"I provided you with a warm meal, and you ignored it like the little rebel you are! Wasted food, Number Seven!"

My mind rebelled as the sudden realisation sank home. He... he hadn't! He'd just put it near me... he hadn't... oh... oh no... no no no!

"N-no...Maste—" I was cut off, again by a scream as the bowl crashed over my head hard enough to crack it and spill its lukewarm contents over me. My left forehead, from my eye to my ear along the swollen scar, ached and stung under the impact. Dizzied, I slumped against his hoof with my vision reeling.

"**Insolence!**" His words were almost making me go deaf already, my ears unable to handle the close volume. "**You ignored it to try and insult me, Number Seven!**"

I tried to squeak my apologies, every thin leg struggling against his one gigantic hoof that seemed to cover my entire torso. But he was having none of it.

The stark truth was becoming clear. Whether I'd taken it or not, the result would have

been the same. There was no right answer here with this monster.

“Stand up, slave...”

I weakly strove to obey, clutching my now bleeding forehead. Wearily, I opened my eyes to look at him.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Master...”

“Silence. It isn’t up to you to be sorry. Do you not remember what I told you? I don’t torture. I simply punish those slaves who do not know their place. The ones who have drifted from their role in life. How many times do I need to repeat this to you, Number Seven?”

His voice wasn’t shouting. It was those times he scared me the most. When he simply trotted back and forth around the room, speaking as though in deep thought.

His eyes finally settled on me, regarding everything.

“These...’things’ you carry around. Gifts... toys of a spirit you do not truly own and clothing that hides your shame beneath it. Remove them. **Strip**. You disobeyed... now I need to remind you of some things.”

I bit my lip, suddenly breathing a lot faster. But I felt my hoof moving to the clasp of my saddlebag... steadily shivering over the fastening.

“**Too slow, Number Seven! I said STRIP! You do not own those things.**”

Squeaking with terror, I felt myself obeying, sniffing as I dropped my saddlebag and pulled my goggles from my head. Struggling and shivering, falling to my side, I tugged my fleece and attached saddle over my head, revealing my bandaged wings and feeling horribly vulnerable and exposed. But the sight as I brought my head out only gave rise to a sudden shock of tears and begging.

My Master had unfastened his heavy whip... letting it uncoil onto the floor.

“Throw it all behind you, slave...”

My quaking hooves just crept over my face. The shouted repeat of the command made me do it.

“Now turn around.”

I could barely stand, hearing the drip of tears off the floor as my hearing seemed to become more perceptive from sheer instinct and fear. I could feel the sweat rolling over me.

“Turn. Around.”

I almost fell, shivering on the spot with my eyes clenched shut as I slowly rotated.

“Please...”

“**Silence.** You *earned* this, Number Seven... the moment you thought you had a will to make your own choice. I control your life. You *will* obey, even if you feel you won’t. But you’ll learn over time...”

I heard the hiss of the whip being drawn back. I closed my eyes tightly.

“You’ll learn...”

I didn’t dare open my eyes.

My Master had a meeting soon, one I was to attend with him. I had time to do things. But I didn’t dare open my eyes.

He had opened one of the doors of his office to reveal a cell. The walls thick and lined with sharp edged metal plates and mouldy tile. The floorboards were gone, revealing

nothing but ruined concrete that resembled hewn rock. The moment I'd been thrown in there to wait and 'think about my place in life'... I hadn't dared open my eyes.

I simply lay, feeling my back and rump swell and swell with growing pain. Feeling the dull throb of pain growing to a searing burn that twisted and surged all across my skin. Feeling the dread helplessness all over again of being ordered to stand still and take it... no matter how much I'd shrieked and begged. I wanted to see the damage... it felt like my back's skin had been flayed clean from my body as I felt trickles of blood flow beneath the swollen lines and thin slitted cracks where my skin had split. At least I could ignore one command. I could still cry. My one hidden rebellion. But I didn't dare open my eyes.

The door had slammed shut and left me to 'think about my place in life,' alone in a soundproofed cell with nought but the cold stone and the hot pain to feel. No ambient light to see by. I'd curled up, seeking to take comfort by hugging myself into as little a ball as I could, but the movement had opened every wound in my back. The scream as I'd felt that had echoed in the tiny space. This cell was so small that I... I dared not open my eyes.

I couldn't see... couldn't hear... couldn't go anywhere.

So, I had retreated inside. Closed my eyes and tried to remember the things I liked. But all I could remember was stroke after stroke after stroke. Each one feeling different. Every single time giving rise to a snapshot of my past flickering in my mind's eye. Of rock farms and cart pulling. Of punishments and long shifts. Of obedience through fear and acceptance through hopelessness. I had retreated inside to try and escape it to the past and remember the gentle world I'd seen so little of and bring all my friends and heroes into with me. To open my eyes... to see the truth...

I couldn't handle that.

So I dared not open my eyes.

I simply dared to dream.

The Mall had changed. Being dragged out and chained to My Master once more, I had been led around at his heel with my head low. But I had glimpsed at the stripping down of what had once been Protégé's work.

Now it was simply becoming the same nightmare I had seen elsewhere already.

My Master tugged me to keep up, something I was quickly learning was more like an exhausting half-gallop than a simple canter. Half tripping over my own hooves, I was taken upstairs for his final checks before leaving. Every little step was renewing my back's pain.

"You will remember your lesson for hours... days, perhaps, slave." He had told me that as we'd left the room and I had begun whimpering in pain.

The corridors had been tunnelled out in places now, knocked down to create a maze of additional routes through offices and store rooms. Whether it was more efficient or simply more to My Master's preference was unknown. But I saw slaves toiling away under gunpoint to hammer out the brickwork and thick concrete while others dragged in metal boxes full of tools and disassembled workbenches. What was he planning here?

The slaves and slavers all turned to look at me. They looked at me... my wings... my scars... my collar. Some laughed. Some grinned. Some just looked glad it wasn't them.

None showed any form of pity. Either they didn't care or they didn't dare.

Eventually, after many sets of stairs, we emerged onto the main balcony I had once been

thrown from in the plaza. Oh... how it had changed. My Master permitted me to gaze over the edge and see what had been started.

The Plaza balconies were blocked by sheets of rusted chicken wire now, razor wire running around the edges to dissuade anyone attempting to pry it off. Each shop cell was being converted into a true prison. Thicker bars were being welded in and the doors kept locked as I saw the slaves being led back into the Mall. In small groups, they were assigned cells and shut in tightly. Others were being dragged out, often looking dead on their feet. I saw whips slash across necks, backs, and rumps of those who were slow in dragging themselves up... only reminding me of my own burning wounds. My knees felt weak enough to want to fall from the searing feeling... but I couldn't... if I did, he'd only whip me more.

Behind the fountain lurked a new item... a small incinerator. Thick, bulky, and with four small gates to the furnace inside, ponies were throwing scraps of wood into it. I was almost sick on the spot as I saw a small commotion around a cell turn into the guards simply throwing a corpse into it. She just hadn't woken up.

The smoke carried upward, belching through the hole in the ceiling that had been covered over with a cage again. But I could already see the smog collecting on the upper levels where slaves covered their mouths with cloth and lay in coughing heaps. Craters, bullet holes, and battle damage still ravaged the area, but the worst craters in the floor had been dug out and turned into more of the curious confinement cells covered by cages or sheet metal.

Even as I watched, I saw one buck dragged across the ground, thrashing in panic before being hurled into one. Immediately after they slammed the lid shut, I heard a squealing shriek and a horridly high pitched wail beside the panicked sound of hooves fighting to scramble up a sheer rock surface. My skin crawled at the sound.

"Now you see a *true* bastion of slavery, Number Seven." My Master grabbed my head, keeping my eyes forward. "The slavers command! The slaves obey! The disobedient are punished! This is how things *should* be run. Doesn't this look familiar? Feel like somewhere you know so very well?"

I *hated* his questions. They were cruel and obvious in their intent. He *knew* that I hated it... but if I denied it he'd... he'd do things...

The will to shout at how sick he was in the head was overwhelming. I'd once thought he was simply monstrous in his overbearing nature, but now I knew he was not sane. His methods were changing, this wasn't even slavery as I'd seen it. There was no end goal here. It was just control, and nothing but that.

But instead, I simply nodded. "Y-yes... Master."

"Mm... feels like home. Welcome to your new life." He paused, then grinned. "Hehe... look who it is. Recognise anypony?"

He wrenched my head enough that I cried out and would have fallen but for him holding me as the movement tugged every bleeding lash upon my back. My eyes were pointed down into the plaza. Blinking and trying to focus, I felt a sudden shock and will to leap into it pass through me.

Glimmer!

She was being roughly handled by a slaver, dragged in alongside three soot stained slaves. They were pressed toward her old cell, now newly locked over. But I could see she barely put up any real resistance, allowing herself to be led and tossed around with a lot less of the

spirit I'd once known from my friend. I could see her hooves were frayed and sore from some form of physical labour and her back bore the dull marks of heavy weight pulling. But something else was becoming apparent. Her cheeks were flushed and her movements... dizzy. Like some sort of fever...

"Yes... your *once* friend. We've had her working all those proper shifts she missed after the welkin only gave her work repairing technology. She's been cast to *proper* work now, carting materials from the crater teams to the radiation engine Red Eye uses."

Radiation!? Then that meant it... it was a radfever! Poisoning! My Master must have seen the look on my face, for he just crudely cackled and patted me on the head with a hoof.

"Don't worry... if she learns to work hard and becomes sick enough we might give her a little RadAway... just to keep her working and not taking the easy way out. No pony escapes their duty until they've worked themselves for all they possibly can."

Panic was rising in my mind. I could see clearer and clearer than in the hours since I'd last seen her. *Something* had started to affect her badly. It must have been intense! She *needed* help but... but she couldn't take RadAway! It'd kill her!

I... I had to... do what? What *could* I do? I was even more trapped than her...

I wasn't given the chance to even shout to her. The collar pulled tight, choking any words from my throat before I could even gasp a breath to make a noise and dragging me to lie against My Master's leg. Unable to speak up, I saw her pink mane and dull red robes disappear into the old shop before her gate was slammed shut.

"P-p-please... Master... let me say so—"

His leg I was pulled against kicked out, knocking me on my side a good five feet away before the chain caught and stopped my slide just short of the edge. Again, I felt the raw skin on my throat tug and sting.

"You don't get to **ask** for things. Now... we have a meeting to attend at the Ministry of Arcane Science. **Get up!**"

Quickly, I obeyed, keeping my head low.

"Better... now, we—"

"Master! Master!"

A thin, nasally voice cut through, one I recognised all too well as his assistant. That scrawny thin pony that seemed to take care of any general paperwork and message carrying for My Master. Daring to lift my eyelids up a little, I saw him approach quickly and abase himself even faster, rather out of breath.

"I have somewhere to be, Wormtail. This had *better* be good..."

"I... phew... I bring news from... from Red Eye himself! He wants to speak with y-you, Master."

There was a brief silence. It became clear that My Master had taken that as rather important news indeed. I could understand entirely. Master Red Eye was, well, *The* Master of Fillydelphia. Every pony reported to him.

"Hmm... it seems he has received my request then if he wants to see me. Very well! Wormtail, run ahead and inform him I shall not be long. The ass will have to wait. Now..."

I quickly lowered my gaze as I saw My Master turn back to me.

"We can't have a pegasus snivelling around our great leader now, can we? Not his sort of thing..."

"N-no, Master..."

The chain pulled *hard*, jerking my head back as I fell to the ground, muzzle and chest

first. It was followed by a half kick with his front hoof hard enough to drive the wind from me.

“I didn’t ask you! Learn your place and when to speak, Number Seven! Now... we need to find someplace for you...”

Curling up, choking, and trying to suck air in, I heard his assistant laugh in that shrill, demeaning tone. He shut up at a quick glance. My Master turned, unhooking the chain.

“You there!” He shouted to a passing slaver. “Take this slave to the Plaza until I return. Make sure he’s *not* in with the Ranger. Somewhere far back, out of sight.”

“Yes, Master!”

The chain was passed. It was almost a relief. I could keep up with this slaver on my shaky legs as I was led to the stairs once more. Behind me, My Master kept glaring until I was out of sight. I... I had to use what time I had, find Glimmer and... and try to get her RadPurge from Weathervane!

I may have lost her friendship, but I *wasn’t* going to watch her lose her life!

Just... *how?*

The Plaza was even worse up close. The sickly stench of decay slapped through even my choking cold. I was led across the clattering metal that now covered some craters, pulled between slaves who worked themselves to the (sometimes literal) bone on pulling the enormous pulleys for lifting giant rock debris through the roof. Every one of the covered confinement pits was a source of either a crying whine or dull defeated moaning. Despite morbid curiosity, I still couldn’t see into them. I could only smell a horrid rot seeping through each.

Quickly, I really began to hate my cold... it only seemed to let the *bad* smells through.

But my eyes could only keep going back to a certain cage... praying to myself I’d see somepony there.

There wasn’t. As such, I was simply led, whimpering and limping behind my allotted slaver toward the back of the Plaza. The area where the last confrontation between the griffons and raiders had taken place was chewed up, but I could still see gruesome stains on the floor and pillars.

“Eh, this’ll do. In here, runt!”

The chain was removed from my collar before a half buck punted me through the doorway into the darkness of an old store front. Curling on the ground, I heard the door slam shut behind me and solidly lock, leaving me to the darkness. Already, I heard slaves shifting around, but I just moved back to the bars. I was still bleeding from my back... tired, scared, and sore... but I just wanted to crane my neck through and look for any sign of Glimmerlight. Even just another glance to... to maybe catch her eye...

But the bars were too close... pressing my face against them, I slumped down, miserable. Everything was just coming apart...

Behind me, I picked out the sounds of hooves approaching. A couple of foul-looking earth pony bucks were coming up behind me. Turning my back to the bars, I saw one grin.

“Look who it is...”

“Yeah... remember us, kid?”

I really didn’t. Whinnying as my back scraped on the ground, I pulled my pained body

away from them.

"Don't remember seeing us lying around under Barb's raiders? Don't remember the sounds of flaying skin?"

He advanced into the light from the plaza entrance. To my horror, I saw that one flank was just a red, angry scar of muscle and barely healed flesh.

"We *saw* you helping them raiders to begin with. You helped put us all in that!"

"Just your luck you're with us now, eh, little wings? Grab him!"

They lunged. Back to the side wall, I just screamed as they charged forward.

A feeling of overpressure in the air raced through my ears, before an eruption of force and a sound like a thunderclap slammed across the entire cell. A solid wave of telekinetic power blasted the two bucks away as easily as leaves caught in a hurricane. Crouching low amongst the small cloud of kicked up dust or pebbles, my mane whipped as I felt the forces unleashed tear at me and my exposed back. The slaves cried out, before being silenced by the bone crushing slam of their impacts on the bars. Aside from a white blue flare... it had been entirely unseen, like the wind or an invisible tidal wave.

"Get *away* from him, you two! *Shoo!*"

Amongst the fading rumble, I overheard a female voice that I knew! Opening my eyes, I saw the bucks lying in a dizzied, sore, and groaning heap near the wall bars, slowly trying to crawl away while holding their heads. Turning, the sparking light of a faulty-looking horn had rushed up beside me.

"C-Coral?"

"Ssh... Murk, come in here. Ignore those louts."

Her hoof carefully wrapped around my neck as we limped together into the darkness. With my eyes beginning to adjust, I saw it was an old confectionery shop with dozens of spilled (and unfortunately empty... damn) sweetie jars. She led me past the counter, into the back. A glowing gendlamp, like many slaves had managed to purchase from the likes of Sooty Morass, lit the tiny hovel of a room. The store room beyond had collapsed, remaining inaccessible. Coral showed me to a thin mattress on the floor beside the gentle blue glow of the lamp and softly pressed me to lie on it.

"Don't worry about that pair. They won't dare do anything to you with me around. They know I'd blast them through the bars if they ever got on my bad-ow!"

Her horn sparked, flickering like a spark circuit. I saw fizzles of energy drip from it as her hoof rested against the side, breathing heavily until it calmed down.

"Are... are you alright?"

"I'm... fine, nothing I've not been used to for years, now settle. Shh..."

Her hoof gently pressed on the back of my head, stroking my mane gently as I saw her eyes flow with horror to my back. It almost sounded out of place, to hear such a colourful curse surge from her mouth with disgust while she lifted the lamp over to get a closer look.

"That monster..."

I could only nod, resting my head in my forehooves. Lying still, it gave me more time to really remember just how much I could feel the demeaning scars upon my back reminding me of... of those few minutes under his punishment...

"It... hurts..."

"I know it does, my dear. Ssh... lay still. I'll do what I can."

Coral Eve produced a small bucket from the corner, making me begin to wonder if this was a cleaning cupboard. Water sloshed in it as she soaked a cloth and began to gently clean

me. Such a moment... feeling a motherly touch from somepony who really was one. Even if she wasn't mine, even if it stung and hurt, having somepony to just wipe away the blood and grime that the lashes had left upon me was enough to give me a moment's respite. Hearing her soft coos, feeling the firm yet gentle strokes of a wet cloth and feeling the hurt flow off me under the thin light was gradually soothing my frayed nerves. If I looked up, I could see her long mane of white and black, tinged with blue. It was crudely tied into two braids and a long ponytail as though desperate to remember how she used to look. Her thin grey coat was smeared and scarred like any other slave now.

"I'm so sorry he got you, Murky. I really was hoping you'd gotten away. I... I wish I could do something to stop him taking you again... you poor thing. No pony deserves what he gives out."

I didn't reply, other than to lean my head to her side for some slight measure of comfort. After a few moments of squirming and whining, she gently cleaned the lash wounds and refitted my wing bandages with all the skill of hoof an earth pony might have. It felt relatable, I'd walked that journey once too.

"Th-thank you... by the way..."

"It's alright, my dear. I told you before. I know an innocent young buck in need when I see one. If I... if I can't care for my own, it would be wrong of me to ignore you."

I lifted my head. "Can I come back here, if I'm allowed?"

"Of course! You've *more* than earned that, Murky, with all you've done to help me. Although, I would have thought you'd go to, well... Glimmer."

There was an awkward silence.

Eventually, it was broken by the soft sounds of me fighting to choke back all the emotions as I finally let it all out to somepony about what had happened. The first caring ear since then was all it took to get me to talk as openly as I could. To my surprised, she didn't raise any objection given her past with Glimmer as she let me get it all out of my system. Instead, she simply held me.

Feeling the crushing guilt, I told her about our argument... about what had happened to cause it. About Littlepip and about what The Master had been doing. Coral Eve listened quietly before leaning her head atop mine.

"Listen, Murky... it doesn't matter about me and Glimmerlight. *You* need help too and I... I trust that she'll be good to you, too. She's proven that much to me, even if she and I are, well, a long way from seeing eye to eye..."

I looked up to her face, twitching slightly as I heard some guards canter past, slapping batons along the cages. Coral seemed genuine. Glimmerlight's assertion of who *really* was the true forgiver between them rung in my head over and over...

"So, I want you to know you can *always* come back to me, alright? Any good ponies need to stick together in here. That and, well... I could do with somepony around sometimes as well..."

She brushed her eye with a hoof before looking back at me. I just nodded, unsure of what I could say. But seeing Coral smile at least a little... that was the first true moment of relief I'd had all day.

"I'll... I'll try. But I don't know what he wants with me... and I don't know if... if I can go back to Glimmerlight. She probably hates me now, and she's sick and—"

"She's *what*?" Coral blurted it out, before pausing, biting her lip and reasserted herself. "She's sick now?"

I nodded, a little perplexed at how suddenly emotional her response had been toward someone she 'hated.'

"R-r-radiation sickness l-like before... like you. They're going to give her RadAway to keep her working, but she can't take it, and I'm s-scared for her because I..."

I fell out of her grasp back onto the mattress, holding my eyes.

"I don't want her to die... even if she doesn't ever want to see me again, I don't want that."

"I wouldn't want her to die either..."

There was an odd silence, before I looked up at Coral once more. I knew that was the case, but the way she said it had been different. This was not bitter ambivalence, there was a mournful worry in her voice now.

"No matter how I feel, nopony deserves to be in this prison city or to die the horrible lingering end that it provides. Look, if... if you want to know something—she *won't* hate you. I don't think she really can. You should have seen the arguments we used to have. If... if you talk to her... or make a gesture to just show that you're, well... sorry. Maybe a drawing?"

Sighing, I just shook my head. I had no journal on me. I had nothing but the bandages upon my wings and the collar around my neck.

"Well, I've got a piece of paper here if you want it..."

Coral shifted in the darkness, producing a single slip of paper bearing masses of tables and figures on one side, lots of small ticks in a grid covered it. But one side was almost deliciously white and untouched.

I sat and stared, shivering at the burning of my back and the heady fever I had... as I saw *one* chance. Just *one*.

One drawing to help save a friendship and... and show her what she meant to me and how sorry I was.

My mouth trembled. Could I draw again? I... I'd failed so much and... and just not done anything! It all came out wrong and terrible!

But I *had* to.

"Alright, slaver! Bring the pegasus to me!"

The voice cut the air with as much finesse as a sledgehammer, making me sit up straight with a shock. No time to think or worry, I turned to Coral Eve.

"I... sorry I don't have time to say but... but I'll do it! Th-thank you and... and Glimmer was working to remember..."

The look on Coral's face, just for a moment, gave me a little hope. That soft relief of somepony hearing about a promise being upheld.

"If... if I can save her, somehow, I want to keep helping her to... to remember and we, um, we can all come together to get out of here? Please say yes... I..."

I shivered.

"I don't think I can last under him. I'm so scared, Coral..."

"Where is he?"

"Right here, Master!"

Coral looked back to me. "Yes you can. I've seen what you can do already. If you feel the courage to do it... then do it. Do what you need to, Murky."

I heard the cage start to be rattled at, felt my forehead, back, and throat ache as I put my two tiny front hooves to Coral's chest.

"I'll try... and I will... I mean, spend time with you too. She really wants to help you... so do I... but please I need t-to... ask... before they take me! C-can you write something for me on this? I don't know how..."

"Yes, of course, hun. But hurry! What do you need?"

Less than a minute later, they got the rusty door open, throwing it to the side and entering to reattach my chain and drag me away.

Once again was at the mercy of My Master as he reattached the chain to his armour. He tugged me hard, whimsically noting my cleaner back and taking a sick pleasure in the way I trotted obediently alongside him. My head remained low.

But as we passed a certain shop cell... I saw her. Lying upon the floor, flushed and panting for breath from aching limbs... she had pulled herself from the stuffy back to take what breeze she could coming in from the skylight.

Our eyes didn't meet. I didn't even know if I saw them closing because she was avoiding me or not. But I had the last ditch effort of paper. I had it tucked into my bandages.

I had the words. I was three words stronger...

The plaza door was opened, and I was forced through, even as I saw Glimmer's head slump to the ground amidst a wracking cough. Leafshine was bent over her, shaking Glimmer by the shoulders and whispering into her ear.

To save her life and to save our friendship, my only spot of hope now, no matter what it cost me from My Master. For Glimmer. For Coral. For all of us...

I just prayed that I could dodge the repercussions.

Fillydelphia glowered in the dark. The streets toward our destination began to bustle again after a brief reprieve from the storm. Stumbling, limping, and sniffing from a running nose I followed My Master, feeling the light drizzle of hot and damp air stinging my exposed back.

One thing became clear very quickly. This was not the way to the Ministry of Magic, whatever it was. Picking up that my nervous trotting required a harsh drag every few seconds, My Master looked down at me. I cringed back, my eyes darting to all the ponies looking upon My Master and his pet dejectedly being dragged alongside.

"Our meeting is now in the old central factory, where the Ministry of Wartime Technology considered their hub. Thanks to the delay from our 'leader,' we had to move the venue." My Master turned as he trotted, staring at me eye to eye.

"You will remain silent unless spoken to. These are important figures, Number Seven. You will obey them if asked anything. You will be the meeting's servant. They will require drinks in the factory's heat. You are *not* permitted to take any unless I instruct you this time. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master!" I almost shouted it, nodding fervently through clenched teeth. The pain in my back was terrible. every time it shifted from a step only making it worse.

"Good! Now hurry up..."

Our pace increased. I could swear it was deliberate, as the added effort on my torso was making my cuts open and close repeatedly. If it hadn't been for Coral, I worried that they might have become infected already. Who knew what My Master would have made me do for some medicine?

The journey was not long, thankfully. However, I began to notice that we were moving closer toward the crater than I had expected. Its baleful glow emanated over the rooftops and between alleyways in the thick misty dark. Part of me felt glad... it meant I was nearer to Hearts and Hooves Hospital, my only hope for RadPurge. Could I do this? Could I mount an escape from the chains during the meeting and somehow escape to make a desperate run of RadPurge to Glimmer? Could I even get away again afterwards?

Not to mention at some point find more RadAway. Amongst all the pain, I hadn't even noticed that my throat was feeling... tight. Not from the collar's chaffing, either. Had I gone through radiation without knowing? Had it been from the metro? What if it was just a worsening condition like before? This was too early since my last RadAway. The worry began to strike me... did My Master know what I needed to survive? What would he hold me to for it? Oh Goddesses, please in your great generosity provide...

"Here we are, Number Seven..."

The chain was pulled, briefly dragging me along to stand beside him. Before us lay the largest factory in the entire city. I had sometimes seen it in the distance, spotting the sheer scale of the wide manufactory itself. Aside from coolant towers, it was not particularly tall, but it must have covered at least ten blocks worth of the city behind thick walls and containing immense yards of old military technology. No wonder Red Eye had taken such an immediate interest here...

Before us lay the metal gates, made of metal fence and thick bars, they lay open to allow the slave workers in and out under the watch of two enclosed guard towers with griffon snipers. The wall wasn't fully intact. Being this close to the crater, much of it had collapsed and even one of the immense shop floors toward the craterside wing had seen its roof tumble inward. Like the other hubs, it had resisted the balefire well... even if the structure had been seared and blackened. Above the primary central headquarters, I saw an immense symbol of an apple, hanging on metal cords rather precariously.

The guards let us through, glancing and chuckling as I was led on beside My Master. One of them mockingly barked once we'd passed, and I felt my temper rise with embarrassment.

Inside the gates, I began to get a sense of the scale of this manufactory's produce. On every side of me lay ranks of old sky chariots, armoured and streamlined. There were protected wagons with long supply beds and strange V-shaped underhulls. Rotor-driven aircraft, driven by pedals and containing side seats for ponies alongside empty pintle-mounts lay derelict. Ponies were moving between them all, examining the carcasses of the war machines and checking things off or taking notes. No doubt trying to see which ones from the vast arsenal were repairable or better as use for parts on the other frames. Dozens... maybe even well over a hundred ponies were slaving away with auto axes, shearing the salvageable elements from the more ruined platforms under *strict* guard. I saw one struck with the hard wooden butt of an ancient hunting shotgun for merely even looking away from his station of work. Others were prying the head off of a massive tracked sentinel robot, one of a dozen lined under cloth-covers beside serried ranks of robot ponies with bulbous heads and empty weapon mounts.

This was Equestria's primary industrial base for its armies...

Our advance took us through a cleared route toward the main entrance, a huge set of steps leading to about a dozen doorways all lined up beside one another, all of which went into the same greeting hall. That alone gave a concept of how many ponies had once entered and left this place at once. If Red Eye could get even a portion of this working...

Very quickly, I gained a whole new respect for the capabilities of his army. The creepy hot air balloons and transport wagons were only to be the beginning. I didn't want to imagine the amount of time, sweat, and lives it had taken (or would take) to get this colossal place operational again and producing the replacement parts for the fields of war machines. But if it did... Red Eye would have access to the full military and industrial might of the Equestrian inventory.

My eyes were so concentrated on the military technology that I almost tripped upon the stairs leading up to the way in. Passing through the doors led to an enormous and open planned reception, high and wide with at least eight separate terminal stations at the large oval desk in its centre. Above me, a balcony ran all the way around three sides with two stairways leading up to it on either side of the reception desk. A rather skinny looking unicorn stallion with an almost zebra-like contrast of white coat and black mane was keeping two dozen workers under control there as they tapped away on the reactivated terminals, with wires running all over the floor. No doubt they were the control hub for this place, a necessity to keep track of the immense capabilities.

"S-sir... I've finished cataloguing the Whirligig reports for the south field, it's not much better than the north one, sir. Without ball bearings, they can't—"

"I *know* why they can't, just get it archived and add it to the part list for when they repair the aviation manufacturing hall. Hey! Hey you, what's taking so damn long on the weapon locker counts?"

"N-nothing, sir! Just the ponies who come to take them for the army aren't telling us how many they've taken..."

"Bloody plank-headed grunts... make your best guess, most of its in crap condition anyway. They'll be back within the hour once they realise the receivers are ready to fall apart. Tell them they'll just have to wait for them to be repaired or go ask the Ironshod outlet in the west wing for new produce. Oh! Master Shackles, I do say hello!"

My Master simply grunted, placing a hoof on the desk. I was left to meekly look up at it from the rubble strewn floor. After a second of wondering why there was so much coloured glass at my hooves, I looked up to see a massive stained glass window of a Steel Ranger that had been blown inward by the bombs. My Master tapped the counter a few times.

"Keep your politeness to yourself. Where is Grindstone?"

"You mean Master Gri—"

"Do you think I care for your formalities?"

The overseer went pale... even through his bone white coat... simply shaking his head. "H-he's in... in the old meeting room... central Ministry research h-hall... just off the place Ironshod used to use to—"

"I know the way. Now be quiet and send a runner along to tell him I'm here."

Gulping, I saw him wave to one of the slaves, who (rather intelligently) just nodded and left, having listened in without needing to ask for clarification. My Master began to pull me toward the stairs, without so much as a word to the overseer.

The inside was unthinkable complex and massive. I saw multiple doors almost as large as Stable gates and about as thick laying open and revealing everything from massive chariot construction halls to paper stuffed archives. Each door bore a separate symbol. One an apple... another a sword and cogs. Very quickly, it became apparent that this facility had been rented out or bought in sections by varying companies to act as a unified production front... even if they still kept to themselves for their secrets. No wonder the Ministry had

chosen to come here. Now, who was their Ministry Mare again? The... the rainbow one? She'd looked angry and warlike enough...

A long hallway stretched before us, crossing a skybridge between two of the immense warehouse-like buildings. Windows had shattered on every side, giving rise to an ash filled wind that blew my mane wildly and stung my eyes and back. If My Master cared for the annoyance... he showed no sign, simply dragging me along over the thick and musty red carpet toward a huge set of double doors. Battle saddled guards flanked each side of it, giving rise to a pang of sadness... thinking of my own personal one from Blunderbuck languishing in a corner of My Master's office so far away... along with everything else that meant anything to me.

"Master! They are awaiting you inside!"

"Good... once I am through and the runner is gone, close the doors. We are not to be disturbed."

"Yes, Master!"

Clearly everypony knew to stay on his safer side. I really had to drill that back into me. Call your Master by his title. Always... always always always...

Inside, I was taken through a set of offices and meeting rooms behind toughened glass. I could see various stairways that led to a machine shop right below us. Up here, though, things were quieter. The terminals were all destroyed by the shrapnel that must have blown in from the windows I could see facing the crater. Almost teasingly... I could see Hearts and Hooves Hospital, its half ruined shape silhouetted against the crater's evil hue. At one side, I spied a little canteen for them to take breaks in. Even from here, I could smell the rot and stale stench over its foul-looking surfaces.

To my curiosity, I saw many of the desks had cutie marks carved into the polished wood of their construction. A set of pears... two screwdrivers... three intercrossing cogs... a sundial...

Wait.

The chain locked as I fell behind, drawing a choke and a reprimanding tug to keep moving. But my eyes just stayed fixated on it. In a far corner, near the windows overlooking the machine floor below. He... he had worked here, that I knew! It *had* to be! Two inactive terminals rested beside one another, connected to a single keyboard. His chair had been knocked over, falling against a long looted looking filing cabinet. Behind him on the wall, I could see papers and posters bearing schematics and rough sketches of metal ponies (or Ranger armour?) and dozens of individual parts far beyond my knowledge. But upon his desk I could see all manner of little things... amongst the tools there were photo frames and small dead plants with musty looking ribbons attached. Gifts...

I dared only imagine what was in the photo frames. I wanted to go over... to look, to see what Skydancer had looked like. He *had* to have her on it! I... I could draw them together!

But My Master would never have let me... the crushing disappointment as I was inexorably motioned onward felt like I'd turned hollow.

One more detail caught my eye though... just as I was passing. Between each wall he was near, a kind of ribbon surrounded his work desk at chest height. Pink... decorated with little faces of Ministry Mare Pinkie Pie looking rather stern and holding up a hoof to bar entry.

I wasn't given much opportunity to ponder it; the chain tugged with an impatient snort, and once again my attention was forced forward. But ahead of us... the usual desk farms

and tables gave way to something much grander.

Another set of stairs rose toward a much more secure looking doorway. It lay open at the top. But before it, embedded into the wide stairwell itself, was a thick stone plinth wrapped in plaques and metal borders. Atop it... stood a Steel Ranger. I squeaked, falling in behind My Master. Only after hearing his amused cackle did it become clearer... it was just an inactive set of the armour propped up as a statue. If it had ever been operational. Whatever metal they used to build the armour had stood the test of time well. It *gleamed*. A more heroic and shining set of armour compared to the flame-streaked and battle-scarred metal gods of war I'd once seen in terrifying action outside the Walls. The symbol of the Ministry rested upon its flank while no weapons rested by its side.

An eternal guardian to the Ministry's secrets within the hub... but one that had stood idle whilst a mad-pony had looted it all. Crimson and gold-trimmed carpets led up the stairs to a very... official... looking brass and wood high doorway bearing four more of the guards. Without a word, they simply nodded and opened them as we moved around the Ranger statue.

"Aaah... Chainlink Shackles, so you join us!"

The familiar voice rumbled from the interior of the primary meeting room. Deep and heavily bass toned, Master Grindstone trotted to meet us at the door. Like an indomitable presence, shaking the very floor, his twisted cybernetic monster of a minotaur bodyguard lumbered along behind him leaving marks on the carpet. It sauntered like some sort of primate I'd seen in picture books, its bionic hand and immense crusher claw resting on the floor before its feet. Upon sighting me, it snorted and let out a sudden, short roar.

Only the chain stopped me in my flight of the room entirely, snapping at its full length until my body flew out under my head entirely, dropping me on my back with a dull thump. I'd almost gotten as far as the nearby canteen to hide in.

"The runner did mention you brought your... pet. I see you finally caught up with him." Grindstone glanced past My Master, watching me as I shakily got back to my hooves and meekly hid behind a desk... before I was simply pulled out and toward the boardroom once again.

"A pony can't outrun their purpose and destiny, Grindstone. He's mine now. Where I go, he goes. In this case... he's to be our little refreshment servant. Aren't you, cutie pie?"

"Y-yes, Master..." I tried to speak without letting the revulsion at that name get the better of me. Grindstone just continued to stare at me, before waving his gigantic minotaur guard back to the side of the room and stood aside for us to enter. Behind us... the guards locked the door.

The lights were low, the windows boarded over, and the walls clearly thick. This was no doubt to be a private meeting. Grindstone continued to stare at me, before snorting. Without reason, he slapped one of his almost elderly hooves across my face. Pain stung at my already sore cheeks. I began to wonder if my eyes would ever be allowed to heal from their blackening.

"That's for ever defying me, runt. Nothing compared to what Shackles does, I'll bet. But you ran from me too when you fled with that mare, Unity."

He lifted his hoof again, before snorting and turning away. I winced, finding a little spike of hate for this donkey emerging as he dared mention Unity's name.

"At least I know good old Shackles will give you the treatment in punishment enough without me having to lift my old body now. Don't dare bother me or I'll have Big Brutus

here relieve you of those wings *permanently*.”

The bodyguard, hearing its name, stomped on the spot enough to garner everypony else’s attention. But it remained loyal and stood still in the corner, like the Ranger monument outside... silent and vigilant. My Master began to move me across the room. Around me I saw several dark slaver figures... each of them rough and wicked looking. That particular rough style Grindstone and My Master shared that led me to wonder if they were all from the ‘old days’ of Fillydelphia, as well. Trotting on his wooden peg-hoof, I recognised the scruffy and disgruntled figure of Mister Mosin at the far end too. Remembering his allegiance with My Master in the riots... it only made sense he was here too.

“Well, well, well... it would be ye, laddie...”

Oh *no*...

Maybe not *all* from back in the long past then...

True to the unmistakable accent, turning my head revealed Sooty Morass coming out from the small side kitchen I was likely to be sent to work in. The grin between his braided mane gave way to a hoof around my shoulders.

“Seems ye’ve gotten yersel’ in another little pickle, haven’t ye lad? Going down while I only go up. Isn’t that just precious? Doing well with the illness, are we?”

I didn’t reply. I just kept my head down and tried to ignore the foul pony. At least, I tried, before my Master’s hoof forced me to the floor, holding me down while he leaned to my ear.

“I told you! You will obey if asked by anypony in here! Now OBEY!”

Spittle flew across my face amidst my frantic nodding and cries of ‘Yes, Master!’ Shivering, hating every second of being made to look so belittled in front of Sooty. He was clearly enjoying watching me squirm... please... this, this was just demeaning...

“I... I’m not doing well, sir. It’s a constant fight to get the RadAway I need to stay alive and... and I think it’s getting worse. My sickness is... is accelerating... sir.”

“Oooh...’sir,’ eh? I think I like hearing that from ye, laddie. Shackles sure has ye broken in well. Well, come talk to me afterwards, always room in me new trade for a little squealing whinnier amongst me clients. I’m sure we could work somethin’ out for me stocks... if your Master permits it.”

What? What trade did he mean aga...

My mind finally caught up. The look of abject dread and shame was enough to make Sooty cackle, ruffle my mane and trot on past, happily lording up his new found power. Was... was he a full on slaver now? Or just a position of power with dirt on enough ponies to ensure a business trade within the city? I swallowed deeply... fighting to keep my imagination from going too far in its fear.

Sweating, I just tried to keep to the side of the room. Now that my eyesight was adjusting and the ponies were beginning to take their seats, I could see what we had.

My Master, of course, towered above everypony else bar the minotaur. Opposite him sat the old figure of Grindstone, clearly a symbol of authority. Sooty Morass sat off to the far end, likely one of their newest members to this little... club, while Mosin was fairly close to the middle, near My Master. He spotted me with his one eye and made something between a snort and a sigh of exasperation. Another five ponies were sat various around them, two stallions and three mares of a mix between earth pony and unicorn. All of them at least once regarded my curious looks with a snarl or fierce look until I glanced away. But one thing was clear... they were all short of word and very considered. I could see the intelligence in their eyes, for all the hate and brutality they exuded. My Master was among his kind here...

experienced and savvy kinds of twisted. No wonder Sooty had found a home with them...

Along those lines, those glances I got suddenly made a lot more sense. I could see each and every one of them working out just how they would punish me in their mind...

In a bit of a worry... I slunk off into the kitchen, the smile from My Master making it all too clear that I was supposed to anyway. They began to talk... simple greetings, reports on things I didn't fully understand.

Wandering inside, I found a somewhat cleaner-looking kitchen designed for catering groups providing for long meetings. But before anything else... another pony caught my eye, standing and eating what seemed to be raw meat at the far end. Much younger than the rest, but still a fully grown stallion. A unicorn, dirty white of coat and one of the most muscular looking unicorns I'd ever seen. His mane was a ruin, almost ghoulish-like, and caked with the remains of a dozen dark shades of all coloured hues, dye no doubt. A *horrid* scar ran across his snout, around and across his mouth like some form of bladed weapon had sank into it before. More deep wounds decorated his balding head alongside the multi-coloured remnants of his mane, giving rise to a huge question of why he was still alive. His eyes were of two colours... red and hazel while he bore piercings through his ears, nose, mouth, eyelids, and even just through his skin in general. My stomach churned as I saw they weren't metal... they were bone.

He was a raider...

He also saw me staring. Those eyes spun to face me... wide and with massive pupils, they looked at me almost disbelievingly to think that I was looking at him. The quake of severe drug damage in his system was all too obvious, yet he exuded a presence somewhere between uncertainty and unnatural authority. His whole body jittered for a few moments, before he spoke.

"You looking to me?"

Oh Goddesses... I had to reply, My Master's rules...

"I... j-just seeing who was—"

"Ah! Ah! I asked if you looking to me? You seein' somethin', eh? Seeing something here? Something *about* me?"

He began advancing, his voice sharp and speaking far too whimsically and fast. What, to any other pony, might have sounded like ignorant bullying threats emerged as an unsettling detachment from reason. As he turned, I saw his cutie mark. A hook, like one an old master of mine had used to hunt riverlife. My chain kept me moving too far away when he moved close by. Already I could see he carried a large machete across either side of his torso along with a coil of rope.

"N-no! I didn't—"

"Thinkin' something about me? Out with it? You got something AGAINST me, huh? All starin'? Ah dun like that! Ah dun like people staring, cause they don't see the real truth, right? So I make em not able to see, how 'bout that? Yeah... how 'bout we do that?"

His magic, a sickly yellow, drew from his side the very hook I'd seen on his flank, attached to the rope.

"I'm sorry! I... I didn't mean to—"

His hoof slammed into a cupboard door, those thick muscles of his snapping the thick wood in one strike. He wasn't anywhere near the size of Brimstone... but this raider towered above me all the same with more build than any raider I'd seen in Barb's gang.

"I said. *Stop. Looking at me!* You think I'm crazy? Huh, that's it? Think something about

me makes me worse?"

"I—"

I didn't even get the chance to finish my sentence. He leapt forward at me suddenly with a keen howl. I fell backward, hollering out loud as he landed atop me and drew back the thin hook to—

...laugh?

"Hehehehaaaahaha! Oooh... oh you... hehe, I'm just fuckin' with you. You see it, right? You see you should be scared and... hah... I like the scream. Screaming's good, right? AARRRRRGGHHH! See? Good to scream... tells you that you're *alive!* Hehehe... c'mon! Laugh! Not gonna laugh, it's funny right? Laugh!"

Chuckling, he wandered back off me, the smile doing strange things with his scar to twist his face in a particularly mad way. The more I looked... the more I saw simply *no* sanity in those mismatched eyes. Suddenly, he snarled, fierce and hateful.

"You not gonna laugh with me!? C'mon little pony, laugh! Lets laugh together! *Laugh!*"

Squeaking... I tried to...

"Heh... hehe?" I was backed against the kitchen counter. "Hahaha? Yeah... um... funny? Haha?"

He looked at me, the smile suddenly disappearing from his face into a kind of bewilderment again. A low danger in his eyes...

"...you laughin' at me?"

"Ha... huh? I..."

"I said, *you laughin' at me?* You was just laughin', was that at me!?" He advanced forward, the hook drawn again. I backed away, finding myself in a corner... the chain tugging tightly through to the next room at its maximum pull.

The raider snarled, fierce anger appearing upon his wild face. His hoof stabbed at my chest, lifting my head up to face him.

"I... don't like ponies laughing at me... why was you laughing at me there?" The eyes blinked, the pupils wide and mad. "That's it... yer fuckin' getting' it, laughin' at me like something's wrong? I don't even like the way you're looking at me... like you're better than me? Thinkin' yer fuckin' better!"

The large hook rose, I closed my eyes, begging loudly as it began to move for my mouth. I felt the tip reaching inside for my tongue.

"Leave him be, Wildcard. The runt doesn't know you. He doesn't die."

I felt him pause... daring to open my eyes to find it mere inches away. The mad raider was looking over his shoulder at the doorway. My Master stood there. His words had seemed calm... but they carried a lot of weight. 'Wildcard' seemed to pause... then smile. He helped me up with a little pat to the cheek.

"Aw... I was just playin', it's no worry. I'm chill, no worries, big guy I'm chill. Chilled. We're cool."

Wildcard affixed his hook again to his hard leather armour. My eyes tried to avoid his as he trotted out. He paused briefly at the door, looking over at me and grinning with only half his mouth. The other half twisted into a sick frown with the scar.

"We cool, little kiddo? Yeah, we cool... gonna play sometime, eh? Get some of my boys together... make a night of it! Haha! They'll love ya, ha!"

He left to the main room, before suddenly firing his head around the doorway with a scream. I scrambled backward, falling and shrieking as he laughed and wandered off.

My Master jangled the chain to get my attention, glowering at the doorway.

"I wouldn't disturb Wildcard, Number Seven. Chieftain or slave now... heh... he's a lethal weapon of ours to point and let go. We don't want you getting strung up if he gets in the mood. You wouldn't know him, of course. Although, your 'friend' Brimstone would. One of his 'Big Four' so they say. Still leads the raiders that joined the Pit... trains them, slaughters the weak and toughens the best with cutting and beatings. Hehe... so mad nopony ever challenged him for any sort of leadership."

He paused, looking back out as I heard Wildcard muttering and chuckling in equal amounts. Then he turned back to me, his eyes low.

"You didn't really think Barb was the only pony with a position of authority in his Clan who liked the idea of working with us to get back at their traitorous leader? To take on their 'betrayed,' as much as Barb wanted to?"

"No, Master..."

"Good. So let that sink in a little. Just think what Barb was like and then remember Wildcard held the same position of power. Strong as any big earth pony and lethal skill with that horn's magic, too. Natural born killer. He may not seem it, oooh I know... but he fought Brimstone over and over for leadership."

For anypony to even consider *voluntarily* attacking Brimstone spoke volumes. My Master stomped more fully into the kitchen.

"Now... you'll find your things here. Put together drinks, whatever you find and serve the meeting as you are called. You will obey them. You will not speak at any point during our meeting and you will say nothing outside these walls. I trust you won't... Number Seven. After all... just remember who owns your friend's life now. We've got Wildcard in the same way we had Barb—to make good on paybacks if you squeal. I promise, his methods may not be as efficient, but they *are* somewhat more... unique... than Barb's were... hehe."

The chain was removed from his plated armour, instead affixed to a pipe on the wall coming from an old boiler right beside the door, allowing me to access both rooms. Making some of the tiles shimmy below him from their loose cement, he stomped out. Quickly, I found myself left alone.

My heart was still beating fast from Wildcard. That pony was... was *terrifying*. He had the build of an earth pony with the magic of a unicorn and his... his mind and the way he acted...

Very quickly, I began to worry about exactly what he might do next, which I suspected was entirely the point. What might he have done had My Master not been here? What had he done to ponies in the past? Barb would *always* be a very... personal... fear and memory. But I hadn't expected another of Brim's old gang to be so close to my life so soon. I didn't want him near me. I didn't want *anything* to do with somepony so... so off the deep end of the wasteland's insanity. If... if he was anything like Barb was, I...

I returned to the corner, curling up immediately on the cold floor, collapsing and trying to make myself cry a little to let it out. I could have sworn it was harder...

It hadn't just been Wildcard that had been affecting me. My lungs were starting to feel swollen and ineffectual. Every breath came with a little wheeze. It really was getting worse to advance this fast...

At... at least I had some time. Groaning, whimpering slightly at the touch on my wings, I drew the slot of paper bearing those three important words out along with a stick of

charcoal.

Taking a deep breath, wheezing and sore... trying to ignore the arguing and harsh discussions next door... I began to create the most important drawing in my life.

“Number Seven! Get through here!”

I almost tripped over my own hooves. Chain rattling, I dove across to where I'd left the tray. As the time had passed, everything had been split between fearful entrances to the room bearing trays of the water I'd found inside a walk in fridge and desperate slow sketching whenever I could. As fast as I could, I threw the drinks upon it. A mix of water, Sparkle Cola, and a few heady mixes of alcohol I'd located all went on together. I had fast learned how to carry it upon my back... through great pain. The cold tray rubbed and ground at my whip wounds, leading to my time around the table delivering their drinks to be little more than a continual fight to not make a sound.

Seething as I placed their next round of refreshments upon it, I trotted in and struggled to carefully move around their table and get their attention without speaking a word.

Grindstone was speaking at the moment, his eyes only briefly acknowledging me before making it very clear I was to ignore him. A few clips around the ear had educated me very quickly in reading their moods.

“From what I can gather, you're proceeding as you should. I expect you all to—”

“You should not **expect** anything of me, Grindstone...” My Master growled across the table, the cutting tone making me very happy I was considered somewhat invisible to the assembled ponies. “Do not pretend to think that just because you are in the position to organise things means you hold **authority**. Just remember who ruled these camps before Red Eye...”

Wandering past Mosin, I felt him pick a bottle of clear liquid for himself and swig it, carefully watching the confrontation. Grindstone sat silent, before raising a hoof.

“What I was saying... was that I expect good things as a *prediction*, Shackles.” Grindstone continued rather diplomatically. “Your authority is and always has been recognised. None of us would be where we are but for your work. Now... I do have to report that, while Ministry Station has yet to be located, my slavers *did* unveil plans that it may not have been the Ministry's only outlet for research...”

“You're jokin'? You mean that there 'nother right below our hooves and we ne'er knew?” One of the mares had leaned forward, swatting at me as I'd moved close by. She had a strange accent, one that clipped and rolled on words as though she was fighting to be understandable. Almost tripping over the chain, I fell back against Mosin who cursed in his own tongue and batted me away with a clip to the ear. I'd only barely kept the tray level...

“No.” Grindstone lowered his eyes. “Not beneath us. Above us. In the mountains outside Fillydelphia, atop their snowy peaks where Red Eye began his mining operations months ago. The Ministry moved a great deal of researchers up there on short notice. Including, I may add, many of Aurora Star's chief leads on the memory projects. That alone warrants that we must pursue this as a critical element. But we cannot simply go up as a small team... that would... arouse suspicion.”

My Master nodded, casting a careful eye to me as I wandered past. Shivering, I kept my head low. The only noise I made was the soft jingle of my chain. Looking up, I had to bite

my whimper short as I saw Wildcard beckoning me over. Before him rested the remains of a dozen drinks already. Trembling, I began to trot forward, nervously passing beneath the heavily breathing minotaur. Those beady red blinking eyes focused like a target lock on me as I heard My Master begin speaking once again.

"You propose we use our newly found slaves to create a mining force of our own?"

"Indeed... the reports back were not very successful without proper mining kit. If we found anyone with mining experience in our combined ranks, we could create a task group to offer as an experienced alternative. That would get us up there."

The moment I came near Wildcard, he lifted the entire tray with his magic... before offering me a bottle of stronger looking alcohol. Sudden panic shot through me as I saw My Master looking. I... I wasn't to take any of it without his permission. But if I turned down Wildcard, what might he *do*? Shivering, I shook my head...

Sooty chuckled, his first sounds in the meeting so far. "Aye... I'm sure I could acquire a few wee bits of tools for them, help sell the appearance, y'know? Yer all filling me coffers with caps from the clients ye bring in anyway, so I can tab ye for them and you won't be out a profit."

"Good." Grindstone watched their newcomer warily. "Mosin, arm some of them. The mountains are not without their dangers."

"Shall be no issue. Old shipment of arctic qualified rifles were found year ago. Only need to prevent *pizdets* of an assistant fucking with poor things till they resemble Hearth's Warming tree. *On menya zaebal...*"

I felt a brief prod on my muzzle. Turning back, I saw the bottle, again, offered from Wildcard. He wore a somewhat disgusted look... as though amazed somepony would refuse an offer. I just shook my head again... backing off. P-perhaps if I just turned and went back to the kitchen I would—

"Eh! Don't you turn your *fucking back on me!*"

I couldn't help it, I squeaked and spun around at his voice above the discussion in the room, just in time to catch the bottle with my face. Spluttering and moaning as I clutched my muzzle, I heard the uproar of protests at the interruption. Very quickly, I felt myself lifted.

"I told you, Number Seven! Don't disturb anypony and don't make a sound! Now **get in there and shut up!**"

I was hurled, passing through the door and impacting on the hard kitchen floor until I slid to the far end. Even before I had stopped, through my aching nose, I shouted out.

"I'm sorry, Master! I'm s-so—"

"**Shut up! A slave should be invisible until they are needed! Do not bother us again! I'll deal with you later for this.**"

My mind rebelled... but it had been *Wildcard* and... and he had...

Oh... what was the point. I was just the one who got blamed anyway...

Pulling myself back to my drawing, choking on the heated, metal-tasting bile in my throat, I picked up the charcoal once again. It hadn't been going well. I was being slow... careful... not moving on until I had made sure each bit looked *perfect!* But at this rate it would take me days to finish what I needed to do...

Carefully, I settled the charcoal stick to the paper, holding back tears as best I could to not stain it. A slow arc... somepony's neck... round it off and... and make it thicker for the back. Yes. Yes that worked...

I could still hear them talking. I wanted to just draw, but I kept hearing those names too many times to avoid listening...

"Aurora Star," Grindstone continued, "we have now concluded, had more than a few 'personal projects' going on. Things that received no funding but which she continued with herself. I suspect that many of these may have illegally laundered funds and elements of proper funded projects to aid her. Her record of interviews from Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle after her funding was cut is, suffice to say, rather long. If you're wondering why this matters to us... the reason is simply this. If Ministry Station didn't have enough of a presence to have its records on file in the Ministry proper... why did she go to so much effort to acquire it and then just use it for nothing but storage?"

A stallion, gruff voiced, spoke up. "We *know* this, Master Grindstone... because the Ministry was keeping something pretty damn secret down there..."

Distracted by their conversation, I felt distracted. In a lapse of concentration, I gasped as I felt my charcoal rub a little too hard. Panicked, I carefully rubbed out a part of their back on my paper, hers would have been thinner than that! Oh come on... I couldn't have too many smudges. Maybe... maybe if I worked on him instead. I moved to the other side, where more incomplete bits of pony sat apart.

"Yes... yes you are right. But my theory is now this. Aurora Star *personally* dealt with it all, and I have never found a single record check by Twilight Sparkle of it. Ever. From what we can gather, she was *particularly* keen on these checks for Ministry Mare approval, so anything lacking them gives a high indication of it being something *outwith* the publicised projects. Nor did I find any audit checks even by her *own* Ministry."

My Master's voice rumbled across the table. "You think that even the Ministry staff believed it was simply storage... other than Aurora Star herself? That she was making one of her own projects down there?"

"Believe? No... it's too obvious. She'd never have gotten away with it. Do I suspect it may be linked to that something we're searching for though? Perhaps. Fillydelphia was full of more holes than the primary hub of the Ministry of Morale here may have ever admitted. It was too industrial... too bustling and active and everchanging for them to keep up with. Just look at the reports of technology selling and we *know* the zebras were taking refugees away from shelters to the metro. If you wanted me to say one thing... it would be that I'm beginning to wonder how she got the resources for these 'personal' projects she sent into that supposed storage area. Now... I shan't theorise more lest we move off in an incorrect direction. Concentrate on the Ministry Station and on preparing a mountain slave force for now."

"Aye."

"Yes, Master."

I sat for a second. I couldn't have missed them referring to Sundial's activities there... nor the refugees situation I'd occasionally heard ponies from the past mentioning. It had become long obvious that there was some sort of power play going on to gain favour in Red Eye's... well... eye. One they didn't want other slavers knowing about to share the gains with. One they were seeking to uncover the past to hunt for. I began to wonder just how much of this was really interconnected... hadn't I heard something about disappearing Wartime workers too?

Below me, however, 'connection' was just what was finally beginning to happen. Delight surged through my weary mind as I saw a pony's face staring back at me from the paper.

One that... that smiled.

I could do this!

Thoughts of the past drifted from my mind as I heard them start discussing logistics. Yes... that gave me time to concentrate... I... I had to do this! It had to mean what I felt! Show what I meant...

I stopped... breathing out, trying to relax. I felt the vision of my drawing enter my mind, felt the pain fade away. I was alone without any danger... just... draw.

I drew... lines...

The lines... they weren't perfect but... they began to curve... and...

Became shapes to link the others I had done together...

I was drawing faster, all the voices and arguments over who did what nothing but the same background noises I'd drawn through a hundred times in my life. Thick swipes for a ragged mane... a gently breezy curve for a tail... a little imagination and picturing the past to round out that body a little...

The shapes... gradually, beautifully... they came to *life*.

The charcoal clattered from my mouth, rolling across the paper and falling between two tiles on the floor. Softly, I lifted the paper before me...

It...

It was *awful*.

I knew fine well what my own skills were capable of, but every out of proportion leg or twist of spine that made *no sense* was all there before my eyes! Why wasn't she looking at him when she should have been? Why were his legs too long?

Clamping my eyes shut... I almost tore it up then and there... why... couldn't... *I just... draw!?*

But I *couldn't*. It had been my one effort. It had to be enough! I just didn't have any other choice now!

That anger slowly began to build in me. The frustration and hatred of the news that had turned me into this talentless mewling nopony. That I would have to give this to her as an apology and it was ALL WRONG and looked horrible... she'd *hate* it...

But I had no other choice...

I had my apology at last. Now I... I just had to get out of here somehow before their meeting ended. This would be my best chance, alone in a kitchen and unsupervised. Slowly, I tucked the drawing back into my wing's now filthy bandages. Standing up, I realised how weak I was beginning to feel. But if... I could just get this and a gift of RadPurge to her I'd... I'd feel better.

Taking a breath, I turned to the kitchen to find my way free of these chains. To find my way back to my friend.

Problem one. My only way out is locked in the occupied room.

Problem two. I am chained to a pipe on the wall.

Problem three. I am beside a large group of incredibly dangerous ponies.

Add to that... limited time. It was no wonder why my searching of the kitchen was as frantic and panicked as it was stealthy and careful. Each cupboard being opened was slow and methodical, offering only the occasional rustle of a chain to convince anypony listening

that I was merely shifting about in discomfort. As soon as a door was open, I would cast my eyes madly around to hunt for anything. Pots and pans, old degraded cardboard boxes of now blue cereal, and even tubs of bleach and cleaning fluids, the smell of which wafted out enough to make my eyes water. Nothing of any use!

Next door, Mosin and Sooty were engaged in an accent heavy argument over the exact procurement of parts for his armoury. Amongst the raging words and the occasional bellows of other ponies for them to quiet down, I dragged a stool over to clamber up on and get onto the worktop. They must have been unicorns in here... for I could see cupboards no pony could ever have hoped to normally reach. Pulling them open, I found lengths of tubing, replacement lightbulbs and bags of nuts and nails. Argh! Come on, was there *nothing* in here?

Moving around, I started even lightly tapping the wall to look for any hollow spots. I *dreaded* the idea of falling down another wall cavity... but at this rate I might have to. Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap—

Tunk.

I froze on the spot, the hollow metallic noise far louder than I expected. The speech had quietened down, and I could hear My Master beginning to outline who should send what slaves. To my horror, I heard the name of 'Leafshine' mentioned as one of the 'volunteers.' Glimmerlight wouldn't like that... oh dear.

But I couldn't help that right now. It was obvious their meeting was beginning to start rounding up all the remaining details. I didn't have long! Pulling away the masses of stacked trays from the wall, I stared in amazement at what I saw had languished behind them.

Like a small elevator, just big enough to fit trays of food or a large pot... some sort of transport to another preparation area on a lower level! Beside it, my heart leapt as I saw the light was *still on*. It would work! Problem one, solved! Almost too easy, really. I mentally kicked myself for not looking earlier. Was I getting that slow in the head? My fever certainly was picking up amongst the groupings of hurt I had from My Master's 'punishments.'

Now... problem two was going to be a lot harder...

"Are in agreement?"

"Aye!"

"Indeed so..."

"Seems fine to me."

"Good, any last elements?"

They were wrapping up! I'd hoped to get a larger head start, but now it would be a rush just to get out at all! Stumbling back along the worktop, I once again began digging into the cupboards. I tried my best on the slippery surface from my occasional spillages earlier, hoofing it carefully over plates and glasses. Hopping up on my hind legs, sweating profusely, I began to rummage once again. At first, I felt delight as I saw a set of boltcutters... but they would be far too loud. *Nopony* would miss the distinctive sound they'd make! All the same, I took them out and lay them upon the worktop., Maybe they could—

My back hoof hit a plate and slipped...

My hooves spinning, I felt plate after plate slip off with it, along with some glasses and pots. I went with them, my vision spinning as I dropped wildly off the worktop to thud on my rump upon the floor. My entire backside and torso *flared* in piercing agony as the punishment from earlier wracked my body, giving rise to a loud squeal and moan. Pots kept falling around me... again and again. It was a miracle I hadn't landed on any broken shards.

My skin *crawled* however at the single sound I heard... of a chair scraping back and somepony approaching. I just curled up under the mass of broken items and shivered as I heard him enter.

"I... have given you very simple instructions... Number Seven..."

Oh no... please please please no...

"I asked you to stay still and to **stay quiet! You are the most useless slave I have ever seen! What part of your orders did you not UNDERSTAND?**"

"I... I got scared, Master! I... I thought I saw a radroach and... I tried to climb up the —"

"SHUT UP!"

My Master glared down at me from the doorway. I knew that look. It was a promise. An unspoken declaration.

"Be silent, Number Seven. I expect you to be ready to explain all your insolence after this. I have numerous overseers who require shift work made up, any more of this, and I will see to it that you carry out them all tomorrow. Understood?"

As he turned, I whimpered. After what I was planning, I would likely have to go through that anyway. That had been too close. He was distracted by the meeting, not given the time to carry out his normal punishments.

I had to get out of here... before he warped my mind any more. I *had* to. I couldn't dare cry, so I threw all the anger into my body and drove myself to my hooves. I had to move before I was pushed down any further. Every punishment I felt breaking me more into my subconscious slavery. Their discussion had been broken. I had a... a *little* time to drag myself out of here... away from him...

I dragged the stool over again, pulling myself up to the cupboard. There had been a screwdriver up there... there *had* to be if there were nails. It stood to reason! Silently, I reached in and fished around until I felt my mouth bite on a handle. Yes! A screwdriver! Just what I needed! I wasted no time in hopping down, having to stifle a loud cry at the jerking movement along my back and rump, before sneaking over to the pipe. Nearby to the door, I couldn't make a single sound as I began to work the screwdriver in my mouth... feeling that every annoying loose tooth ache. I cursed it in my mind... always aching whenever I was feeling controlled like some nervous twitch to tell me when... when somepony had control of me!

Carefully... carefully... I slotted it into the first screw holding the segment of pipe to the wall and began to turn. There were four screws. If I could get them off I'd be free! I'd just take the boltcutters with me and cut the chain on my collar's end someplace else when I could. Blinking... feeling fuzzy inside, I got to work.

"Master Shackles, before we go, do you have any estimate on the time to find the Ministry Station in your den?"

The screw worked rusty. I strained, feeling sweat running down my brow and stinging my eyes...

"Hmph... we've done fifty percent of the rough area. If the room containing the records of it hadn't been destroyed..."

"We can't fix that now. How long do you think?"

It began to move... my tongue swirled skillfully, around and around, poking into the handle's concave end to wind the screw slowly out...

"Two weeks at most. If we can get more slaves, especially ghouls, it'll go faster. They work

quicker... less affected by any radiation pockets. The ones I've got have been working down there for months constant. They're a bit... heh... droopy."

"You'll get them. Anything else?"

C'mon! The first screw just kept coming and coming. How long was it!? I could hear them ending!

"No... I think that's us..."

There! The screw dropped, the tiny noise I suspected only I had heard. Breathing fast, struggling to keep a grip on the screwdriver, I moved to the second one in a rush.

"Very well then. We'll meet again in a few days to see where we stand for the trip to the mountain mines. Good day to you all."

No no no! I was only on the second of them! Twisting madly, feeling a headache break in and my throat clam up in a dizzy spell, I slipped and dropped the screwdriver completely. NO! Damn my... my disease, it was making me dizzy. Fighting down the coughs, I began scrambling around and got it into my mouth along with a clump of lint it had fallen into from the floor. Retching, I just went back to work. I couldn't hope to not be spotted now! I could hear them all moving out. Wildcard giggled at the 'boring' meeting ending. By the sound of it, he was prancing out of the door.

"Master Shackles, a moment..."

"Yes, Grindstone?"

"Our leader's prodigy... what of him? He survives, yet he knows of your betrayal at the Mall."

My ears listened out, but I was having a lot of trouble with the second screw. The screwdriver wasn't fitting properly. Come ON!

"Heh... don't worry about him. Or the griffon for that matter. He won't be waking up anytime soon, and she's bound by contract not to interfere in the political matters of her employers. If he does wake up... hehe... we'll have him dealt with more... hmm, permanently. He has no real support against the word of those he would accuse anyway. Now, I must return to the Mall. I have a slave to discipline..."

The second screw was wiggling around, far longer than the first. I just tugged at it with my teeth, panic driving me to rip at it until it finally popped out.

"Very well... but I would appreciate it if you had any spares, you might send them to the Ministry? I do need some aid in searching through all the things recovered from the Stable if you have anypony with experience."

"Yes, yes..."

I had no time for the others, shaking so much I could barely see. My hooves reached out and tried to gently bend the pipe outward through its rusted joints so I could slip the loop of chain off. I could hear My Master pacing... he would be coming any second! My hooves strained... my mouth gripping the chain fought to not drop it... the heat in my chest only grew. What was wrong with me? My... my disease hasn't gotten worse this fast since the crater!

I heard metal strike the floor.

I blinked, staring at the pipe for a second before I realised what had happened... I was free... the loop of chain in my mouth. I didn't waste any time. I could hear My Master coming, so grabbing the boltcutters I simply threw myself up and into the elevator... hoofing the control panel's biggest button before tugging every part of the chain in with me. I heard his bellow for what the noise was... before I turned and saw him while I was

squeezing into the tiny crawlpace. Behind me, I heard a clank of grinding chains and the smell of dust burning from an engine long abandoned. Come on... come on!

“What... **get out of there, slave!**”

I began to wriggle around, trying to dislodge whatever brakes were still holding it up, screaming as I saw him charge for me. Whether I was going to obey or not... gravity had other ideas. With a jerk and a creak of torsion wire, the tiny box I'd crawled into dropped. Bit by bit, shuddering and falling before jarring to a halt every few feet, I lost sight of him in a cramped black void. I saw the canteen on Sundial's floor pass by... but it just kept going! I heard screams and bellows for the guards... for the other Masters. My back screamed in agony, as did I in a more literal sense. The chain rattled madly and raked against me as I fell gradually before *finally* dropping and impacting upon the bottom floor. I didn't waste time... pulling myself free to find a darkly lit worker rest area and desperately tried to combat the maddened coughing fit that all the dust kicked up in my face had started.

Tables and empty chairs lay strewn in a much larger area with multiple fridges and windows looking right out to the shop floor! This was my only chance. I hoped they didn't know what floor I'd gone to, as I heard their hooves clattering away upstairs. Somewhere, somepony let out a whistle to alert others. I wanted to run... but first I had to get these chains off. Drawing the boltcutters as close as I dared to my neck, I leaned my entire weight upon the handles, feeling them close... bend... groan... cut, and then finally...

With a clunk, the chain broke. I fell over them, the sudden cut as they snapped a joint made me fall onto my front. I coughed as my stomach hit the ground, and when I got up I saw blood. I just hoped that was from my cheek wound... but the metallic tang in my throat told otherwise. The scant lights above seemed to glare terribly in my eyes... before I blinked and tried to reassert myself. Had... had that whole kitchen been radioactive? No time to think... I... I had to go...

Staggering, limping, and whimpering on every step of my back hooves, I fled into the shop floor, carrying the boltcutters in my mouth. (They'd be handy for our escape!) Above me, I heard the thunder of hooves on catwalks. I didn't dare look, instead diving between rows of automated workbenches bearing unfinished and blank shoulder plates of Ranger armour. They seemed strange without their decoration and symbols. But my eye was drawn to the far end, where I could see the dull red haze of Fillydelphia's exterior through a gigantic door. A way out!

Around me, across the catwalks, a half dozen slavers began to filter down, the ones who had been closest to the abandoned shop floor responded to the call to search. Three of them, masked guards, carried firearms... the others holding wrenches or bats in their telekinesis. I shrank into the shadows below an old lathe as I saw them immediately head to cut off the exit and stand guard. Above... the sounds of larger ponies, the masters... they would come here soon and clear it bit by bit until they found me!

I looked around to gauge my options, seeing monorails above my head that would carry large slabs of metal to cutting machines on an automated track system. The offices Sundial had worked in looked down upon this place where they had once manufactured the armour, but so much of it seemed ruined with the irreplaceable precision tools destroyed by times long gone by. Hoof-making workbenches filled the far side near large cages of materials. Generators were behind still sparking fences on the other side. In the middle with me, underneath the offices, were the toolstations. Lathes... drills... cabinets... this place was a veritable maze that must have been a nexus of activity back in the day.

Plenty of hiding spots... just not many ways *out*.

"The shaft went down again! He'll be on the shop floor! Get down now!"

Grindstone's voice was followed by a deafening roar. With horror, I realised they'd set the *minotaur* on my tail. Fear led to adrenaline. With a quick glance around me, I made a decision and just *hoped* that it wouldn't backfire like so many of my plans. I wished I had a smart pony like Glimmer or Protégé to tell me what the best idea was... somepony to just tell me what to do so I could follow and do what they—

...said. My mind stalled a little, before I shook my head and grabbed a bag of nails. This had to work.

Behind me, the brutal sound of a double door being ripped off its hinges by something far stronger than even Brimstone Blitz himself was enough of a motivation to *get moving*.

Breathing was getting more difficult, but I managed to take one big breath before I leapt out into clear view, turned, saw the slavers... and screamed in fear.

All six of them turned immediately, spotting me emerge into the primary path through the manufactory. They started galloping before even shouting.

"That's him! Go! GO!"

"Stay there, little guy!"

Skittering on the smooth stone floor, I turned and galloped for all my worth back the way I had emerged into a small maze of high powered band-saws and lathes. They each had huge, clear perspex cubes surrounding them for safety, creating a very regimented and cramped area to run through. Weaving left and right around them... an almost inefficient route away from them... I came to the far end and turned back... freezing on the spot with my limbs locked as I saw them galloping madly up the main route. A scoped carbine was pointed directly at me.

"That's it! Stay right there! Don't move or I'll— ARGH! ARRRGGGH!"

"FUUUUCK!"

"The hell is-YARGH!"

The six of them collapsed, rolling and screaming as they'd ran directly over my little minefield of spilled nails. Their heavy heads had made them all roll nicely to have the point right in the air, just one more example of the ponies of old not thinking designs through very well. This was probably the same company that didn't think safety rails were a *good thing*.

I cringed a little as I saw them fall and spike their sides through the leather armour... not to mention the ones embedded in their hooves. Weapons fell to the floor as their concentration broke and telekinesis stopped working. Turning, I ran, picking up the boltcutters from where I'd left them.

"What the hell was that? *Where are you all, you blithering idiots?*" Grindstone's voice cut down from above. Glancing upward, I saw him standing at the edge of a catwalk with no railings (*I knew it!*) and pointing a hoof to somepony I couldn't see. But I could sure hear their hooves on the floor.

Along with some rather... bigger... hooves. Galloping back to the main concourse, I headed right for the huge exit. Outside lay the ranks of old vehicles, I could lose them in there! Two shots whized above my head, too high to be anything but warning shots... but

the sound still made my heart skip a beat. I stumbled, looking behind me to see a dozen ponies, including the minotaur at the back and My Master leading the way. They were *all* coming for me.

"I command you to stop, slave!"

Come on, Murky... prove it... *prove you can still defy them.*

"Stop right THERE, Number Seven!"

Glimmer was waiting, as was Sunny and Unity, and Brimstone and Coral Eve. I had so much work to do still, and if I lost Glimmer, so much of it would fall apart.

"Your Master demands you STOP!"

I couldn't stop now... dare, Murky, DARE! DARE TO DEFY AND RUN!

Crying out in sheer effort, I pushed my skeletal legs as hard as they would go, tearing out to the exterior. The heat and humidity trapped below the stormclouds hit me like a wet cloth to the face. My hooves sunk into the soft, yellowed gravel and kicked it up behind me in little spurts as I made my beeline. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw everypony else gradually catching up me, their longer legs powering them along faster than my own galloping. My lungs seared, my throat burned... I couldn't keep this pace up. I... I had to lose them somehow!

My route went right between two large weapons with massive barrels pointed to the sky. Ducking between and through the harnesses of the cannons, I navigated and pushed myself further into the crudely organised mass of war machines. A feeling all too similar to the first time I had run at the Wall came over me. If... if I failed, the consequences would be dire. But I wouldn't let him be My Master! He wasn't mine! Not My Master... not my f-fa...

The words died in my mind as I tripped, landing in the harsh gravel. Hearing them tear the reigns aside for their larger bodies to fit through. The sound of that dread cyborg *abomination* assaulted my ears, as I heard it tear at the vehicles and throw entire wagons aside, roaring like some mythical titan.

Slipping and sliding along the gravel, I rushed for the closest wall, hoping they'd be delayed long enough to let me get a proper head start this time! Slipping underneath a sky chariot, I pulled myself to the opposite side, confident no one else would fit through there.

"Where did he go?"

Yes!

"His tracks in the gravel, there! **Move, you imbeciles!**"

No!

I curved right... then left... then right again. But every time I heard their hooves closing in on the same turns! They were following the soft indents in the gravel I was leaving! Ahead of me, a winding group of more chariots blown away from their original ordered ranks formed a straight run for the wall. A large puddle had formed in the crater around where it had once stood, now a curved breach upon the manufactory's old defences. I could just—

But... no... no I couldn't...

"Follow the tracks! Get him!"

There was no way I could outrun them. I was beginning to flag, my hooves sliding and making huge marks in the gravel. I couldn't... couldn't get the oxygen. I was using too much energy just to keep *breathing*.

I stopped, leaning against a large ammo crate. Hyperventilating, my head twisted back and forth till my sweaty and straggled mane drooped and flew. I began pacing on the spot, my hooves coming down into the same indents of the gravel each time in sheer panic and-

Ah... aha...

I drew breath, steeling myself as much as I could (sort of a bendy copper at most) as the air drew over my throat, feeling like I was swallowing glass. Sprinting forward, I stomped all over the ground in one big line until I reached the puddle... then began trotting backwards, keeping my hooves carefully inside the imprints I'd just made. I'd... I'd go back to that ammo box and hide, hopefully they'd think I had kept running on! Nerves fraying... feeling like they'd come around the corner any second... I had to balance speed with precision. My vision wavered, pants becoming coughs. Whimpering and whinnying between them, I kept hesitantly stepping backwards.

"He's just around here! Go, go! The tracks you idiots, the tracks!" A slaver was screaming, I couldn't hear the minotaur. It couldn't fit through here. Had they called it off? Where were My Master's stomps? I didn't want to look backwards. I didn't want to turn around and see... and see...

Nothing. He wasn't there, my heart tightened as I began pulling myself up and into the ammo box, checking to make sure none of my false tracks had shown my backward motion. No sooner had I pulled myself in did I hear slavers charge past. I couldn't close the lid. I hadn't had time. I just had to pray they didn't look in.

"Up ahead, he tried to use the puddle! Go, over the wall!" One of the mares screeched, before hooves throwing up the filthy water became all too obvious.

"Spread out! Check all the buildings!"

I gently lowered myself down... my breaths came in ragged gasps. In the distance, I heard Grindstone shouting for his bodyguard to follow. Closer by, I heard—

Stomping. Oh... oh *no*... he was coming around the corner, slowly... like he *knew*. I lay still, trying not to shiver and rustle the metal box atop inert shells for the massive barrelled wagons. My eyes were *fixed* on the opening. My Master would move up to it. Any second, his head would just look in.

I heard him stop... listening. Every skill, every little shred of talent I'd come to cherish to stay hidden, I put into action. Holding my breath, tensing my chest to prevent coughing, hugging myself to not shake so much...

He trotted on... oh thank you Goddesses... you haven't forgotten me after all.

I'd escaped pursuit, if briefly... but now I had a greater task to achieve. RadPurge. Glimmerlight. Hearts and Hooves. The hospital would be easy. I knew a half dozen ways to sneak into it now, but the Mall would be more difficult. With our shop cell's door undoubtedly closed off by now, and no way through the plaza's main entrance, I'd have to get creative. Thankfully, I knew *one* other way...

I'd just have to push myself to my limits and return somewhere it had terrified me to get away from, though.

Hold on Glimmerlight, just a little while longer. Please be alive. Please. Our escape will come yet, even if you don't want me around after it.

Just... just as soon as I had a moment to catch my breath...

Flowerpot was screaming the entire basement down at my intrusion. I galloped as fast as my rapidly weakening body could carry me, virtually falling into Weathervane's office and knocking his wheeled stretcher across the room amidst a fall from a wracking cough. The

room spun and I fell, crying out.

“Weathervane! Doctor Weathervane!”

The basement was, other than the pus choked howls of Doctor Flowerpot, absolutely silent. The dim lights the ghoul used were out. He had to have been on a shift. Left alone amongst the grim jars and confusingly arranged test tubes and apparatus, I knocked the stretcher even further from me with a bark of frustration.

“Oh come ON!” Baring my teeth, I limped around. I’d have to find it for myself. If he even had any.

It was becoming a little worrying how many times I found myself trotting along worktops. In this case, I had to carefully avoid the little bubbling flames hung below steaming jars. I could have sworn I saw something... fleshy... in one. There was plenty of the fluid he used to *make* more supplies for the, drastically in need, hospital, but I had no idea how to mix them! Syringes of Med-Yes were kept in a heavily locked cabinet like I’d seen in the Ministry of Arcane Whatssits. I wished I could reach one of them for my back, it was draining my stamina far faster than normal as movement became a continual pain. I’d get used to it... before an odd movement would simply flare it up all over again.

The centre worktable was empty, other than the memory projection orb of Twilight Sparkle. I hoped it had helped him.

But I was getting nowhere!

Doctor Flowerpot offered his help. Unfortunately, his help amounted to a throaty roar through the wall with a slam that made the shelves shake.

“Oh... just... just be quiet you stupid... f-f-f...” I felt so much frustration build up, ready to explode verbally, “...*fingerpuppet!*”

Yeah, that’d tell him!

Almost to my amazement, Flowerpot went back to a gentle growling. It occurred to me how strangely routine his noises in the locked room had become over my time spent dying or healing in this place. But amongst the horrors and pain, I found a chance to sigh and try to smile again. Hah! Weathervane wasn’t the only one who could swear up a storm!

Taking what chance I could, I hopped back to the ground to search his desk instead. I told myself to keep smiling, like I had one with Glimmerlight. I forced a grin onto my face, feeling my cheek sting as the movement shifted the cut from earlier. I tried to ignore it, push away the fact that I was feeling shivery, even though my body and face were warm. Just... smile. I had to keep telling myself, ‘You’re going to get her back... so smile, Murky.’

With a sudden noise in the quiet room, something clattered to the floor the door behind me.

I leapt into the air, squeaking and spinning to face the door. I screamed, seeing two light green eyes staring back at me from the darkness. Falling backward against Weathervane’s desk, I raised my hooves.

“No! NO! Master... please, let me get it to... to...”

In the door, bulbous and bobbing through the air, I saw one of those weird Sprite-Bots staring in at me, two little green lights blinking on its carapace. It glanced to the side at the mop it had knocked over with a careless wing flutter, before seeming to look surprised that I’d spotted it. Without a sound, it turned and fluttered off, leaving me standing rather surprised with that smile still plastered on my face. It had been from trying to cheer myself up, and then of relief that it hadn’t been anything more malicious. My mind wanted to ask the obvious question. What in the Goddesses’ names had it been doing down here!? I made

to follow it, to bark a question, but it had already disappeared into the radioactive basement. Presumably, it had just gotten lost down here. I didn't imagine going there any more than I absolutely *had* to would really help.

Besides, I was on a schedule and for a second I'd... I'd thought... no. Just put him out of your mind. Turning back to his desk, I began rifling through the drawers, feeling only *slightly* guilty. (He got to ruffle my feathers, only fair.) Theory books, one of those freezing cold things doctors held to your chest, various quills...

I tugged open the first drawer on the other side, finding it empty. I moved to the lowly humming fridge at the back. I'd only seen him store confusing looking things in here before, or bottles. Not any RadAway from his previous huge stash. But the freezing air was a wash of pure delight against the musty air down here. Pity that my body was shivering from fever too much to enjoy it for long...

But there, between two beakers. The dull grey sachet...

A single RadPurge... like he'd been saving it. That thought alone made me hesitate. What if this was like last time and somepony else needed it? No, that time I'd *known*. This time I... I only had one confirmed pony needing it, I couldn't risk not taking it! Without much hesitation, I bit the cold edge and turned to grab a bag from the hooks where Weathervane's spare medical coats hung. Finding one in my size took a little work, but I eventually settled on a foal's medical drapes tied into a little bag and tied around me with some linen. Gritting my teeth as I pulled it tight over my back and slid the boltcutters through to stop me needing to carry the filthy metal things in my mouth, I knew I'd have to spend time apologising later. I hoped he would understand... Weathervane had a hair trigger, but he did care so much for everypony.

I passed the desk again on my way out, stopping only briefly to see the photoframes. But then I turned, finding there was more than the one I'd seen.

A healthy Weathervane... with a tiny looking Sundial, short stubby legs and puppydog-like eyes sparkling with gentle wonder as his father held him up to feed a monkey on a tree. The little Sundial, grinning wildly, held a hoof to the monkey's head as it fed from some dried fruit in his other hoof. So caring... careful of hoof and focused on it...

Just like his father was with his patients, the similarities between the two, even from stallion to colt, were so striking. From the eyes, their build, and even the soft way they each held the thing they cared for in their hooves...

Biting my lip... finding the oddly difficult impulse to cry wavering at its peak, I couldn't help but feel an intense... *longing* in my heart. I had to go. I had to move. But for a second, I couldn't deny the sudden feeling.

The stallion that came to mind wasn't mine and it didn't make full sense and... and I knew he wouldn't think it too b-but... I...

Finally, a couple of tears dripped from my eyes.

I really missed having Brimstone around...

Three slavers marched somepony past in chains, dragging them hard enough that their shackled up hooves could barely stride fast or long enough to keep up. Behind them, two griffons swished through the low embankment surrounding the old park near the Mall at high speed, blowing up arcs of ash and dust behind them. Aside from them... it was almost

clear.

Almost.

I'd been approaching the Mall from the side of the Ministry of Arcane Sanitis-thingys. The giant high rise that had collapsed across the park formed a colossal barrier, driving me to head through some old gardens of once impressive manors that had bordered the park itself. All their once impressive metal railings had been taken to the forges, leaving their gardens strangely borderless. After seeing few griffons soar over though, I'd taken to hiding within an oddly intact kennel, where I'd since waited as a work party moved into the park to continue digging at the rubble from the high rise... A missing plank in kennel's rear let me watch the few guards that stood over scavengers, and wait for a moment of free space to gallop through...

I'd just seen it.

Shaking my head to clear the fuzziness, fighting temptation to just take a sip of the RadPurge to see myself a little better, I moved out. Dropping into the embankment to avoid their glances, I pushed onward toward the Mall itself by winding through the sturdy manors until out of sight. I no longer had my grapple-gun saddle, but on the way I had dreamt up a little plan to get over the Mall's fence. Rough living in Fillydelphia over the months had given me a certain appreciation for finding uses for what few items I could muster...

As I dropped to a canter, feeling the stress of a full gallop quickly depleting my stamina, I took a second to catch my breath and let the warm dizziness pass. My chest felt immeasurably tight. I could feel a second pulse like... like something else was throbbing right in there. It made me sick to think of that growth on my lungs pulsating and slowly choking the life out of me. That was it... first... first thing after Glimmer was... RadAway. I'd go and raid somewhere or... something...

Slapping a hoof to my face to snap myself back to reality, my staggering stopped. I found I'd wandered, sore, miserable, and sick to almost fall against the slope of the embankment of the park's outermost border. Looking around to check no pony still saw me, I saw the Ministry in the background. Aurora Star's office window was all too easy to spot. Part of me almost wished I'd had more time in there... thinking of Mister Peace sitting alone...

Maybe I could sneak in after this and try to help him out? He'd keep me safe if I could find someplace for both of us...

After another twenty minutes of fast rushes and painfully slow crawling around convoys, the Mall was finally visible ahead. Tired, fighting a headache, and worried for just how long I had with the accelerating disease, I wandered around to the back, finding an unguarded stretch of the low, but razor-wired, wall. Unpacking my boltcutters and the linen sling, I opened the cutters to their full length and wedged a stone between the scissor handles to make sure they couldn't close. With the boltcutters spread at a right angle, I tied the linen around the centrepiece. A makeshift grappling hook...

I took the boltcutters in my mouth and hurled them toward the top. It took many tries, my accuracy being as horrendous as ever... not helped by the times I spent tripping or spending a minute at a time hacking up dark stains upon the rocks. I just had to hold out a short time longer. Just a little more!

It caught! The angle of the cutters handle slipped through the mesh fencing, catching and forming a rough little linen rope to the top of the fence. Using my teeth, wrapping my hooves around the linen and all the strength I could muster I began to pull myself up it. I could hear slavers nearby... but I couldn't turn my head. Just... just don't look here!

Nearing the top, I wound the linen around my hooves tightly and began to use my mouth to push the linen all over the barbed wire to let me roll over the top and drop down. If I hadn't been feeling as fevered as I was and enduring the burn and ache from every joint or the dull ache along my back, I might have felt proud of myself. At the top, I dragged the boltcutters clear with my teeth and tossed them back the way I'd came. My throw landed them into the dark crevice between a couple of old sheds. They would just weigh me down, and there were numerous ways out again. I'd rather have them someplace I could repeat this if necessary. Finally, I dropped down.

My ears pricked up. If I focused my hearing, I could make out the sound of hooves wading through the thick, goopy mud the storm had left. The slavers were coming around the corner of the building. Picking up the RadPurge and cutters, I wasted no time in rushing forward and hiding behind the Mall's old power boxes near the wall, shimmying myself into the small gap. Sure enough, a couple of mares trotted by, exchanging hushed conversation on their clearly boring shift. Lucky for some.

Stopping to pull at my collar, I could feel the red marks and sores below it already forming. They stung to touch, chafing against the collar when I moved. I needed to get this done quickly, before all the sickness kicked in bad.

Now to get in.

I'd been deliberately ignoring this part. Meekly, tripodding my way forward with one hoof clutched to my painfully convulsing chest, I wandered past where Flippy Bit had met his untimely door-related demise and unsteadily made my way to the fire escape, feeling ready to faint at any moment.

There was just one way in I knew...

Three... two... one and a... a half... one and a qu-qu-quarter... one... a bit less than one...

Forget it... GO!

I heaved and pulled the stiff doorway open, throwing myself inside before I had time to think about the *mind numbingly stupid thing I'd just done*. The dusty room's musk blew into my face, made me squint my eyes, and blew outward into the city as I simply galloped inside and for the vent before it woke up!

I slipped and stumbled over the masses of used food packets and cans upon the floor, that small vent all too promising in my vision. I didn't dare even *look*... but I heard it. Like an exhale of dead air, dry and throaty... building to a distended mouth's horrid howl...

I leapt for the vent, my hind legs kicking madly as I tried to pull myself up and into it. With a look over my shoulder, I saw the ghoul janitor throw its body around to get its rotten legs below it, scrambling and pulling its ruined body toward me from beside the door where it had lain to rest since my last departure. I screamed, screamed, and screamed again as I failed to lift my own weight. C-come on! Couldn't I even do a single pull up!?

My leg found a box to the side of the vent that I could use for some support. Pushing up with a hind hoof, I tugged myself into the vent even as I felt it gnash at my tail. Still crying out with every short, stammered breath, I kept dragging myself with my forelegs until I was clean away from the entrance and crawling deeper into the vent.

Behind me, the gnashing sound of the ghoul's mouth was all too audible as it leapt

toward the vent entrance, snapping in again and again. It only got more frenziedly the further I pulled myself back with its rotten hooves clawing and thumping away at the lip. The sight over my shoulder made me freeze on the spot... before the coughing fit finally came.

I matched its spasm-like movements, convulsing as pain racked every side of my body and blew small wisps of blood. My vision whirled, and I felt myself falling. I didn't feel the impact.

Dizzy, hearing distance noises and feeling a pounding in my skull, I opened my eyes to realise I had blacked out for a few seconds. H-how... I... I wasn't in radiation!

Slowly, not helped by the howling of the beast screaming in at me, the nausea passed. Breathless and sweat stained, I shivered and felt even my abused back and rump simmer down in comparison. I just needed a second...

A horrible sound. One of the most, in context, terrifying ones I'd ever heard began to make itself known. That of the duct thumping a lot closer. Wide eyed, I curled around to look into the darkness... and shrieked. My Master was staring right in at me... reaching... clawing and stretching to pull me back to him! Curling up, I closed my eyes. But an unbidden command forced me to open and look again.

Somehow, I didn't even know *how*, the ghoul had gotten into the duct and was slithering... gasping and howling for me, pulling itself through the cramped confines toward me. What... oh Goddesses! What was wrong with me!?

"NO! GO BACK!" I'd screamed out of fear, nothing else. It didn't listen. My hooves kicked into action, pulling myself back and away much slower than I'd have liked. Desperately, I began pulling and frantically crawling backward away from it. Gurgling, the janitor didn't give up the chase, keeping pace with the sickened, weak pony it so desperately wanted. I reached a two-way junction before panicking. Which way had I come the first time? What... oh Goddesses what if there was a dead end!? But I had no luxury of time. I just picked instinctually and kept crawling. I glanced back to find the horrible hanging jaw and the distended tongue swinging and swaying mere feet from my hooves. The beast tugged itself ever closer, its eyes glowing a hideous green. How was it moving so fast!? This was a nightmare!

I was so intent on the ghoul that I nearly dropped into the same pitfall I had last time. My rump almost disappeared below me before I caught myself and tugged my frail body over the hole of the downward plunging duct. Twisting painfully, dragging my back against the wall, I saw the ghoul move closer. It stretched out to grab me and clambered past the gap. Why couldn't it be stupid and just fall in!? I lashed out with a hoof as its own neared my leg, cracking its already broken nose. I kicked again and again, watching it lose balance and struggle.

One more bucking kick, normally reserved for the nether regions, made it slip. The howl of hungry rage as it descended into the darkness below made me shiver. That had nearly been me...

I wanted another minute to pant and recover, but I didn't have time. Not to mention that the screaming of the trapped ghoul was only making me feel worse. Clambering on, I knew I had at least one more ordeal before I finally... *finally* got to Glimmer. Feeling my wing, wincing to the touch, I at least knew my drawing was there... pathetic and insultingly bad as I knew it was, it was all I had.

I was, however, pausing now.

I knew this hole. The grate through which I could drop... I knew it, because I could still see my blood spilled upon the same floor I had cleaned.

His office. My prison.

He wasn't home. But I knew my luck. If my cutie mark and its foul destiny willed it, he'd be ready to come out of the wall or something the moment I dropped down there.

Already, throughout the Mall I could hear screams and shouts. The horrid thing was I couldn't tell the difference between the slavers taking orders to watch out for me and the slavers taking advantage of the slaves they now had under their absolute will in My Master's foul version of this place. It all just... meshed together, a chorus of Fillydelphia. But at least my route would avoid them for all but the absolute last moments.

Carefully, I dropped down. The landing... could have been more careful. Although I landed on his bed, the shock through my legs buckled my back, splitting the clotted blood on my back all over again. Crying out, I dropped to my side upon the bloodied floor, only adding to it all the more. My voice grew hoarse. I croaked painfully as I pressed a hoof behind me and held a scrap of linen torn from his bed against the wound. I could feel how... bumpy... my back seemed. The feeling revolted me, almost enough to make the rushing fever and running nose feel inconsequential.

There was a moment of silence as I bit my sore lip and listened carefully. I expected it any second... the sound that would imply he was approaching. It *always* happened. This had been too easy thus far. (If I forgot the ghoul, which I was very keen to.) But there was nothing. Standing weak, with my lashed back and rump, bleeding cheek, swollen brow, and a headcold with my sickness getting worse every few minutes... I just had to keep pushing. All my things were still here, to which I gratefully pulled my fleece and saddle on. It stung... but the soft material just made me *feel* better to cover up my wings again. No pony had to see them... I'd been lucky thus far with them on show. Everything else I hid in my saddlebag, slipping the boltcutters through the fastenings of my battle saddle opposite the grappling hook.

I touched Unity's statuette of Littlepip for luck, seeking any form of belief I could hold on to. I wasn't going to waste time and... and...

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself fixing his bed after I had landed on it. Afterwards, I would tell myself it was to try and cover my tracks. But even I knew there were no illusions who would have taken my things.

As I shot the hook back into the ducts again, I screwed up my eyes and tried to pretend I'd just made a mistake about that... to pretend it hadn't been for the... the *other* reason.

Last bit... last bit and I was *gone*. 'You've come this far, Murky', I told myself. Just a... little... further...

This part was not going to be easy.

The plaza was *heaving*. Slaves were being brought in, vast quantities of them. I wondered if their 'Mountain Task Group' was gathering here before their request was put in... for as I stared out of the air duct Brimstone had lifted me into days ago, I could see no real way

through.

A column was being marched past my hiding spot, upstairs toward the higher levels. Many of them carried that sooty looking residue, as though they'd been working in the rest of Fillydelphia's mines before being brought here. My Master was really calling in all his favours over the slavers to amass so many. Already, I dreaded how many were being sent to the unending underground hell of the metro. Behind them, I saw cages filled with more ponies than I'd ever seen in this place, no doubt to impress upon Red Eye that they could resume more important missions. I could only guess to get the choicest loot for their little 'group' before any other slaver. They really were making a big move... getting rid of Protégé through false info leaks and betrayals had only been the beginning...

Red Eye's potential for a greater military force had astounded me. But now I found myself in stark astonishment at the sheer ambition My Master was clearly holding to seek favour from Red Eye for power...

Glimmer's shop cell was in the main ground floor. If I dropped out now, I only had to go down half a flight of stairs, get to the bars, pass my apology through... say... say whatever needed said... and go. Straight back. Once in the ducts I'd be safe... er.

But there was only one way through here... I'd have to try and blend in.

Because that had *always* worked out in the past...

Awaiting the column to consist entirely of slaves and not slavers... or at least till the procession blocked sight, I hopped out of the duct and walked morosely downstairs with my head hung like all the others. Some of the slaves looked up at me... but simply seeing another little pony who had been battered around, they didn't pay me any heed. Thank the Goddesses I'd thought to get my fleece on!

"Hey, watch it, runt!" A hoof shoved me against the wall, staggering on my exhausted legs, I slipped down and covered my head. The movement felt far too natural. Sadly... that sort of thing was fairly common in my life. But it let me creep away faster with a valid reason to do so, cantering down the rest of the stairs into the main plaza. It had changed even more in the few hours. Scrap-built scaffolding had formed bridges from one balcony to another on the higher levels, which were gated on either side and held long rifle armed unicorns who swept their barrel around far too readily. The incinerator had really got going, belching its smoke in thick clouds to the wired cage roof while I could see slaves being forced to work away on stone chipping, sewing or other small tasks even in their rest periods.

The bustle gave me a good shot to stay hidden. Falling in amongst a group beside an elderly earth pony (How had they ended up in here?) I matched their pace as it slid along the wall, passing shop cell after shop cell. The heat in here from that incinerator wasn't helping my dizziness. Twice, I stumbled. More times, I coughed. But I swallowed the bitter air and kept going. So... close...

"You all! Halt!"

My hooves froze. It was My Master's assistant, what was he called? Wormtail? I saw him march across the ground, before turning to an entirely different group. I was about to feel a little happier until I saw who was with him. *Wildcard*. My Master was obviously moving him into a role that Barb had once had until he likely had become too much of a threat. At least you would see (or hear) Wildcard coming. Even now, he was whistling as though nothing in the world was wrong around him. What was that tune? Four short whistles then a long one? The same again... then four long ones.

Forcing myself to ignore it... I made the last short hop and pressed my face to the bars.
"Glimmer!"

My hopes fell. There was nothing... nopony. The cell door sat open, not needed while they had been taken to a shift. My heart felt like it had been... been *crushed*. Sliding down the bars, I lay on the floor before it for a few seconds. No... she... she should have been here! I needed this! *She* needed this!

Slowly, I drew out my package for her, wrapped in linen. Wishing I could sob, I brought out my drawing carefully and slid the edge into a fold of linen. She... she would find it... she'd know it was from me...

Wandering inside the cell, I moved into the back and set it down on her side of the couch. She'd find it. I stared for a long time at the drawing... just hoping she'd come in behind me and be surprised... but I only heard more cries of those thrown into the yet unknown pits outside. The door out back had been blocked up. I just held the picture and stared...

It was meant to be Glimmerlight and... and Brimstone and Coral and... and what I remembered Coral's son to be like from the memory. Caduceus too... Leafshine like she'd asked me and... and even what I imagined her parents were like. Strong and tough Steel Rangers but still caring for their daughter.

But I'd messed up so much... her mother and father were in the wrong jobs, I'd done her father as the paladin and her mother as the scribe. Caduceus' little glasses looked weird and messed up his eyes. Brimstone was *freakishly* huge, even more than he should be. None of them scaled right... I could see curves wrong or... or how I'd made Coral's son look too fat and... and...

The three words stared up at me. Those three words I'd hoped would mean it.

'I'm sorry, sis...'

They had once been an apology for... for not realising and saying the wrong things.

Now they were simply an apology for making everyone she ever loved look *stupid* on this drawing.

I turned and left.

I still wished I could cry again.

Trotting back out, I made to sneak back to the duct and slink off into the night. I'd try and hang around the Mall and see if I could spot her looking any healthier. But with such a pathetic apology, she'd likely not care to see me. Even after what Coral Eve said.

Depression was hitting hard, but even it wasn't enough to stop all the burst of adrenaline I felt at who I saw the moment I left the shop cell. A new wave of slaves had been brought in; all of them thin and hungry. They were sat around the fountain, waiting to be told where to go. I spotted the fiery and earthy two-tone mane immediately. Sunny was among them. Part of My Master's stock, I had figured I'd keep bumping into her while I was around him too.

The decision was reached in my head before my hooves even started moving. I didn't head for the duct. No, I went forward, weaving around the confinement pits. There was a silver lining to all this confused running! I could turn this into something good! Hope flared up in my heart, I could check one thing off my grand objectives!

"Sunny!" I whispered as loud as I dared. She was staring at me, but didn't reply immediately. Her mouth gaped, moved and finally seemed to break through into speech again.

"M-Murk? Why are you..."

I couldn't stop myself, I hugged her.

"L-listen, I'm not meant to be here, but we can go! Me and you. Like we planned!"

"Go where...?"

My eyes were starting to cast around. We didn't have the time to discuss it, already I could see Wormtail and Wildcard coming far too close for comfort. Was that raider being a bodyguard or just enjoying the sights from that mad half twisted smirk? I lightly tugged her arm, almost feeling sick at how quickly she'd gotten so thin. I'd been born to it, and my friends I'd met after they'd been in there, but she'd been a healthy wasteland *veteran* not too long ago.

"Out of here! Hide! Escape! Come on, we can sneak out in the ducts now you're so, uh, so thin..."

She might have made a little joke about that, I was trying to give her reason to quip or snap at me a little. But the almost blank look she gave me simply broke my heart for the poor mare. I *really* wanted to give Doc Minstrel a good square buck between the legs for leading her to this, had he still lived.

"O... okay..." Her voice was soft, before she gritted her teeth. "I need out. Need to get... get my gun and... and shoot that... that..."

Yes! That was the attitude! I nodded furiously, before wincing in pain and confusion at the world blurring before my eyes. "Follow me, we'll go get your gun, Sunny."

I hoped I could find one. But that wasn't important. What was important was how she reacted, standing up warily beside me. Cautiously, we began to retrace my steps as a sense of growing momentum began to overtake me. We would do this! With somepony else I could talk to, we could find a way to help the others too. I'd be taking Sunny away from My Master too. We would both be defying him! We sped up, trotting around a group of slaves being pulled from their shop cell. I kept my grapple gun facing away from any slaver, direly hoping they wouldn't see it.

"Everypony halt!"

Wormtail's annoyingly nasal voice snailed out and was noticed only through how downright *insipid* it was compared to having any real power. It took everypony a few seconds to obey, compared to the freeze frame on life My Master could pull off with a shout. I sensed Sunny stopping behind me. Turning, I shared a look with the dusty coloured mare. Only now that I got a chance to look, her brow now bore the horrid scar of a lash wound, much like my back. I could only imagine who from.

"We're one short! One shooort! That's one less for you idiots! Where are they?"

Oh *shit*! I permitted myself to blaspheme in my own mind as the stunned look we shared made it all too obvious who he meant.

"Come on! Oooown up! Where are they? I know numbers and I know how to count! This is... this is *highly dis-satisfactory*!"

Was he serious? I could even see a *slaver* slap his gas mask with a hoof above us. Wormtail began to move around the middle group, asking them who had gone. We didn't have much of a chance.

I glanced to either side of the plaza. The duct was only about twenty feet away, but if we moved we'd be spotted. If we didn't we would be too.

Only one way. *Dare*.

"Sunny... y-you ready?"

"I'd rather be shot than continue this, Murk..." Her voice sounded so fragile now, like she was terrified of having been brought to that point.

Staring into each others worn and red tinged eyes, we turned and galloped for the duct.

"THERE THEY ARE!" The new bridge guards had us in a second, screaming out to the rest.

My legs ached, I could see Sunny tearing up at a pain in her leg as she fought to push forward. We dashed around slaves, leapt over those lying down and Sunny even barged a slaver out of the way!

Ten feet! Just up the stairs now!

"Block them in! BLOCK THEM!" Wormtail screeched over the commotion. The slavers above held fire, likely from the mass of targets their Master wanted kept alive too well. But ahead of us, we almost ran directly into a block of heavily armoured slavers rushing to guard the stairwell. The duct was blocked!

To my credit, my panic was now only *five* seconds long instead of ten. Reaching out to grab Sunny, I pointed to the opposite and unguarded stairwell. One slaver leapt a pack of slaves with his back hoof catching one in the face to stop us. Yelling in pain from the action, I dived to half slide and half roll underneath him. Sunny took advantage of his stumbling over me to shove him into a mass of weary looking bucks who'd grouped together. The slaves simply stared in astonishment.

Reaching the stairs, we found even more slavers rushing down. Screeching to a halt, surrounded, I looked up and again while trying not to keel over and give up. But my eyes found the balconies.

"Sunny, grab hold!"

She stared at me for a second, before doing as I said. "I *really* hope you know what you're doing, Murk!"

"So do I..." I murmured, hopping up to point toward the balcony, flipping out my mouthpiece and firing the hook to catch on the scaffold bridge. Biting hard upon the trigger as soon as I saw it wrap around, the tension strength almost surprised me as both our wasted bodies flew upward, tugging hard on my back.

I couldn't scream, I had to keep my mouth shut on the trigger! Together, we flew up above the slavers and wound quickly onto the bridge. One slaver above tried to catch us, but just received Sunny's desperately swung hoof in his face for his troubles. Sunny held him down while I clambered over the edge and got untangled from the scaffold with panicked hooves; then we galloped on.

We'd run to where I'd fought Barb near the roof and use my grapple to pull us out through the hole! That cage wire couldn't be *too* tough and I wanted to bet that Barb's knife was still up there from stabbing Protégé to cut with! Glancing back, I saw slavers fighting through the slaves to chase us with clubs, whips and (making me shiver) *chains*. Briefly, I saw Wildcard running up the opposite stairs we'd tried for. Well... all right then, whatever floats his boat...

We passed a cart of pipes for constructing the scaffold bridges, one that we spun and, as one, bucked down the stairs. An almighty clatter that assaulted even my ears rung out as dozens of heavy pipes thundered into the chasing slavers. We went higher, entering that darker stage of the enclosed stairwell. Behind us, I could hear more of the slavers beginning to cluster on the balcony and be shouted at to give chase. But the pipes had slowed them, hurt them. Every single item we found, either Sunny or I turned to hurl at the individual

pursuers. The door was just up ahead, but a faster unicorn tossed the projectiles out the way with his magic and began to catch up with us, charging up the stairs. Squeaking as he went for *me* I pulled my mouthpiece trigger again to fire the hook into his chest before retracting it. The projectile blew him off his hooves to crash into two more behind him. I glanced at my grapplegun as it retracted.

“W-wow... gotta remember that idea...”

I felt Sunny pulling me as we pelted into the darkened room, she slammed the door shut before we worked together, our frail bodies offering just enough to push a work cabinet in front of it.

“What’s the plan, Murk? You do have a plan?”

“Y-yes... kinda. Make s-sure it stays shut, I need to hunt around.”

Hearing the slavers beating on it harshly, I turned back to the nightmarish generator room. It still haunted me, being chased by somepony in the dark and hearing Protégé scream in pain like that.

Now, to find that damn knife! It had to be here some—

“Surprise, everybody!”

I ran directly into a hoof. My head stayed where it was as my body kept running beneath it, bending me back to twist over and collapse to the ground with a bloody nose. Another stomped down into my gut, driving what little air I could manage right out of me along with a spray of misty blood. Through my darkening vision, I saw a multicoloured mane and mismatched eyes erupt from behind a generator and surge right toward Sunny.

The mare spun, instincts no slavery could kill driving her into the counterattack from a life on the harsh roads of Equestria. Her hooves flew out, but were simply batted aside like any child before one of Wildcard’s front hooves slapped across her face, throwing her to the ground. He began kicking lightly at her.

“Get up! C’moon! Get up! Get up get up get up! Come on, gimme a good performance! Be a star, get up and fight!”

I saw her in danger. I’d handled Barb. I could push myself to help a friend from *this* nutjob! Lifting at least my front half up, I bit hard on the mouthpiece, firing the hook directly for him. Feeling the jolt of firing, the hook soared forward like a long range punch... before curving away in a glow of magic. Wildcard’s horn sparked, my own hook soaring around to come right back at me, spin around and around to wrap up my legs, lift up, and drop me on my back... hogtied. Gasping in the pain of the drop, I fell to the side and saw him just laughing.

“Unicorn brawlers, huh? Pretty fun things. See, somepony told me a unicorn couldn’t be that, so I tore his throat out with my horn. Then I realised that was a pretty bad move, couldn’t tell me he was wrong, you see?”

His magic surged, flaring brightly with that vomit yellow colour to slam me into the generator before arcing across to grab Sunny’s backward double buck by her hooves and lift them from the floor. His own counter buck spun and slammed into her chest. I heard something crack, but I couldn’t even scream myself as the impact to my head only felt heavier and more painful.

I didn’t even see the end of the fight. I passed out far too early, the last sight of a unicorn combining his telekinesis and earth pony like brawling into one hurricane of brutality. The powerful demonstration making me realise that it’d be a long while before I was truly free of Brimstone’s past still hurting the present.

Consciousness brought only a deathly feeling.

Even before my vision came back... I could feel my throat gurgling and full. My chest was convulsing like I'd swallowed a parasprite. A windpipe that seared and burned inside me along with a head that felt like it had been split open. I was cold... shivering. Everything felt wet... I'd been stripped again...

Sunny... I... had to go get...

My limbs felt restricted... they couldn't move far from below me. Was that... mud? Damp? Stinging... the rain? Where... where was...

"Wakey wakey, Number Seven..."

No... no... don't be awake! Faint, faint Murky! Fall into the black and just don't wake up!

"I said... **wake up!**"

A hoof hooked around my forehead, tugging it up and back. There was no hiding it as I groaned loudly at the rather large swelling on my forehead being handled roughly. I didn't want to open my eyes... but I had no choice. The groaning turned to a horrid cough... I was... was *very* sick... like before in the crater. I could feel it bubbling in my throat... feel the loss of breath and heady fever taking grip. I... I didn't have long...

My Master was staring down at me. From underneath a sheltered umbrella upon a stand in the ground, he was backlit by the flare of sheet lightning above us every few seconds. But those green eyes... they were never-ending.

"There we go..."

"Pl... please..."

He grunted, dropping my head to flop back down into the mud, my mane lying soaked around me.

"Don't even start, slave. Now before I begin to say anything, I advise you look around you..."

Almost not wanting to... I did look around, moaning from a stiff neck and the dizziness from just looking. There was...

Nothing.

We were alone. I didn't even recognise this place. A large expanse of barren wastes in a clearing between abandoned buildings. Thick mud gooped beneath me and him, water slid off the nearby rooftops like waterfalls. The umbrella was keeping it from falling, but already there were many large puddles formed around us... some of which seeped underneath me and stung horribly. But to my horror... I saw that I was chained to the ground by every limb and once again attached by the collar to My Master.

Even with just shifting my weight, the pressure of the collar gave rise to a horrid spontaneous amount of choking and coughing when my chest spasmed. Eyes rolling over, curling up as best I could from being staked down... I whined and cried for help from my sickness... I cried for Weathervane. I needed... needed RadAway... *now!*

Then I saw it... right beside him. Right within my reach was an orange sachet. Still hacking and dry heaving, I began to pull myself toward it, please, Master I needed it!

Chuckling, his hoof slowly pushed it back out of the way... out of my reach.

"Oh no... disobedient slaves don't get treats, Number Seven..."

"I..." My sentence was cut short by another cough. "I... I *need* it, M-Master... to liiive, please..."

My head was grabbed, forced to look up at him.

"You disobey me! You run from me! You try to take another of my slaves and now you say you want more? Are you so greedy, Number Seven? She was sent to the metro for her punishment. You are here as *your* punishment! My punishment of you... and oh... you will not be getting away so easily this time! NOW BE QUIET AND LISTEN!"

Holding my ears, shivering and whining as he bellowed into them, I was cowed into shrinking back from the needed medicine. I heard My Master chuckle at the submissive reaction, before patting me on the head.

"I figured you might try something like this, Number Seven... I figured. It's why I offered a little insurance policy..."

"W-Wildcard, Master?"

He sneered. "Oh... oh no, he was useful, yes. But in the end you would never have gotten far. You must be wondering why you kept slowing down... getting sick... always worse and worse despite your own medicine. Well... *that* was my assurance that you need me. A RadAway a day... the doctor's told me. Easy to find for a determined pony. But a three RadAways a day? Oh... much *much* harder..."

"Th-three... Master?" I wanted to cry, feeling my chest rise and fall and swell and hurt and... and... "Wh-what have you d-done to me...?"

That *sick* cackle and sneer, my head was lifted, before I felt his hoof tapping something.

My collar.

"It's a wonder of what you can find in an old contaminated prison right beside the crater, Number Seven. A collar irradiated enough to keep slowly killing you... over and over and never ceasing its work to end your *life*. Not enough to harm those around you but just enough to make that growth of yours *much* worse... hehehe. Just enough that you need somepony who can get anything he requires to keep his *favourite* little slave alive..."

I wanted to be... to be sick. Not just from the disease but...

My hooves touched the collar, trying to pull it off. My eyes stung... I felt hollow inside. All... all this time he'd been... been making it worse. He'd locked me into a killing collar! I fell to the side, screwing up my eyes and *trying* to cry as best I could... but I only spluttered and spat. I could subconsciously imagine it... magical radiation particles eating away at me... slipping into my throat every second. The red sores and rashes all around my throat made so much more painful sense now...

Oh... *Goddesses* please... *somepony*! Lift me out of here... I didn't want this anymore! *Please!*

"Please... Master I... I'm dying... *now!* Please, can I..." The words felt foul in my mouth, but already my vision was fading. I didn't have a *choice*. "Please... can you... you give me some RadAway..."

That mocking chuckle made every inch of me crawl in disgust. I felt him pat my head again, like I was some sort of little child.

"Oh we will... we shall ensure you will be kept alive so long as you obey. But first there is your punishment for all you've done, my boy."

My mind rebelled. Do *not* call me that.

"I told you, I'm not a torturer, Number Seven. I don't sadistically harm ponies for my amusement. Control them? Oh yes... I do love my little subjects... but I don't aim to hurt

them. Many just... heh... can't handle the job. No... your punishment is not to be harmed."

My body kept shifting, convulsing and tugging against the bars which he'd chained my limbs to. Then why... why outside and chained into the mud so alone? But then I saw his eyes narrow, before reaching into his own armour's pockets to pull something out and drop it before me.

My journal.

"Oh no... you won't be punished with whips or beatings, slave. I am a merciful Master sometimes... I only ask that you do one thing."

He leaned down, those yellowed rotting teeth inches from my face and staring intently at me as I writhed in the mud, caked and soaked amongst it.

"You will draw me."

The journal was pushed forward. I recoiled, trying to force myself away from it. No! NO! Drawing was... was my only real freedom! *NO!* I wouldn't... *I couldn't!*

"Please... Master, s-something else... I'll do more shifts!" I turned, begging to him and trying to ignore that knowing smile that he had me in a figurative corner.

The wind blew the sheet rain in under his shelter, soaking me from the side all over again and stinging my wounds badly. But he only kept smiling.

"No... you will draw."

"I can't anymo—"

The thunder rolled above me, but as quickly as it went... he was on me. Screaming, I felt the rain wash over me as I was pushed out from under the shelter into the *torrent* of lightly burning rain upon my back. Thrown side to side, roughly handled and aggressively controlled, I was pressed to the ground... a brown muddle went before my eyes... before my head was pushed forcefully into it. Mud sloshed across my face, blocking all air as the liquid flowed into my nose and mouth. I flailed, panicking and trying to move. But his hoof stamped down... pressing my face into the water as it bubbled and splashed around me. I... I couldn't breathe! Mud went down my throat... I coughed and swallowed the dirty water... I... he was drowning me! Smothering my face to—

Air! The pressure released, I choked and spat, falling to the side. Groaning and hacking up wads of wet mud... I felt myself sink slightly as the rain kept pouring down into the recess I'd made in my frantic kicking. My entire body was quaking... all too ready to expire. Then I saw the journal slide before me again... that umbrella following it.

"You will **draw** or you will **die**, Number Seven! **This** is your punishment! To prove to me that you are willing to be my slave! That you submit to your life here by using your freedom to choose this drawing... to complete me in your life!"

His behemoth like stature flared and silhouetted in the lightning. I could see his giant weight actually sunk a little into the mud. My chains slid and turned brown under it all as I just looked up and tried to shake my head.

"But... I... I lost the ability. I can't draw any more..."

He didn't even reply. I just felt him reach for my head and move toward the puddle again. Screaming, I wasn't even given a chance to close my mouth before my face was splashed into it again. It lasted longer, all thoughts blurring into a vague nothing... my thinking slowing and turning more to almost hallucinogenic colours and silver shapes that spun and twinkled even through closed eyes.

Then suddenly... the sky. I hadn't even realised he had pulled me out from the torture

again (Damn whatever he said about it!) and laid me on my back. Again... the journal was pressed near.

I couldn't take another drowning... I actually couldn't. I could feel my life hanging by one fraying thread... awaiting the unconsciousness before I would drown not of mud but of my own blood that even now I could feel clogging my lungs from the swelling taint growth. Shivering... I looked from my chains... to my journal... to My Master... to the sky and to my own cutie mark.

I thought of all the others. What would they will me to do? To do *this*? But I had to live... for them. Please... please let me... let me see past this...

Slowly, I reached for the provided charcoal and moved to a clean page...

"Good, Number Seven..."

Ignore him! I shook... the charcoal rolling against my loose tooth before I gently bent down and... and began to...

...draw.

L-l-lines... corrupted lines I never wanted to do became... they became c-c-curves and...

They grew bigger, stronger. Outlines taking more prominent priority and then whispering inward with quick flicks. I had to pick up the charcoal as I kept coughing... but always came back to it... feeling his hoof stroking almost lovingly over my mane.

Curves grew and joined up to... to make the next bit... the same mantra, the ongoing routine I'd always held and used. The one that had been broken now came back. They became shapes...

The little details flushed, glaring up at me. My eyes burned with the effort to cry... but his orders somehow stopped me doing so. Terror flowed through me. For my life... for my freedom and will to be my own pony. I didn't want to do this! But the mud trickling from my face and mane that dripped over the paper only reminded me of what awaited... as if drowning in my own blood wasn't bad enough.

The shapes they... horribly... slowly and maliciously...

They came to life.

I sat back, shaking more than any point in my life as I saw My Master examine it. My breath was shallow... fast... please, I've done what you want, give me the RadAway please!

The journal was lifted... and I could see what my own subconscious had done.

I'd drawn. Properly and with all the old talent I had... but now used only for drawing the things I was commanded. Was... was that it? I had lost my own freedom of mind? That I could only draw what I was *told*?

For before me... I saw My Master upon my own journal. Now immortalised and carved in my mind's eye. Huge, authoritative, and a presence beyond scale upon my life. He stood protectively there, grinning *that* grin. His eyes all too familiar and his own scar identical to... to...

The pony I'd shown eternally attached to him...

My Master stood protectively above me... his one large hoof wrapped over the little slave I'd drawn, keeping him close. The way a father would do for his... s-s-...

...son.

I didn't say a word. Neither did My Master. He simply looked to the drawing... before grinning... turning to a large smile. Slowly, he hoofed across the RadAway that I took and bit away the seal of to hold my life in the balance. It'd take a few minutes to work... I still felt weak as I felt him stroking my mane while I drunk.

“There, there... now you’re learning... let’s go back home, shall we? Your time has only just *begun* Number Seven... you have yet to begin **true** slavery under me. But I’ll be nice before you start... I’ll even let you into the plaza where you can tell your friends, because you’ve done *so... well...*”

The chains were released... all but two. The one around my neck and...
...and the one around my soul.

Coral Eve tried her best. She really did. But as we lay together in her cell, I just couldn’t do much but cling to her and shiver. In her motherly embrace, she cooed and softly whispered, sensing a buck in need even if he wasn’t a child anymore. She had cleaned me of the mud, helping to wash away some of the physical stains and help my back.

But after I had told her, I think even she knew that it would take a lot more than a little hug to really help how I was feeling.

My ear twitched... I’d heard something. A little *tap* upon the bars. Not like the batons like somepony might knock on a door.

I looked up, attracting Coral Eve’s attention.

“What is it?” Her voice betrayed worry for the two of us, having found ourselves in a mutual state of simply needing anypony else who could be there for them.

I didn’t speak... I simply got up and began to trot out the room. Her two cellmates glared at me... but wisely kept their distance. Coral Eve held some real fear factor over them. But my eyes only saw what awaited.

Near the bars, I could see a small package with a sheet of paper sticking out of it. I trotted carefully over... slowly unpacking it to find two bottles of water and a little of the preserved soup from long ago. With baited breath, I opened up the paper... I recognised it... I knew it...

The drawing of... of all of us. Terrible as ever and bearing all the mistakes. She’d... she’d *returned* it...

But it held something new.

Amongst it all, between her and Brimstone, in somepony else’s style of rough scratchings more used to diagrams than real drawing... I saw... myself. I had been added to it all right beside her. I felt my eyes go wide... surprise...

Below it were two words I couldn’t read, below the three I had on it.

Coral came out behind me, looking over my shoulder in surprise, a hoof resting carefully on my neck.

“W-what does it s-say?” I stammered...

“It says—” but she stopped. Looking up.

Before us, emerging from the shadows of the plaza... weary... hungry looking and barely recovered from sickness. She wore her torn red robes, her pink mane fallen around her head and before sullen eyes that already held tears.

“It says... ‘me too,’ Murky.”

My hooves shook, dropping the drawing to push forward as we met at the bars, nuzzling and reaching through in the best approximation of a hug we could manage.

“I’m so sorry!” I squeaked, finally feeling relieved tears begin to fall from my eyes. *Finally*. “For... for it all and... and sorry the picture was so bad! I got it all wrong and I hoped

and...”

Her hoof touched my mouth, stopping me. Her tired but oh-so-trying to be happy eyes glared to mine with the best smile she could manage.

“Murky, dear... I don’t care how good or bad you think it was. I care that you *did* it. That you took the time to do this for me. That’s all that matters...”

Behind me, I felt Coral move up to be beside both of us... animosity briefly forgotten for this one moment at least. Glimmerlight looked to her.

“Thank you, Coral... for taking care of him.”

Coral Eve merely nodded, her hoof resting on me as I held my friend.

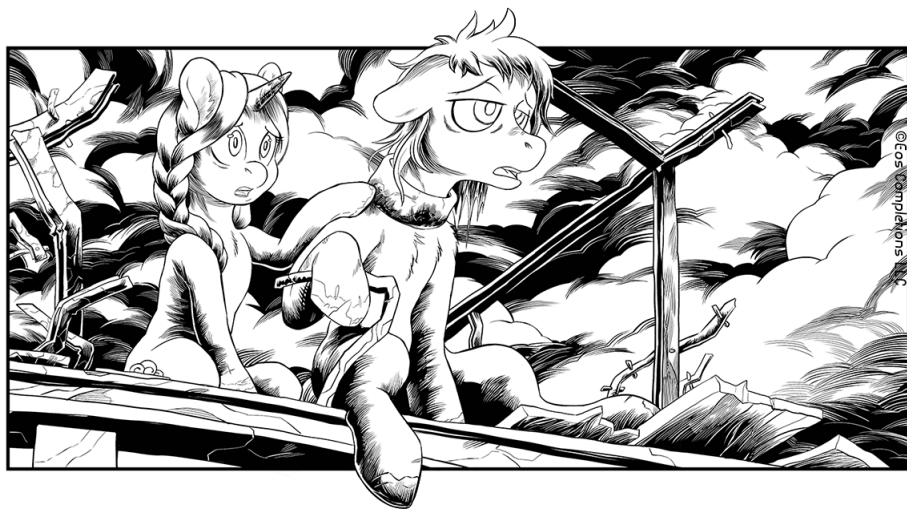
We had a lot to talk about... to work out. Things wouldn’t be perfect immediately between us all and... and I knew I definitely wasn’t the same. I’d lost so much to the world around me. I knew I’d been knocked back... devoid of what my friends had given me and my growing personality.

But for now... I had a sister again. The family I had chosen for myself.

Footnote: Perk lost...

Confidence Boost – Something has damaged your belief in yourself. Your friends may be there... but you can't help feeling that you've lost something inside that may very well take time to get back. The dark days are upon you... ones you'll need your friends all the more to help you get by. You have lost one point of charisma.

The Only Way Out



“Will I lose my dignity? Will somepony care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?”

“What is it like to be without hope?”

Do you know that feeling? Like, when you’re about to have something done to you that you can’t possibly hope to change and there’s that one horrible moment of clarity when you realise ‘this is really happening, and I can’t stop it?’ As though you’re strapped into a... a... rollercoaster about to go over a horrible dip, but you can’t get out? But worse because you know it’s going to be something terrible.

“Not to sound like I’m trying to lessen what you’re saying but... yes. I do.”

Then you know what I mean. The first time I ever felt it was years ago as a foal, when three slaves held down my legs and pulled my wing across the cold metal of an anvil. Time froze for one horrible second when I saw him raise the hammer and an icy inevitability ran right through me when I realised that hammer was going to fall and something you never think will happen to you is suddenly beyond your will to stop. Then it happens and you just want to wake up from the nightmare that you know is all too real.

It’s the knowledge that you no longer have any say in your life at that very moment. That something else is driving you and forcing something to happen and no amount of begging or wishing is going to stop it. It’s like that every second of the day.

He was right. It was only just beginning. My Master had broken me in, demanded that every facet of my life accept him until I was even bearing him in my journal. Now I was to begin my ‘new life’ as his, simply accepting what I was told was all I was meant for. To work for his benefit, to be his own slave, and to have no choice of my own that was not pre-decided by him. He... he lashed me for waking up too early! I had my food taken away for not eating it in the right *order*! Shift after shift, unending... his way to instruct my life. Make every moment of it into a living model of obedience. To push me past my limits then order me to go further, just to see me manage it and shock myself that I could so easily

become what I was before the Pit all over again.

Rarely was I given any rest. He'd only throw me into that tiny cell in his office that was my true home in his eyes and leave me alone in the dark. He leave me in the cold; wet, sick, and alone on a rough concrete floor.

I just couldn't handle it. My life was swinging out of control! I made attempts to escape, but he knew where I would be every time. He'd... he'd even let me get away from the Mall, sometimes! But he'd always be there, allowing me to think I'd gotten away before the chain would snap tight, and I'd be drawn back. I made one last attempt before he began telling me to grow up and accept life as his s-s-son.

Always always *always* ramming it into my head to accept him as a father and... and g-g-grow out of believing it...

"...was what? Hey, *hey* what's wrong?"

I don't want to remember that moment! But it's always there, and it always will be! I just... the feeling.

No, no no, it wasn't fair. Why then? I wasn't ready to know it. I wasn't ready!

"Murky? Murky, what happened? What's wrong? Hey, hey come here..."

Just, I... I can't help it, s-sorry.

He didn't give me a choice! I only had one choice left.

One choice... one way out...

"Murky...?"

...I had to.

"Murky! *What did he do!?*"

The bar locked shut through the handles of the trap door. I knew it wouldn't hold them long.

A violent thumping on the weak wooden, iron reinforced door signalled that my pursuers rather agreed. They screamed, ordering me to stop and blasted chunks from it with roaring shots of those snout nosed shotguns many slavers carried. Buckshot flew through the air, pinging into the empty studio I'd ran to. I ducked back and galloped away from the lethal swarm of pellets.

Sweat flowed, my brow and muzzle stung as it reached the cracked skin of my radsors. Every leg thumped, aching to be rested, like a thousand needles were being jabbed into my inner thighs. I could feel my mane plastered to my head and the searing pain in my eyes from when I had run through chemical smog belching from the factory next door.

But I still ran.

Floorboards snapped, creaked, and splintered beneath me as I galloped for the windows, the only way out of this room. I knew that for sure, for I'd tried this route twice already. I only hoped the slavers behind me hadn't been on those shifts to know, too.

With a sharp crack of snapping wood, the trapdoor sprung open behind me! Glancing back at the dark forms rushing through, I turned and redoubled my efforts with the long chain hanging from my collar dragging and clattering behind me. Sprinting through the building with thick wads of bloody pain in my lungs and throat, I dove through the broken window. I knew what lay outside it, that a corrugated metal overhang like a ramp to catch me. Landing with a clatter, I slid onto my side, skidded down it, and leapt from near the

bottom. The jump sent me sailing over a three-storey drop to crash through the scattered glass of the adjoining factory. Shouts of frustration as I heard the overhang collapse and fall behind me almost lifted my spirits enough to ignore the harsh *slap* of hard metal floor meeting me belly first.

Screaming, I curled up, clutching my bruised stomach. The bruises hadn't formed from the drop. They were old. So old I couldn't even remember how long ago I'd received them. Hours had become like days. I didn't know how much time had passed since the first broadcast about Arbu anymore. No, these blackened shades of skin beneath my patchy and, in some places, non-existent coat were from when I had taken the liberty of *assuming* he'd wanted his bed made. I could still see all too clearly the wooden rod he'd beaten my stomach and chest with.

Yet, even after landing on my abused underbelly, I could not cry. Some things just ran that deep these days.

I reached for the railings of the metal catwalk I'd landed on, almost falling right over the side into a tanning vat beneath as I found no such rails there (some things never changed). Beneath me, slaves were still cringing from the shower of glass I'd sent into their workplace among the mill's vats, the falling shards plinking into the thick, fatty mixtures. Pulling up my legs and finding them crooked and shaking beneath me, I stood up to continue my escape. I... I had to keep going, I'd gotten further than last time! My Master had missed me when he'd tried to do his whole 'appear and trap' routine! This was a proper escape now!

My head glanced from side to side, looking at the floor beneath me. The rows of vats underneath the catwalk I was on emanated foul fumes up toward me, but closer to the exit I could see a massive conveyor bringing in carcasses and lengths of leather that cut right from wall to wall. It was blocking all routes to the exit on the far side from me. Two scaffold bridges crossed over it on either side of the room. I'd need to get over one of them to reach the way out!

The stairs shook over a foot from side to side on crude fixtures as I descended to the tanning mill's work floor. Slaves backed away from me. I could see their overseers beginning to shift through the crowd I was so desperately trying to merge into, but they all saw my wings. None of them would let me near. They all knew the standing orders about 'the pegasus.'

I had to... to run. It was the only way out! *Just run!*

Crying out in pain as I forced my body to go one more time, the collar and chain feeling heavier by the second, I fled. Galloping across the floor, around ponies and ignoring the shouts of the slavers knocking slaves aside behind me. I'd heard too many cries to stop to tell them apart now. Only one voice mattered to avoid.

I galloped for the closest bridge, but seeing two slavers throw a mare aside to rush down the aisle between vats toward me, I doubled back. They were already on that one! I... I had to get to the other one! The foul stench of tanning liquid spilled from buckets knocked over in my passing, giving them a horrid slippery surface to catch up.

A slaver mare, as deep red as Brimstone and a gas mask swinging below her snarling face shoved her way past two bucks, leaping between the vats to get me and block the way to the *other* bridge! With the two behind me, they had either side of the aisle blocked! I couldn't go over! I was too short! But if I went under I'd be too slow!

I was caught with no way out of the factory!

Casting my head from side to side wildly and whimpering, I spotted a wheeled slab of

metal for letting repair-ponies slide under the conveyor belts. Rushing forward, I pushed it toward the conveyors between the vats. At the last moment, I jumped toward the trolley, landing atop it and rolling underneath the conveyor belts at speed with the rusty clanking of the rollers passing inches above my head.

Behind me, the slavers from either side dove to try and grab my tail. Mercifully, for once, their hooves caught nothing. The trolley sailed on past the other side of the conveyor, hitting the loading ramp leading out of the factory and began picking up speed. I flew from the factory on my makeshift transport, rolling onto the granite courtyard ground and whizzing by the guards that seemed too surprised at the sight to realise they should have stopped it. My chain trailing behind whipped around one's ankles, tripping him on the spot.

I had to admit, even under the panic and desperation, a little satisfaction crept into my heart at the sight.

Hitting the edge of the concrete pathway with a jolt, I was catapulted into the muck from the last shower of rain. Cast out into the dark street under the black clouds and swirling smoke of Fillydelphia, I fought to get the air in my complaining lungs and to keep putting one hoof in front of the other. That was all I'd been telling myself. Escape was possible. I knew it was. I'd seen her do it. I just had to keep trying!

The familiar tone of enraged Fillydelphian slavers emanated from the factory behind me, the situation all too memorable by now, I could hear their hooves stamping and galloping onto the hard ground. I just had to go a bit further! Trial and error had got me this far! The sewage outlet was near, one I knew was hidden. Not the closest, not the furthest. It was picked at *random* from me choosing the first number I'd heard from somepony else around me to ensure he couldn't predict me.

Slavers burst from the tanning mill, following the trailing grind of my chain upon the ground. Panicking, I kicked my legs into a mad dash over the road to slip and stumble down the steep embankment that led down to the overflow sewer drains. I fell, rolled, screamed, and pushed my hooves beneath me again even as the motley assortment of leather and metal clad slavers appeared at the top behind me. I was so close! He wasn't even close to me, I'd have heard his thick stomping! I just had to avoid this bunch of—

The slurping sound of someone stumbling in mud was my only warning. Leaping to the side, a murky green slaver fell down past where I'd been, his clumsy hooves sending him tumbling down the slope. Swearing, holding his horn where it had struck a rock, I saw eyes promising imminent *pain* if he caught me. Unsteadily descending to the ground myself, we began a slow and slippery chase in which our hooves sank almost half a foot into the ground on every step. Behind him the others slid and wallowed, that red mare trying to hop between rocks to catch up before falling on her side, covering her long, trailing coat in goopy greenish mud. Panting, I felt my vision go blurry and my throat swell under the radioactive collar. I knew that this was a death sentence if I couldn't infiltrate back into Weathervane's soon after this. But I'd be away!

Just escape. That was *all* that mattered. It was the only way out. The only thing worth keeping in mind. There was something out there beyond the Wall. *Remember it and push on!*

Dragging my chain, trying to keep it ahead of the unicorn. I felt glad the fall had at least damaged the telekinesis he seemed to be trying to use. His horn sparked like Coral's before fading out. But he was gaining. Long legs were so much handier for this terrain! I could see the passage ahead, but it wasn't the one I wanted, it was the false one! I'd done this before in my food run just after the Arbu broadcast, so I had to be sneaky. The one My Master would

think I was going for was the closest one! But my real one was around the corner, the one to fool his tricks!

Just a... bit... further...

My chain went taut. The sudden stop made my hooves slip and sending me collapsing into the sloppy ground. The unicorn had caught up to me! Reeling me in... coming closer.

"Hah! Gotcha now, kid! Now let's find who you belong to, huh?"

He bent over me, front hooves reaching under to lift me up. Slurping, pushing my hind leg out from under the mud, I shot a back hoof behind me at speed, crashing into his nether regions. The legs around me went limp, a horrid squeal of pain and disbelief pierced my ears as he fell to the side, squirming and holding himself between the back legs. I winced myself. The strike had felt like much more of a *crunch* that time.

He kept writhing, screaming in horror. But I kept dragging myself onward. Slavers were catching up from being more cautious on the hill. From all sides they rushed. I saw whips, nets, and canes. My body ached at the thought (and ached for the same reasons in a more practical manner, too) even as I kept going. I just had to make it to the sewers! It was the only way out! The only way to be free!

"He's going for the sewers! Stop him! STOP HIM!"

I *had* to! Sliding on a shallower section of ground, I began to pull the lichen covered nets that had once acted as filters away from the opening. The slimy substance coated my front hooves... even my mouth as I disgustingly bit and ripped away at it with everything I could. Beyond it... the gaping hole with an open cage door lay before me.

I'd made it.

I hazarded a look back before the warm, fuzzy joy of relief flowed through me. They were still miles away! Pushing through, tumbling as I got in, I struggled with the caged hatch to close it. Through the bars I saw them approaching, first four, then ten and then *twenty*. A whole crowd of slavers seeking to keep me enslaved. Not anymore!

With them still ten metres away, the door wrenched shut. I slammed the bolt and clicked into place the padlock I'd stolen from my last shift before trotting backward when they crashed into the bars. They tried to pry it off to no avail. The lead slaver, a huge brute with pitch black coat and mane stared at me with hazy eyes and unspoken threats. Feeling my chest quiver with fear, I turned to gallop into the darkness...

...and ran straight into his embrace.

Tiny wails from my tortured throat barely had time to echo before they were clenched and half-choked as one gigantic hoof held me to his stinking and sweat soaked leather barded chest. From the corner of my eye, I saw the lanky grey mane, the thick brown coat, yellowed teeth, and my own eyes looking down at me from the darkness.

My Master only grinned, leaning down close to my ear as he sat back and stroked my forehead with his own hoof, tracing across my scar. *Our* scar. I just stared away as best I could, feeling sick. How... *how!*? I'd been so *close*.

It was like he'd read my mind, whispering gently even as I saw him.

"A random direction... surprising routes... deliberately taking the harder paths and yet still you come to me all over again just when you'd thought you were free, eh? Come back to complete your punishment shifts? There's *lots* of overseers want to see *you* in their workplaces these days."

He slowly clicked the chain into place again. I struggled, but without even a word he hurled me into the side of the sewer, striking me across the mouth repeatedly until a wet

line of blood trickled from my lip. I begged, but he only brought his hoof down one more crushing time. Under it, I heard a crack. Howling, feeling my eyes water from physical injury than from choosing to cry I fell back. My... my snout *moved* under my hooves! I howled again and again through my hooves, a muffled scream that led to me falling forward toward him. I hugged his nearest hoof, nursing my broken nose and pleading that I was sorry. He simply stood above me and began to drag me by my chain toward the exit and the grinning slavers.

“By this point, son, after so many tries you really should be asking yourself if you aren’t finding your way back to me all on your own without even realising it.”

“Murk? Murky Number Seven? Where have you got to? Hey, Murk, get those skinny hooves trotting and get out here!”

I was leaning against my workbench, my hooves idly tracing across multiple large brass casings for anti-machine rounds to fit them into the heavy metal boxes for transport. Clicking the last one into its slot, I groaned as my aching neck took the strain and lifted the box in my mouth by a strap to carry.

“Where in the blithering hell are you, Murk!? I said get over here!”

One of my legs wasn’t working right... my nose felt stuffy and swollen. Shifting a few inches at a time, I wearily carried the box to a large crate, feeling my teeth throb with pain at the weight in my mouth. But I worked on, passing through a roiling cloud of dark red ashy smog that blew through the factory. Chemical smoke tinged in my half-open mouth, burning my nose and stinging my eyes. Coughing and choking, I dropped the case of ammunition to the floor and fell upon my side.

Nopony working at their own benches around me paid any heed to the little pegasus, naked and bearing his broken wings at their hooves as they morosely trotted to and fro like little cogs in the great war machine of the factory. Just like me. Groaning, I dragged the ammo box the last few feet, pushing in alongside a mare with little coat left and choking up yellowed spit as she placed her own box in. I’d have complained about the chemicals saturating the air, but the truth was the ambience in Fillydelphia alone was toxic to the core. Even outside, you could still taste the rusty tang at the back of your throat on each strained breath.

“There you are! Murk, why didn’t you respond?”

Whimpering at the effort, pushing my tired hooves up I slotted the ammo box into the last remaining space before the guards began to close it up and mark it for delivery. Finally, my ears picked up on the words. Other ponies... they were becoming distant compared to the only voice that mattered. Slumping against the crate, my mouth hung open in exhaustion. I saw the overseer coming through the steam clouds wafting from the forge and acid wash machines with a cloth tied around his mouth.

“So... sorry. Didn’t hear...” My voice was quiet, little more than a whisper interrupted by a harsh hacking. My body was weary beyond measure... a dozen crates of a dozen ammo boxes each filled with a dozen heavy rounds for hours upon end in the sweltering heat of a forge had driven me to the edge of stamina. I didn’t even feel my movements... I just slaved away until it had all become a blur...

The overseer... List Seeker, he was the one I’d worked under before, a scrawny earth pony

who had given me the forge socks that were now our waterskins in waiting. He wasn't so bad if you did the work right. He trotted over to where I could more properly see him and his cutie mark of a candlestick with multiple wicks either side. Casting careful eyes at the finished crates, he turned and nodded approvingly.

"Good work, Murk. Now go on and *get*. Your shift ended ten minutes ago. Time for you to go back to the Mall. It's your rest period."

Horror struck through me. I couldn't go yet! I abased myself before him, shivering and only adding to his confusion.

"M-Master, pl-please can I work one more shift? Just one more! I... I don't want to go back there! I want to keep working here with you..."

The overseer sighed, looking away. "You've worked four shifts in a row here already, Murk. Well beyond what I allow ponies to do before the chems start to kill them. You can't spend all day here. We've been through this three times already and I don't think he'll—"

"*Please!*" I begged, moving forward, my front hooves resting on his. "I want to keep working *here!* A... away from—"

"Me, Number Seven?"

Even in the stuffy atmosphere of this factory, I felt my blood run cold. Through the smoke I could see his gigantic silhouette looming there. Every slave scurrying around him with their heads lowered, afraid to accidentally make eye contact with him. Shifting and coiling around him, the smoke drifted past to reveal My Master. Standing amongst the other slaves, he had already seemed to exude authority and become the very nexus of this workplace regardless of whether it was his or not. The overseer beside me gulped, trotting forward.

"M-Master Shackles. Murk has offered to work another shift here. He is doing good work once you find something he can manage. If you would loan his services to me for just one more shift. Just one more—"

"Silence your weakness of *care*, List Seeker. Don't think I can't see what you do. Trying to find and take in slaves to just 'get by' and 'meet the quota.' Finding those who could perhaps *survive* in your factory in their time here. I've humoured your requests for Number Seven purely as a means of allowing him to find his own realisation that *wanting* to work is the mindset of a true slave. Isn't that right?"

His eyes glared down at me shivering behind List Seeker.

The overseer took a second to consider his options. But really, with My Master above even his gangly height he had no choice. My squeak of horror as he sadly trotted to the side was only matched by the one I made as my chain was removed from the bar I'd been attached to at my workplace. A hard tug and once more I was tied to My Master's harness. Exhausted, with every joint aching and stiff I found myself dragged up to his side again with my head hung low. I... I wanted my workbench! I could lie on it while I worked. Just cease to exist for another few hours, please!

But as I was dragged away, my brief hope that Glimmer or Coral Eve might be back from their shifts on my rest period was shattered when I was pulled in the opposite direction of the exit leading to the Mall. Looking stern, Overseer List Seeker turned to look at us departing through his arms factory.

"Hey, the Mall's in that direction, back there!" He pointed a hoof.

My Master simply cackled and patted my head.

"Number Seven asked for another shift. I'm giving him what he wants. Just not under

you.”

Limping and staggering out into the surging wind of the ever present dark storm above us, I could only see List Seeker’s concerned look turn to a dejected sigh as he turned back to his own factory and the workers inside. The crashing sound of machinery faded away as I limped in step beside My Master, the ground turning from smoothed stone to gravel below me. Light rain misted all around, giving rise to the sense that this storm that had wracked Fillydelphia ever since Barb’s riot was not going away any time soon. A darker Fillydelphia for darker days.

But for all its changing atmosphere I quickly realised where I was being led. Right into the past.

“Well would you *look* at what we got here.”

I sat before a desk, sniffing from the damp rainwater dripping off me and stinging my burns and radsors. A miserable little sight in the eyes of the pony who sat looking over her desk. Not that she would ever need any reason to hate me.

Wicked Slit moved from her chair, trotting around the desk with her eyes trained on me. I tried to keep watch on her knife while it flicked around and rubbed against the floor near me. I could still hear My Master moving away down the catwalks outside her elevated office. He hadn’t even spoken to her, but instead just threw me in the door and left. Now I was trapped with the most neurotic slaver in Fillydelphia all over again, just like old times, just like— WHA!

I was being dragged. My chain was still attached and Slit had grabbed it in her magic to pull me to my hooves and out the door.

“One shift, Murk. I’m *not* going to let you waste seconds of time you could be *failing* to meet quotas sitting here looking sorry for yourself! You brought all this on yourself the moment you made a run for that wall. This is *far* too long overdue. **Move!**”

Her hooves lashed out, striking me on the side, flanks, and face. Anywhere possible, really, as she began forcing me from her office. I couldn’t even reply to her as she began slapping and striking me onto the catwalk. I tried to move ahead of her, but my legs felt triple jointed and mixed up. I reached the stairs and tried to move...

“I said **get moving!**”

Her magically enhanced voice stunned me before the vicious full buck caught my shoulder. Sharp pain flared and I was sent tumbling down the catwalk stairway to land on a searing hot concrete floor covered in still sparking fragments of metal. Howling and squealing, I pulled myself up and began backing away from her while trying to pat down my smouldering coat and the pain of the small burns.

“Please, Ma... I mean, sir I... I mean Ma’am! I’ll work! *I’ll woork!*” The last word stammered and warbled from my mouth like a long plead. The resistance had been battered from me. I was too tired and sore to properly think and... and just let me do something I can switch off for...

She dragged me by knife point toward the yard of her foundry along rows of the all too familiar carts. Of course she’d want me to work on them. I was shoved and, shrieking as her knife prodded my hind quarters toward one, I began the soul crushing task of locking myself into the harness of the item that had defined my life, feeling the familiar weight of a

cart resting ready to be lowered onto my back.

"You probably think you're lucky. I made a few threats last time, little Murk." She trotted around me, pacing back and forth. "Told you what I'd do to you if I caught you. Well, Shackles wants you working, so I'll put you to work. But don't think you're getting away without a little something from me!"

I stood stock still, now locked in place by the harness. Oh Goddesses! She could do *anything* and I couldn't escape. The sweat trickled from my face. I saw slaves watching, grinning. A bit of free entertainment in their ongoing slow days. What was she going to do? I'd seen her *kill* ponies without meaning to when she got lost in a frenzy.

Wicked Slit backed off, suddenly grinning through her long and sweaty red mane.

"Oh, just something to make you remember. To make you *regret* daring to run from me! To kick me. You had your fun hitting on me."

I saw the slaves glances to one another, a mixture of confusion and dark humour leading them to be unsure if they should laugh or look afraid. Wicked Slit turned side on, stamping a hind leg.

"That *hurt* you little fucking weasel! Thinking you could do that and you *wouldn't* pay?"

Slit began to trot toward me, her knife passing to my cheek and slicing across it just enough to break the skin.

"Eye for a fucking eye, Murk. You'd better fucking *remember* why you're afraid of me so much. You'd better *remember* what it was like to be the slave who would gallop on a sprained hind leg to finish in time so that I wouldn't *remove* his leg. You'd better remember, runt... just what you are to us. You *aren't* some fucking hero who's going to escape. You *aren't* somepony different from all of those other slaves in my factory. Now you're going to remember it every step you take for the next few hours."

White hot pain slid across my back, I screeched and writhed as I felt hot blood trickle down my sides. She... she'd slit open one of my whip scars before slamming the harness down on my back. Coming close to my ear with her psychotic voice dropping, I couldn't cry to let out the fear but I could cry in pain, moaning and choking in equal measure.

"You're a slave, Murk. *His* slave. But for the next few hours, you're *my* fucking slave. Now Mistress Slit says... *gallop*. Gallop upon the back you'll spend your whole life breaking for us." She paused, "For Red Eye."

There was no choice, no argument. I simply had to weep and gallop even as my back stung and bled behind me under the harness. Gallop, be loaded up and then gallop again. Always galloping even when it hurt too much to carry on. She or somepony else would always be there to push me onward. Even if it fell to exhausted tearless sobs, I didn't stop crying the entire way. Journey after journey, load after load. Every time returning to be met by her gleeful and satisfied stare at the pony who'd dared to defy her. Filled with scrap, cut metal, or discarded refuse, I was sent on my way. Trips to the Ironshod Outlet, to List Seeker's munitions depot (Seeing the tired overseer watch on with almost pity), and even back to the Wartime Ministry Hub.

Until finally, as some sort of twisted mercy, My Master was there waiting at the end. Collapsing, my back crusting over and my chest pitifully trying to raise and lower for breath, I fell at his hooves. My throat was swollen. My disease catching up from the workload and my collar steadily pushing my life's countdown onward...

Please... RadAway... now... I... I couldn't take much more...

He only grinned that one grin at me, and slowly spoke.

“Get up. Time for your next shift.”

The crate behind me finally slid the last few inches, pulling it into place.

“Good, laddie! Very good!”

My ‘overseer’ clapped his hooves in delight at my first job completed for him, grinning to a pony he was bartering with. Sooty’s desk lay near the front door, behind us two huge curved staircases ran to the upper level on either side of an inside fountain beneath a recently repaired chandelier.

“Just my new little worker, my friend. Now, what shall it be? A quick fix? The whole experience?”

I fell against the crate, seeing through unfocused eyes the shape of that most hated trader laughing with the sick minded client. Around us lay a nexus of debauchery. An abandoned mansion in the residential district hastily converted to operate this newer venture. Sooty’s new trade in ponies to the slavers (and sometimes slaves) who could pay for the opportunity.

Across the hallway, there were various bucks and mares, slaves all, chained to the wall with a crude board above detailing their costs. I was somewhat glad I couldn’t read the various crude lists of ‘tiered’ acts each was expected to market. But not one of them had anything approaching any will in their often blackened eyes. Some were crying, having realized they were consigned to this as their life from now on.

I had long since forced myself to ignore the sad sounds from the closed rooms upstairs.

My Master had dropped me here to work as Sooty’s assistant. My crates were heavysset, but empty. Designed to accommodate the varied manners of payment Sooty’s ‘clients’ brought with them. Anything from spare clothing to weapon parts was exchanged after a brief haggle with Sooty Morass himself to attain their ‘credit.’ I’d seen him sell a pony for an hour in return for a good set of cooking pans he’d wanted. Was that all a pony’s dignity was worth to him?

I felt sick. Even beyond my current heightening disease that saw me blacking out for a few seconds every couple of minutes.

The trader trotted toward me, tapping the crate with a hoof before grinning down to me.

“Now might I ask what ye are doin’ resting, lad?”

“I... I... why...”

The trader seemed to sigh a little, patting me on the head in that far-too-friendly manner.

“Ye know, laddie. Here’s a generous wee gift of info. In this world, you use *everything* you can get to find a way by. Me? I just do it better than anypony else. Ye think I care what I sell or who I exploit if it helps me make me way through life? Just accept it, lad. The ones who know what to do to survive succeed in this world while the ones who don’t, like you? Nothing more than a means to an end. Ol’ Red Eye gets it. I get it. Shackles gets it. It’s not personal, just business.”

How could that be how *my* world had to work? I’d seen Equestria, seen the green fields and beautiful colours.

But back in the real world, my captor simply sighed at my lack of agreement and spun away.

“Come on! Get the back to work or Shackles will no doubt be interested to hear about you taking *unordered breaks*. Shift yer arse and get the rest!”

A command.

I obeyed.

The rest ended up being *twelve*. Every one of them had to come from the basement and eventually taken upstairs to his storage room. I passed slavers taking poor ponies to an assigned room. Some fought and were dragged while some simply morosely trotted with a resigned and depressed look. Every time I came in, he lorded over me, taking the chance to abuse this moment of power with an ‘assistant’ from My Master being sent to him. Finally, as the last crate was shoved into position, and I leaned back against it to try and dig a large splinter from my right fetlock, Sooty Morass trotted over. With all clients satisfied and left to make their ‘choices’ behind him, he had a few spare minutes for me.

“Does good to repay your debts right, doesn’t it? For all yer scamperin’ around, ye still come back to be here with me. Coulda saved yerself a lot of trouble by just taking up my offer back at the skypport, huh?”

I couldn’t muster much of a response, simply looking back up at him with a quivering jaw. Seeing his hoof reach out, I shrank back against the crate, unable to hide a little shrill squeak of fear.

His face lit up as he heard it.

“Oh... oh now that, that’s just...”

The smile turned to a deadly fiendish grin.

“...marketable.”

I’d felt the sensation many times but never had it been more true now as my blood turned to *ice*. Hearing the arrogant little chuckle as Sooty saw the look in my eyes, I just shook my head.

“Oh don’t give me that, little laddie. Don’t ye remember I asked ye before? I’m sure something as, heh, exotic as you...”

I felt him stroke my feathers poking out from my bandage. I... I wanted to throw up.

“...would attract *quite* the attention.”

His voice was different. This was no longer the carefree and arrogant marketeer. He *smelled* money from me and the greed and ambition to grow and prosper was all too visible. Tugging me away from the crate to the centre of the giant entranceway, he stood me upon a large fragmented mosaic beneath the domed roof and chandelier before beginning to trot around me. I kept my eyes front, trying not to whimper too loudly at the clacking hooves and beady eyes on all sides.

“Good and small. Not many bucks your size. Lots of interest for that from the male persuasion. Bit sick looking, but we could help that with a lil’ RadAway. We’d still make a profit.”

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this. I wanted to wake up.

“Mm, yes. I’m sure we could still find a use for you. Put you to good use in my ‘lower expense’ range, hmm?”

He lifted my front hooves, tapping them before raising his other hoof under my jaw and gently patting the side of my mouth with a knowing grin. I knew what he meant, I just didn’t want to think about it. All I could do was squeak and hide under my own front hooves to quiver on the floor even as the thick stomping from the main door started.

He had come back.

Sooty turned, laughing as he stood up away from my huddled body.

“Master Shackles! Your timing as ever is perfect. He has just finished his work!”

The mosaic's broken tiles jittered loosely and trembled out of their sockets as My Master strode into Sooty's sick business. I could see him *smiling* at the sight of it. Slavery within slavery. No wonder he liked it.

But he represented, for once, a way out of here. I scrambled across behind him. He hadn't even spoken a word yet but Sooty only laughed at me moving so quickly.

"Was just discussing a business deal with the little pegasus here. Me doors are *always* open if you ever want him to grow up a little. Got *more* than enough clients who'd pay a good amount for a little submissive pegasus like him."

My Master cackled. My heart skipped a beat. Was he? Was...

But as I looked up, he only shook his head.

"Get up. Next shift."

"Ready up! Cycle's coming again!"

Nostalgia. Horrible, horrible nostalgia. To be forced into work at the very places I had once gathered my items to escape from. My life told in reverse. To be back the threshing mill amongst the small ponies forced under its whirling blades.

"Go!"

A sore body, a near delusional mind... I saw only the lint and frayed threads ahead of me... the scything machine just beyond. I charged, scooped and then fled the impending doom. My back was a mess. The little strands were catching in my scabbing wounds from Wicked Slit's tasks, my leg still didn't feel right...

"Ready up! Cycle's coming again!"

Dropping what I had I felt the light cane whip over my ears, as it did every slave. Their new theory. We could never get enough. We would always be pressed for more. Till our very blood became the price they paid for the small scraps of thread. It... it didn't make any sense...

"Go!"

I dove in. I cried out... snatching what I could and scuffled with another slave who tried to take *my* quota. We retreated, feeling the hiss of cold metal at our tails. Falling out, I felt the cane whip over my ears... then the next... and the next...

"Ready up! Cycle's coming again!"

This was so pointless! Why didn't they just use unicorns!? Why us!?

"Go!"

Why us!? WHY ME!?

Again and again... unceasing. Bearing new slashed cuts on my hind legs, as shallow as they were, but still another addition to my gradually breaking body over this day of hell.

Lying amongst the thread, choking and spraying my lifeblood across what I had gathered from my mouth, I simply let my consciousness begin to slip. My throat was thumping, my lungs were tightening... but I looked up to see him there...

"R-RadAway... M-Master please..."

He grinned.

"Get up. Next shift."

Sliding... galloping... screaming... I clambered from cart to cart, terror forcing me to make one last effort despite my injuries and despite every inch of my body saying no. I wouldn't let them eat me.

My leather suit had come undone from an auto axe cutting the threads, I could have sworn on purpose. Now I fled through the underground nightmare that was Hive's pits. They swarmed around me. Beasts in multicoloured winged forms that fought and rushed and pushed, all trying to get in through the hole in my chest. My goggles were steaming up! I couldn't see! I couldn't *breathe* through the mask! I fell...

Dusty rock met me on the way down. I beat my hooves, feeling their scrambling bodies around the hole. Then a horrid stinging pain as I felt tiny teeth rip a small half-inch chunk from my chest and gnash in again and again. Its comrades joined it, shoving to get into my breast. Crawling and likely invisible under the swarm, I felt my chain catch on something, jarring me to a stop. I... where was the exit!? Where did I go!?

My body failed me. I fell. The spasm came, my chest convulsed. The coughing fit hit me like a sledgehammer to the ribcage. Swelling over my collar, the painful seared skin of my throat from such constant radiation rubbed and chaffed on every wheezing kick of my body. Blood splattered from my mouth, coating the inside of my hood and vision slits, blinding me. I felt a sting on my chest, a nibbling before I rolled over to put the hole to the ground and ride out the sickness.

I lay there a long time, hearing the sound of the parasprite pits around me. Eventually the little demons left me be, sensing their hole was covered. But I didn't move. Blind inside the foul armour, exhausted beyond motion, I simply lay. I might have passed out. I didn't know. Every so often I tried to move a hoof, only to feel the muscles complain and respond slower than they should. Inch... by... pain... staking... inch... I... pulled... myself... toward... yes!

Reaching up, I felt the handle of the locker room, used by those who needed a quick repair. Pushing the first door open to the area, I slipped inside and fell upon the floor, finally tugging my hood off.

I couldn't move. My legs were... were gone. I couldn't feel my body. I was spent...

I knew he was there, watching me from across the locker room. I knew he would be. He'd have known when to return. Looking up, opening my eyes, seeing through a fine red haze (Oh Goddesses... I'd turned bloodshot in my sickness...) I coughed up another thick wad and shivered, pleading with my eyes... please let that be enough...

"P-p-pl..." I couldn't even finish the word, my throat was... was dying...

He only shook his head.

"Get up. Next shift."

Helping repair the Mall. Kept away from the cells and my friends amongst the higher levels to sledgehammer a wall down. I didn't even *know* why. Just an old back room of a shop they wanted connected to the corridors. I didn't know what shop.

I could barely tell who was around me, but the buck to my left was crying openly. He had made the mistake of trying to beg to the overseer. One of My Master's most brutal. An obese and slimy wretch of a stallion that kept his saliva smeared clothing on only through

crudely tied rope. But the slave beside me? He had begged, saying this wasn't what he was meant to be doing, that his life was being ruined from the slavery.

They'd taken him and... and...

Oh Goddesses preserve him, they'd cut his *cutie marks* off. Just held him down and ignored the pitiful, humiliating screams that stripped his pride and strength as the serrated knife dug and slit. The overseer's way of showing him that he wasn't meant for *anything* anymore. They'd caught me looking and...

I was just lucky they hadn't done the same.

It was just one faded, blurry mess. Like I'd scrubbed a hoof over fresh charcoaled drawings and ruined all the clean definition. In the same way I could no longer draw, I could no longer see my own life. No longer feel the clarity I'd spent so long honing and achieving through hardship and the joy of friendship.

Just one exhausted, painful and useless tap of a hammer after another...

I'd be knocked on my side if I dropped it. Every single time. I was useless! I had no idea how long I'd been here but I'd managed only six strikes that didn't even chip the wall. My rump was red raw from the whips meant to motivate me. Nearer the end I couldn't even shriek in pain.

I was dying, but something made me keep moving...

Again...

"Get up. Next shift."

Taking his clothing to be cleaned by my own hooves, feeling the stinging chemicals burning my hooves and making my muzzle's radsors swell with the toxins emanating from the tub. Of me being found lying on my side simply moving my hooves with not enough energy to move the rest of me...

And again...

"Get up. Next shift."

Carting refinery fuel, somehow trotting still because I was *told* to...

Past every limit I should have stopped at...

"Get up. Next shift."

Cutting scrap in the junkyards...

What he commanded, my body obeyed...

"Get up..."

I couldn't... I looked up... this was it for me, I knew it. Blood dribbled from my lips, I bled from my back... pain covered every aspect of me. Every place, every intimacy and crevice of my frail and mortally sick body. I had... had given more than I knew I had... give, give, give... now with nothing left but my life that he owned.

The orange sachet appeared before me. A sudden last lifeline. Getting up, I suckled on its

tear off straw even while feeling his hoof stroking my mane gently.

“...good boy.”

The door had slammed shut, locking me in the shop cell. I hadn't trotted in, I'd been carried 'home' on a slaver's back after being dragged by My Master back to the Mall.

Now I lay on my side, wheezing as my skeletal little chest fluttered and tried to raise as best it could. I lay in the one stream of light that entered through the cage from the Mall outside. In the diagonal rays filled with dusty air broken only by the shadows of harsh faced slavers trotting on patrol outside.

But she was there.

Coral Eve had been waiting. She always did when I was out on shift. Every chance she had she was here waiting and hoping that I'd be returned before her own shift came up again. The mare was limping from a savage cane lash to her front left leg and hazy eyed from a fever brought on by chemicals ingested in her own shifts... but she still did what she always had in these last few desperate times. Without words passed between us, I felt her gentle touch lift me onto her back and begin to trot into the back room. Purely by instinct, I found myself clinging around her neck along the way until I was lowered onto the mattress and covered with a ragged blanket for what rest I could hope for until it all began again.

The orb shone, glittering brightly and illuminating the room as it hung in the air before Glimmerlight's horn. With a splash of radiance, it split apart and the shards of sparkling magic wrapped around her horn.

“Alright, Murky, just lie there. You know this doesn't hurt.”

I had little choice, my failing leg had, well, failed. All while, my snout and chest ached to even move. But Glimmer's sole remaining healing orb she had stolen back during the riots was our last possession to keep me going, working its powers as she traced her horn an inch from my body. Up and down, the gentle and easing warmth spread through my body to restore strength and vanquish pain.

It said a lot that Glimmer was using this on me. Her face bore numerous new bruises. Without Brimstone around, she'd had to fight off the attentions of those who saw her as 'vulnerable' now and had tried to take her food. At least that's what she *told* me they'd been trying. Thankfully, she'd stayed as safe as could be despite the injuries earned in her own defence, I knew she could take care of herself. But for her to endure an infected cheek wound to instead heal me, I was so lucky to have her.

Glimmerlight had joined us more properly earlier, somehow wangling her way to a cell transfer. I'd managed to push out a wheezy question of how. It seemed that we still had at least one friendly face in here as Blunderbuck, the junior armoury assistant, had been ordered to take away her scrap pile to the armoury and new workshops of the Mall then evict her from our old cell. He'd managed to get her in with Coral to be closer to me.

It was perhaps the only piece of good news all day.

I groaned on the spot, feeling the painless but nonetheless uncomfortable sensation of

tendons re-knitting inside my leg as the tension of muscle power returned. Glimmer's hoof reached over to gently stroke my mane, calming me.

"Not far now, Murky. It won't do it all, but it'll help you rest better and let you move again. The better you move, the less they'll hit you. Don't worry, help is coming. I heard somepony talking about the punishment detail returning later today. Brim'll be back! It'll get better with him here. Promise."

There was a little snort from Coral's direction before the grey mare stood and trotted over while Glimmer finished up, the spell fading from her horn.

"Th-thanks, sis..." I stammered, still wary of the term even after the apology. *We really* needed a chance to talk about it. I could see it in her eyes. The brahmin in the room, the 'talk' we'd need to have sometime soon about... about what happened. But not now... things were too bad right now and we both knew it. We'd both been angry, both been hurt... but right now we needed every bit of strength we could muster between us.

Shifting up, I still hurt, but the sharper cuts, burns, and strains were gone and replaced by a dull ache that accompanied most muscle movements. That and my tooth still felt loose even as my hoof felt the raw skin around my neck. Always related...

"I mean, thank you. I... I hope he's back soon."

"You're telling me. Sooner he's here, the sooner he can bully some slave into getting his own shop cell back and the sooner he can buck that welded door clean off its hinges and get you out of here away from *him*. Heck, we'll all go, I thought we could tough it till Protégé got back but..."

There was an odd silence, broken only by a light and dry attempted sob from me. I'd seen him stable in the Fun Barn, but the sight of that black dagger piercing out through his neck and chest still horrified me.

"But I don't think he'll be coming back." Glimmerlight finished quietly while Coral nodded lightly, reaching out to incline Glimmer away from me.

"I don't want that beast anywhere near me, but if his strength to knock a door loose can get Murky away, I'm not turning it down. Now let him rest. It can't be too long till they'll come again."

I bit my lip nervously. Coral and Glimmer always seemed on the cusp of a debate or argument, but I only saw Glimmer nod, clearly not wanting to do anything right now that might invoke harsher emotions.

"It's... it's alright. I'm just tired..." I muttered, trying to smile at Glimmer, probably failing, "I just need to get my head down. I'm... I'm used to this life..."

It was a terrible lie and perhaps the worst attempt to reassure someone not to worry about me I'd *ever* made. But the fact that Glimmer seemed to spot that and hug me close meant the world to me. She was putting on her best, comforting me all she could while clearly keeping her eyes averted from the bruised eyes, hastily bandaged wings, and marked body I had before her. She simply looked at *me*. Into my own eyes, reminding me that she saw a pony, not a simply physical tool.

That alone reminded me that I wasn't lost yet. I may have been broken around My Master but... but with my friends, I could manage.

...barely.

She clearly *had* noticed the weakness though, biting her lip even as Coral coughed politely for her to give me space to try and sleep. Her hooves seemed a little slow on wanting to leg go of me, nor mine from her. Finally, I saw the sudden horror of her stifling a

sob behind a smile, leaning her forehead on mine and speaking so quietly. I knew it was just for us.

"I'm sorry this happened, Murky..."

"I know..."

"We'll live. I swear to you we'll *live*. Someday... someday soon, we'll make a home for ourselves, far from *anypony* and just live how we want. Please... *please* keep believing in that. No matter what happened to... to my parents, or your Stable Dweller. *We* matter, Murky, don't let them take that away from you, *please*. You've worked so hard to become who you are."

"I'm trying. I... I still want to get out, promise."

She ruffled my mane, choking a little smile out.

"Go dream of that mare y'want, lil' bro. They can't take your dreams. I'll be just outside."

We parted, Glimmerlight reluctantly leaving me to finally rest while trying to dream the dreams that would see my life better.

Somehow, it didn't feel too different from a single night in a pigsty once so long ago.

"What's that?"

"Huh?"

"What is... what were you going to do!?"

I shifted in the blanket, my body feeling crashed out from the healing and exhaustion. Sleep had come when I'd least expected, a slow and creeping relief after the comfort of knowing I'd at least been left with my friends. But my ears picking up the sounds drove me to crawl through the blanket and lean up, the shallow snooze leaving me groggy eyed and disoriented as the sudden shouts rippled through the cell.

"I... I was just—"

"You were going to do it again, weren't you!? I can't believe you! All of this and that's what you fall back on? How many?"

No reply.

"How *many*?"

"Four..." A sniff. "My shifts. To try and stay happy, for him."

"Now a fifth? When does it end, Glimmer? Let go of it, give it to me. Put that blasted thing down now!"

Coral. It was Coral shouting, arguing with Glimmer. I heard a brief scuffle, before something clearly fell, pinging off the ground and bouncing away from them. My eyes finally adjusting, I saw something roll into the back room with me.

An empty memory orb.

"What were you going to get rid of, huh? Caduceus? Forget what he tried to do for you all just to rest easy not seeing what happened? Today's shift? What will it take to get through to you!?"

"It wasn't that!" Glimmer shouted back at last, silencing the air between them. I'd heard them argue many times since Glimmer had 'moved in' to our cell. The two of them in close proximity was just drama waiting to happen but they'd at least found some semblance of order in taking care of me.

Somehow, I felt a little guilty about that.

"I... I was going to... to strip away what his radio told me. About my parents..."

I could just imagine the look of fury building on Coral's face, unable to properly express the anger as I heard her voice low and unerringly steady.

"You were going to forget your own parents' deaths? Just throw away that they died because *you* couldn't handle thinking about it like anypony else has to in this hell we call a world?"

A hoof stomped at Glimmer's voice rising. She was crying. I could hear it.

"You don't know they're dead yet! But the worry's killing me! And it wasn't for me! I swear it! It... it was for Murky..."

"What?"

"I thought that, if I didn't remember it for now we could get on just fine like before. He needs solidity, Coral. Now more than ever with that monster killing him day by day! I just want to *help* him! Be the the big sister he *needs*, the best friend who isn't constantly worried about wanting to tell him off for believing in the mare who likely *killed my damn parents*, Coral!"

There was a brief silence, interrupted only by Glimmer's occasional sniffs. I wanted to desperately gallop out, grab her and tell her... tell her...

I didn't know, what was I *meant* to say about her mom and dad?

Coral replied for me.

"Do you know why Shackles is letting him stay with us, Glimmerlight? Have you thought why he's permitting him to not be kept in a tiny cold cell on his own?"

"I..."

"It's because putting him here with us makes it *worse*, Glimmer. He's out there every time breaking him to the point of death before healing him *just* enough to rest up until the next day. He's putting him with us because he *knows* we'll comfort him. We'll take care of Murky and treat him well all so Shackles gets to drag him away from us every single time to break him all over again."

I gripped the blanket, cuddling it tightly as I listened. I'd... I'd begun to suspect it but...

He was using me to hurt them...

"We're his counter, Glimmer. Part of his sick little game as much as those slavers are whether we want it or not. If he left Murky alone without us, he'd break and likely die in a day. You and I both know it. By caring for him... we're making it hurt longer but he knows we won't be able to just let him go. It's unfair and cruel beyond measure and you know what? We don't have a choice. There's no victory to be had here in trying to make it all seem 'alright' every time he comes here with some stupid 'consistency' because there's no end out *there*."

"Please... Coral." I'd never heard Glimmer's voice so weak. "I... I don't think I can cope. It's like going cold turkey on an addiction! I keep wanting to just get rid of something to make it hurt less. As much as I keep telling myself we're working toward something, I just don't see it. We've fallen farther from escape than ever."

I heard Coral Eve snort, and the sound of somepony moving.

"If you want to do anything for him, Glimmer, you need to stop trying to pretend it's all fine and that you can just forget the bad things. I want out too. I want my *son*, but just wishing for some impossible heroic race outside the walls isn't going to work. Maybe... maybe something will happen. Maybe your raider 'friend' can do something, maybe Protégé will come back."

Her hard tone eased. I heard her sigh.

"But if you want to help him now, give him something to hold onto. A hope no pony can take away no matter how many times they try. I've had to see the faces of my friends and family screaming and begging as they were humiliated and torn apart before my eyes every night. I see my son alone, begging for his mother. You are... you used to be stronger than I was. If I could manage it, so can you..."

Gripping my blanket like a foal with his stuffed toy, I leaned back on the mattress, surprised by the sudden change of tone. She sounded like she had in Glimmer's memory orb...

"Swallow your grieving, Glimmer. If you want to help him, talk to him about what *he* believes. What matters to him. Go on, there's not much time before they come again. If you want to talk to him, do it now."

There was silence between them. I only heard the outside Mall... the crying, banging, and moaning that perpetually filled the air of sick and weary slaves. But then slowly... the sound of somepony getting up and trotting toward me. I threw myself under the blanket again, pretending I was asleep. Only after I heard the hooves entering the back room did I allow my eyes to open, as though her trotting had woken me.

Glimmerlight was in a real state.

Her eyes looked sunken and red sore from crying, far more than I'd obviously heard. Her soaked mane straggled about her head, caked in grease and mud. Seeing me looking up from the bed, my big sis only gave a sad smile as she wandered over to lie on the bed beside me.

"Hey there, Murky. Sorry to wake you..."

"S' ok..." I muttered quietly, rubbing my eyes. But somehow I got the sense she knew I'd been pretending. She had that look in her eyes that told me she could tell.

"Listen, I..." She paused, her eyes flicked to the door, as though trying to think of what to say, "I just wanna' say something, and I don't know if it'll come out right. I'm sorta' making this up as I go along."

Truth be told, I wasn't sure what she was going to say either, but I could understand that fear. I felt it in every conversation.

"It's okay. I... I don't mind that. I'm no better, right?" I tried to smile, tried to forget what every shift meant, tried to forget the demeaning life as a 'pet.' Right now, I was simply her friend, shifting across to lean my head against her shoulder. Slowly, moving away the blankets in the hazy darkness of the cell, I felt her hoof wind around me.

"I just wanted to say... it doesn't matter what you heard Littlepip's done out there."

She must have felt me jump. For the last day all contact had been harsh and unfriendly, despite hugs earlier, I still flinched. But she seemed to guess what was going on. It was partly anger, partly a void of sadness and misery at everything involving Littlepip, because she held me tightly and stifled my protest.

"Don't say it, Murky! Please, hear me out! It doesn't matter what she's done out there. Why did she inspire you?"

"B-because she was... was free and... and... really strong to d-defy slavery and escape..."

Glimmer nodded, biting her lip. Where was she going with this? I didn't want to have her tell me to just accept the truth again. That wouldn't help! I... I needed the real truth, that this was all some lie...

"Because you saw her escape to be free. That's what I mean, Murky."

She turned, her hooves on my shoulders.

"It doesn't *matter* what she did or didn't do out *there!* You have all the proof that she *got there*. She inspired you because she escaped, never ever forget that! That's the important thing! No matter how bad it is, no matter how much we hurt or argue or... or lose. She's done what she needed. Proved to us that it's *possible*. For now, that's enough to give us hope to hang in here."

That was true...

That was *so true*.

I sat there, her hooves resting on me, just staring and thinking. Every aspect of this nightmare of my hero becoming something I refused to believe was ignoring the biggest thing.

She had *already escaped*.

Glimmerlight smiled, seeing the look on my face as my eyes widened and mouth clearly gaped open a little, knowing she'd stumbled onto at least one way to find some form of compromise between us.

"We'll talk it *all* over later, Murky. I *promise*. But for now this has to be enough for both of us. No matter what she is, what she did, or what's true or false she gave us hope of potential. Now we just need to hang on, Murky! Brimstone's coming back, Protégé will recover eventually, we... we have Coral with us now, and I still managed to hide our stuff in the wall cavity before Blunderbuck came!"

She wiped my sweaty and drooping mane from my eyes, seeing my own terrified gaze behind it.

"We can *still* do this, Murky. Just don't let them beat you. You're strong, lil' bro. You've so much more than you think. Now please, please *hear* me when I say this. No matter what's happened between us or... or them, don't let them win. They can't break who you are because somepony's already proven it's possible! Don't let them ruin who you became since I met you. Just don't..."

I felt a twinge in my eyes, the feeling so familiar I never even noticed it. Part of my mind rebelled. I hadn't been told I was allowed to cry! I hadn't been told!

But I dared to rebel a little.

I cried with my sis as we held one another.

"Just a little longer, Murky. I know you're feeling weak right now, vulnerable. I know what he's doing to you, but *please* just hold on. I... I couldn't bear to see you go back to what you were, you're such a beautiful little pony with an incredible heart that I don't want to lose! No... no matter who you want to believe in, I'll still love you, lil' bro..."

The tears properly came at last, shift after shift of them held back released by the care of Glimmer.

"I love you too, sis... I... I won't. It just hurts so much..."

"I know, Murky. I'm sorry."

"But I... I'll try and hold on for that better day when we can all leave together. All of us, Littlepip got out, she... she did it. They can't take that away from me! N-no matter what they do to me there... there's still that hope, right?"

She smiled, ruffling my mane. "There always is."

We both jolted upright as we heard the cage door lock slammed open and the door wrenched across the ground, creaking and scraping as it went.

"Murky Number Seven! Next shift! Come on, Shackles is waiting!"

I couldn't help the little whine escaping me. It... it was starting again! But Glimmerlight pulled me tightly to her.

"Just hold on, you've got that little core of hope. They *can't* take that away from you, you always have that over him, just stay yourself. Don't turn back to the slave. You're more than a number."

A harsh trotting step gave way to a slaver barging into our back room, invading our safe haven of peace. I didn't even pay attention to his shouting as he took my collar and chain, dragging me away from Glimmerlight. She followed as far as she could to the door of the back room where all the other slaves in with us were instructed to stay. A couple were grabbed too, a cull for the workforce. I was simply dragged away from her.

"Hey, you too! Get over here, mare!"

I looked up, seeing the masked slaver pointing with an armoured hoof at Coral Eve, sitting morosely against the wall. With a brief glance to me... she didn't take more than a second to get up and join the movement, giving Glimmer a brief look. I could see the unspoken words.

'I'll take care of him.'

Even as I was brought outside. Even as the chain was taken up by My Master with a sick grin and an all too intimate stroke of his hoof across my face at seeing me somewhat recovered I knew she was there. No matter what hellhole they had planned for us, at least I wouldn't be alone this time.

The scream cut the air around the Mall with such a sudden cold shock that I almost joined it.

The thud that followed, however, only took whatever fear I had and converted it to a sudden and hollow kick to the gut.

We had just left the Mall when the sound had made almost everypony spin to look as we all saw the shape fall from the roof and crash into the hard gravel path around the Mall. Just out of nowhere. Now everypony was silent, gradually moving closer. I couldn't see anypony on the roof, had somepony pushed him? Was it an... an accident?

My Master strode through the crowd, me being pulled in tow. With slaves parting ahead of us... we saw the reality of what had happened.

Before me lay a young buck with his cutie marks sliced off.

...I...

I didn't...

A single moment on a control tower long ago was in my mind, one inch away from leaning too far off the edge on purpose while scared and hurting...

My Master snorted, ordering a couple of slaves to dispose of the body. I remembered he'd told me this long ago, that slaves used the roof of the high Mall to end it when they saw no other way to escape the pain. No other way out.

He was just like me. But he hadn't the same hope. The same sight that I'd seen that there *was* a way out from inside the city. That somepony had managed it. Without that he'd... he'd...

"**Do not cry.**" My Master did not shout. He simply spoke firmly, simply turned and dragged me away as I saw the lifeless body dumped into a cart.

Nothing more than a means to an end.

Sooty Morass' observation on the life of the enslaved bit deep, as I saw one more unknown and lonely soul disposed of. Nothing more than a simple tool that had reached its final use before breaking.

Meanwhile, all around, the slavery went on.

At the very least, it wasn't raining.

Sore of hoof and stiff of body, I trotted behind him with my head low at the front of the process of two dozen slaves. We had all been quiet. Whether in simple submission or out of emotion for the poor buck we had all seen I did not know, but My Master seemed content with it as he led us. We had left the Mall headed in the opposite direction from Hearts and Hooves Hospital, toward the Ministry of Arcane Science and eventually taking a turn that led us somewhere else entirely.

I'd never been to this area of Fillydelphia before...

It felt isolated, barely used by Red Eye's empire from a lack of the colossal factories around. Instead it was populated by cold grey homes of hewn rock and thick pillars. Lining the streets past soggy dead gardens they seemed silent and untouched. There couldn't have been many resources to be gained from out here but I still saw some individual ponies sifting through them with maps hanging around their necks. I knew that job, they were slaves pushed into exploring the city to find potential areas that could be stripped of anything useful and help prioritise the places effort was made to salvage properly.

This must have been the only significant area left within the Wall these days so untouched.

Large tenement buildings, single floor shops, and abandoned diners passed by us on either side. This had once been a crowded neighbourhood. We had to sometimes weave around crashed and ruined chariots or wagons. The entire place looked bustling but none of it particularly wealthy. Likely the reason why Red Eye hadn't dealt with it other than to wall it off for eventual expansion into. I had to give him credit, that sure was thinking ahead for the long game.

Curiously, many of the buildings had large unfinished upper floors that seemed to jut out of already existing rooftops. Had they been trying to expand the housing around here vertically? Much of the work in progress had been decimated by the Balefire to leave girders and long poles of metal hanging or having tumbled into alleyways or over the road. But many still bore wooden platforms up high. Desperate building for cheaper expansion when the funds were going to the war effort, I supposed.

"We're here, get in the gates you wretches! **Move!**"

My Master stamped and pointed to the next building at a cross junction. Surrounded by high metal fences, what looked like an old school or mansion seemed to jut out from within. Most of the fence was melted, fallen upon its side from the heat that had warped the shape or bent it toward the ground. Crunchy dead grass went underhoof as I trotted into its grounds.

Behind me, Coral stopped briefly and turned her head. To our right there was a sign, leading me to simply glance at her for the literary aid.

"Cross Street Orphanage..." Coral didn't dare speak too loudly, you never knew when

The Master was ready for any excuse.

We were led up before the pillared entranceway. Casting my head up, doing my best to stay as far from My Master as my chain allowed without pulling, I got a good look at the building. Above the way in, I saw an old mural of the Goddesses. Twisting around one another.

Protégé's cutie mark. The symbol of peacetime Equestria. Only at the centre of this one lay a small sleeping foal protected by the will of the Goddesses either side. The dream of better days for sure.

Going higher, I saw high angled terracotta tiles on the roof punctuated by musty windows. But above that again was another of the girder and wooden panel extensions intended to add another half floor to the already tall building. They hadn't even gotten around to cutting through the roof before everything ended.

I could see several slavers waiting around and inside the main oaken doors. Thick and reinforced, they must have been a real security barrier along with the iron bars across every one of the tall windows. They looked tacked on, wartime paranoia affecting a once idealistic building. Trotting in behind My Master, we were brought to a halt in the dark reception. A huge staircase swept up before us covered in a thick blue fabric that ran down into a muddy carpet of very old hoofprints. Old furniture bearing brass decoration and edges flanked us, the sort of thing I'd once seen in stuffier rooms within Manehattan.

"Your task, slaves, is twofold." My Master looked around, before staring across every slave in turn. "Red Eye wants the girders from the roof, they're of a rarer alloy metal. After that you are to search the entire orphanage. Red Eye wants, hrm... toys, for the foals."

The slaves distinctly seemed to contain their relief. This was an easy task as far as things usually went. The chance to spend a little time hunting toys in an enclosed building for a little? Even with the girder job this was a... relief.

Part of me couldn't quite shake the horror that *any* form of slavery felt like a relief. But even as I kept my head low, hearing the slavers start organising the rest into teams to complete the job on the roof first, I felt a tug on my chain, pulling my head up to look at him.

"All ready to begin again, Number Seven?"

I cringed, feeling myself lean against Coral to my side even as he stared down. Those light green eyes, *my* eyes, glinted with joy at a job for his little pet.

But I had a little more strength. Glimmer was right. Just look forward and keep going. N-nothing he could d-do would stop me believing. We could beat this, we could beat him and—

My chain tugged, pulling me from my hooves to lie on the soppy wet carpet trodden by so many hundreds coming in from the mud and rain. A hoof stepped on me, pressing down and holding me to the floor.

"Do not dare look upon me with that kind of face, Number Seven! You look to me only as your Master and nothing else!"

I tried to move, but his weight pressed down.

"I... I... auuurgh! I'm sorry, Master!"

I choked, my chain lifting me up by the neck, his voice roaring and drawing back a large bony hoof.

"I did not tell you to speak, slave!"

Surging, driven by his huge body, the hoof crashed across my snout, swinging me like a

piñata on my collar while held up. The pain of my recently reset snout sending a lance of agony through my skull and down the back of my neck to the choking burn of the collar holding me.

“He was just apologising! Leave him alone!” Coral rushed forward, before being thrown back with the flick of that same abusive hoof that had so recently struck me. Struggling to keep my eyes open, clutching at my collar to keep myself breathing, I saw her knocked back into the rest of the terrified slaves. Their Master’s fury was not one they wanted to be caught up in.

“You do not dare believe you have the freedom to *speak*, Number Seven... now get back in line and don’t ever look upon me with those rebellious eyes again!”

I couldn’t breathe! The blood from my snout was running down the back of my nose into my constricted throat, drowning me in my own fluids! I couldn’t even nod!

The hoof struck one more, propelling me into the crowd of cowed slaves. The example before them of what happened to slaves who ‘resisted’ brought them to huddle and cluster away from me. All except a black eyed Coral Eve,

Whining, I nodded rapidly to My Master after keeping my mouth shut. He... he hadn’t asked a question, I wasn’t to respond. It wasn’t my place, I was just a slave, what had I been *thinking*!?

I wasn’t free to think. I’d forgotten that.

“Good! You’re learning...”

Standing in the light of the exit, the darkened red haze of Fillydelphia casting a blood red glint to his eyes through the many doors, My Master instructed the slavers (who seemed more than hesitant to speak themselves) to get us onto the roof. Reaching down, he detached my chain from my collar before chuckling and turning. Walking toward the outside world away from our task, I could only presume he was to wait outside or deal with something else in the meantime.

“Come on, Murky. I’m here, my dear.” Coral whispered, her hooves around me. She tore a section of her shredded blouse to hold against my snout. The light blue fabric dulled and turned a harsh darker red as my bleeding nose seeped into it. I... I wanted to cry. To cling to her, pretend she was my mother, and just let it all out.

But the command was still standing. He’d reminded me to follow it again.

“You will not even cry.”

“It’s okay...” She coddled me, stroking my mane as each slave was raised by the slavers for the journey upstairs onto the roof. “It’s okay, you’ll be fine...”

I wouldn’t be. This was too much, every time I healed, I... I got this treatment. My snout was broken again. I could feel the bones shifting. My ribs hurt, my neck burned, my cold stifled my thinking and hurt my head. My lungs were... were... swelling and burning like my throat...

Too much...

Just *too much*.

This was a lot higher than it had looked.

The top of the orphanage’s floor expansion project was utterly exposed to the hot winds of Fillydelphia. Breaths of air that stung your eyes and sent the bitter poison of the air

swirling into your mouth. Most of the slaves had found something to wrap around their mouths. We weren't so lucky.

But the full extent of the project was clear. They had been building three extra floors as wide as the orphanage again onto this wing of the large building. One side of the old walls below us had been sheared away completely, exposing every one of the three existing floors to the wind as well. I didn't know anything about architecture other than that the world needed more safety railings installed, but my best guess was that it was to rebuild the support walls into the new floors on top.

Honestly, the whole thing was just silly.

Oh... and of course we were tasked to strip girders from this whole ramshackle deal...

Hooking another bag of screws, nails, and tools onto the harness across my back, I began the journey back up. Carefully limping across wooden planks and trying to avoid going near the edges, I ascended the three rickety floors set between the two dozen loosening girders. My snout had swollen up, blocking my nose with dried blood and giving me a distinctly silly look. Slaves and slavers alike had already renamed me 'Red Nose.'

That wasn't what I needed right now.

"Hey, Red Nose! Black sheep of the Red family?"

I closed my eyes, pushing onward to the top level. Ignore them. Ignore them...

"Your big brother Red Eye get all the favour?"

I wanted them to stop, but I dared not speak. My nose throbbed as though in response, tickling inside like I was about to...

Oh no.

I sneezed. My cold catching up with me in the choking air up here. *Writhing* pain spiked through my snout and throat. I shrieked sharply and fell to the ground, clutching myself and trying to not let my *other* illness spark up, too. One hoof pulled the collar as far from my neck as I could, like it'd do anything.

They snorted and turned back to their work, ignoring the little filly-sized buck that lay clutching his nose. I actually felt light headed. I hadn't had any serious cuts, but all these little injuries were adding up. I was just one small pony! One little being who couldn't take this any more.

Yet I got up and moved on. I had my commands, and a good slave didn't disobey, even if it hurt to do so. Gingerly, I picked up the bags again and continued moving, trying to keep my hazy vision focused on the thin planks that formed ramps between each level. Eventually, the relief of the third and top floor lay before me as I offloaded the goods for the slaves and rejoined Coral to work on the long-rusted screws that held the scaffold to these girders atop the entire stack.

She'd seen me coming, extending a hoof for a gentle hold even as I approached. I knew it couldn't last. We had a quota to meet.

"Still hanging in there, Murky?" Her voice was soft and very quiet. I wondered if Glimmer had told her I liked knowing someone was speaking so that only I, with my sensitive hearing, could hear.

"Mhm." I wasn't up to many words right now, so I just nodded as I picked up the heavy wrench I'd been allotted and started the long, difficult grind of pushing my whole body weight onto it. We used the screws as temporary holders to stop the entire thing collapsing once we removed the long jammed ones. Some more 'skilled' workers would come later on today and actually do the deconstruction. Our purpose was just to make the job easier for

them by replacing the hard-to-remove nuts and screws with easily workable ones.

The entire thing was just so menial, so pointless. I could think of a dozen better ways to do this. But it wasn't my duty to think, I was just to be a little cog.

My wrench scraped and ground as it tried to find purchase. Working my hooves around it, I fell into the work again, starting the weary process of spending minutes at a time trying to make it move that one slow inch to the left or right. Somepony had told me which way they came off but I couldn't remember.

Just put your head down and work, Murky Number Seven. Do what you've always done to get by.

And so my head was lowered as I leaned into the work. It couldn't stop the pain in my body, it couldn't stop the longing and wishing to be able to just spend hours cuddled up to somepony to relax and pretend life was good. I barely cared with whom. Coral, Glimmer, Unity... the Stable Dweller. But it could make time blur and let shifts flow by, that I knew.

Coral beside me worked as hard as she needed, cautiously watching for when a slaver was nearby. We had to speed up then, look like we were striving our utmost. They listened for us talking, so I simply took comfort in the occasional tap of her hoof on mine. Just to remind me somepony kind was there.

The nut in front of me jammed even tighter. I'd been moving it the wrong way for the last... however long! My legs shivered as the frustration built up higher still. I... I wanted to just hit it with the wrench! Hit it again and again until all this somehow went away...

I'd never make my quota now, because of one stupid little thing.

I was going to be whipped. I just knew it.

Thumping a hoof down, I leaned my forehead against the girder, feeling the sway of the platforms below me and slowly casting my eyes up to look out over the red-lit vista of Fillydelphia. In the distance, I could see the sun just poking over the edge of the Wall. Its hazy light through the cloud cover ever-taunting and full of unfulfilled wishes. Once, I'd dreamed of what was out there, but now I couldn't think much further than that Wall.

Looking down over the chimney stacks and collapsed roofs, I saw the dead city streets that led back into the more bustling industrial sector. Every block led to an increasing nightmare. Between towering smoke stacks and clouds of smog, I could see the thick shape of the Mall, the faded colours of the helter-skelter, the sprawling Wartime Factory Hub and the enigmatic Ministry of Arcane Science, all of them clustered among mesh, brick, stone and hot metal. Lower down still, I could see the slaves tramping about just like me. Day after day. Below that I saw the pits, or the smoke rising from them at least. Down. Down. Always down to find worse things.

I couldn't escape all this.

My eyes travelled farther down, seeing a few prospectors in the next streets, then farther down still until I was looking over the edge.

Between the walls and the half melted fence, I could see the gravel surrounding the building. Blinking to clear my eyes, I could fancy I saw the dead plants among the little trails of gravel. I leaned out a little, peering toward it.

Would... would it hurt? S-six floors. Would that do it? Would that let me escape?

Eyes wide, I couldn't help but just... *think*...

Maybe... maybe I—

“MURKY, NO!”

A magic field slapped me back, hurling me away from the edge where I'd been hanging

over and about to fall without even realising it. I tumbled back, thrown into hooves that wrapped around me and drew me safely away. I... I... *what had I been doing!?*

Coral pulled me farther back. My nose throbbed terribly from her powerful use of magic, but I was in more shock than pain, my wide eyes staring at the edge I'd been slowly tipping over.

"What were you doing? No, Murky! You *don't* have to do that! Oh, it's that poor little stallion from before putting ideas in your head. That's not the answer!"

Her hooves stroked my mane, keeping me close, ignoring the shouts of the slaver as he heard the commotion. But she was wrong. That stallion jumping hadn't put the idea into my head.

He'd only reminded me of it.

But feeling her there, the realisation only began to slap home of how close I'd been *again*.

"I'm... oh Goddesses, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

My eyes felt wet, not on command, but I looked up at her face, both stern and caring. I could see her horn crackling, and she sucked down the pain that using her magic had caused her. I just kept apologising again and again.

"I... I didn't meant to! *I promise!* I just... just felt... I can't do this. I thought I'd escape! *I thought I'd be free so long ago!*" Sniffling, I put my head to her shoulder. "I can't do this under him! I want the pain to end..."

"It will! Remember what Glimmer said, Murky. Remember what your, hm... sister said. It will, someday. We're with you. We *all* are. Even if we're not all around you, I'm sure they're thinking about you. Even that nice mare you told me about... Unity was it? We'll all be together someday."

She was struggling. Coral, I knew, was one of the most hurt of all of us with her son out there somewhere. I could *hear* her fighting to even believe herself, but it was obvious. She was saying it for me. Simply nodding, I clung to her and tried to forget the horrible sensation of my body's balance tipping and moving toward the point of no return.

"What's all this racket!? Get back to work, you fucks! *You two!*"

We looked up. A masked slaver brandishing a shock rod in his magic had ascended to check on progress. I could just imagine the face snarling beneath it.

"Get back on the line before I—"

He was drowned out.

At first, I thought that Coral had unleashed her magic out of protective anger, but it had been a great clash of thunder that had shaken the building. The clouds above broiled and twisted, the flash we had missed the first time flared once more before the scaffold and girders rocked and swung from the concussive force of thunder above.

Then slowly, we began to feel the drips.

Every slave knew the routine. Get into cover. Coral held me safe through the rush as we all fled to the building below. Slavers allowed it, for slaves losing their skin or getting horrendous infections from prolonged rain exposure were no good to anypony.

The door slammed behind us all in the upper pantry of the building, two dozen slaves cramming into one small area hurriedly. The slaver drew his mask off and spat upon the floor.

"Well, guess the toy collection starts early." He turned, spotting us as I felt Coral tighten her grip on my weak body at his lowering of eyebrows. "Well? *Get going!*"

She helped me up, and I saw the others shaking off wet coats with towels stolen from the

pantry before beginning their own trudge to search the orphanage. My own wing bandages were sodden already.

"Come on, Murky. Come on. Let's get your mind off such things."

I squeaked, looking away, feeling ashamed to have had her see that.

"I'm sorry... I... I didn't... I don't... I..."

Out of the door, she stopped for a second, kneeling down to be more on a level with me, placing a hoof gently on my battered face.

"You're scared and losing hope. I know how it feels, Murky. But please, don't do that to yourself. Don't do it to *us*. *Please* promise me you won't ever think of that option. You're *one* of us, Murky. You mean a lot to us."

Hyperventilating, trying to get the breath, I only attempted a shaky nod after four attempts to find the words.

"I... I p-promise..."

One last hug, and she looked to the hallway. We were in an old wooden construction, one with dull, carpeted floors and old, thick doors leading away from us at the top of the staircase. The bannisters were decorated with a long-faded antique finish.

"Come on, let's get some toys for the foals. Something even we can feel a little better doing. You just take it easy and I'll search, okay? Find something to distract yourself with, don't think about it..."

The doll stared back at me disapprovingly.

I sat on my rump before it, watching it as it lounged atop an old pile of towels, perhaps having been cleaned with them before it all happened.

The whole thing was blackened, twisted, and bug eaten. But it was the only one we'd found nearby the laundry room. I'd made to pick it up until I'd seen that look in its little plastic eyes, sat there staring back with all four hooves on the ground. I had recoiled a little, before glaring back at it myself as though asserting that I had confidence in *some* ways. Even if it was over a foal's toy. Without quite knowing why, it had become a contest between the doll and I for who would look away or blink first.

A contest I wasn't sure I was winning.

"Y-you won't win!" I boasted, stomping a hoof on the ground as my eyes itched.

The doll remained quietly confident.

My eyes narrowed, feeling the strain. It would fall over any time now! That stomping of my hoof on the stone floor totally hadn't been to make it fall. No, that was just... a... a warstomp! To psych myself up!

It moved not even an inch. Those glinting eyes staring back as I leaned in closer and closer. My cheeks pinched in an effort to push myself, I could push myself to win sometimes! I wouldn't... I wouldn't...

I blinked.

Suddenly, somehow, the doll looked rather smug.

"ARGH!" I picked it up, turned, and dumped it on the floor, throwing a towel over it. And then an upside down basket over that. Followed by jumping on to the basket to sit on it.

Just to be safe.

Crossing my front hooves with a snort, I allowed myself a raised chin of achievement. That'd show it! Smug little thing thought it was so much better than me! Well, who was the pony on top now?

Looking at the quiet room around me, it did occur that I was perhaps trying *too* hard to distract myself from what I'd been thinking about up on the roof.

Coral Eve returned from the dryer closet carrying a few layers of cloth on her back with perfect balance normally only seen in earth ponies. With a small smile to me, she began to tear it and work with a little needle and thread we'd found for laundry repairs. Her eyes went to my makeshift stool before

"I see your contest ended?" She had a sly smirk. "It win?"

I balked, looking down below me for a second.

"N-no!"

"Of course, dear."

All I could do was blush. "How did y-you know I was, um, doing that?"

"Mothers know these things. Like how I knew you weren't actually sleeping earlier when I sent Glimmer into you. We've got eyes everywhere, Murky!" She looked up, tapping the side of her head. I blinked a few times, blushing rather widely until Coral patted my head and went back to her sewing.

Slowly, I climbed down from the toy's prison and picked up a needle myself to help her. She looked rather surprised that I knew how, before we both fell into the brief process of creation. I looped and joined fabric while she shaped and sewed it into a shape and form. Just a few minutes of calm while doing something we both wanted to do. We made a saddlebag for the toys! She kept working, though, so I kept helping her. It wasn't drawing, but it gave me something to focus on. I found myself hoping to sew more things with her.

We'd avoided the topic of what had happened, instead using this downtime as a chance to let the scared little buck inside me calm down. But I knew it was all façade. We were just trying to pretend that there was something other than the nightmare of My Master to return to when this work ended.

All the same, I appreciated it.

"There we go! It's rough, but it'll help if that rain's still on when we make the journey back." Coral held up *our* creation. A multicoloured and rather garish looking patchwork of various bits of fabric she had found. Tying it around my torso, I felt the gentle comfort of cover for my wings once again.

"Thanks, Coral..."

"You need something in your life right now. But we should get moving, we've got your one toy yet somehow I think they'll be expecting a bit more. Where are the others?"

Shifting about till my bandaged wings were safe and secure under the makeshift cover, I sat and closed my eyes, allowing my ears to do all the work. Slowly, I tried to tune out the throbbing of my own irregular heart and ignore the stinging pain all along my muzzle to simply... hear.

The stomping of hooves... upstairs, to the right... the far wing.

A shout from the front door... the common room.

The crashing of pans... pantry.

Nothing to the left...

"The left wing's not been touched much yet."

I opened my eyes, seeing Coral take the toy out from under the basket and throw it into

the crude saddlebag. (I *saw* that little 'better than you' look there, toy!) Joining me near the door, we continued the hunt. The others hadn't had much luck... mostly on account of them all rushing the common room first and fighting over the more obvious ones that had been left. We'd stuck to the outside areas... figuring we'd pick up what was ignored in less obvious places.

Partially, I thought, it was also Coral not wanting me involved with any of the fighting. I could still see her glancing at my hurt nose every minute or so.

We trotted the abandoned halls. Behind us, the shouts of slaves fighting over toy trains in the common room to add to their quota sounded all too appropriately childish. No, we'd made a good decision to come the quieter path inside the surprisingly large building. The walls were decked with old crayon drawings here, sunny rays beaming down on crude trees and stick figure ponies.

"Orphanages are such sad places." Coral let her hoof drift along the crayon. "In wartime, it wouldn't just be those who'd never had a mother or father, would it?"

"No..." I bit my lip, feeling the sudden realisation of what she meant come all too close to home for me.

The haphazard colours on the wall went below internal windows for supervising the playrooms. Now, though, they only looked in on collapsed ceilings. We followed the drawings, before turning the corner and coming to a large wall that had perhaps once been blank.

It certainly wasn't now after somepony had had their way with it.

As high as a small foal could reach with a stool, it was *covered* in crayon. Held in stark relief from the thin red light entering through the musty windows, it stood out in the dingy, abandoned corridors like a great flare of happiness. Drawings, words I couldn't read, ponies, and places all in a grand vista. I saw Canterlot Castle, rising high in thick white chalk upon the once-beige wall. Dozens of ponies played, foals mostly. They were defined only by the colour of what the stick body was and some clumpy manes. Some sort of huge garden party under massive streams of thick yellow sunlight that arced down through the drawing.

Everypony seemed so happy.

"This is some serious dedication from a *foal*." Coral cast her eyes around it.

I had to agree. They had clearly been young, however they really had made this something special. I could even see how some of the chalk was older than the rest, more dry on it.

But then I stopped thinking... and started looking. My hoof drifted on the crayon for a few seconds, before my heart nearly skipped a beat with a sharp thought.

"C-Coral?"

"Yes, Murky?"

"If these were wartime, why is the crayon over the top of the dirt and dust?"

She blinked, before reaching forward to wipe at one section with a hoof. The pink chalk of a brightly smiling, poofy maned pony smudged off easily, blurring the edges of a cartoon face staring to the side. I could swear she was looking with shock exactly at the place where Coral had smudged her.

The long maned unicorn beside me took a step back, wiping her hoof on the floor.

"Let's... just keep going, shall we?"

I could hear the sudden uneasiness in her voice. My hooves hesitated, but hearing her trot much more cautiously away, I couldn't help but follow. Glancing back, the pink pony

drawing—

It had a hoof up, as though waving at me.

Hadn't it just been...

Had I just missed...

But...

I wanted to snort, but it would have hurt too much. Instead I simply turned and stomped away with as much indignation as my little hooves could muster. I *really* hated pink ponies.

We passed various doors. A simple cleaning cupboard, a staff room for those who ran the orphanage, and even a brief first aid station. We hunted for any RadAway, but we found nothing of value. Anything was either long gone or simply had been beyond this orphanage's budget. At most, there were some dirty needles and a roll of bandage. We paused briefly as Coral tried to clean my snout a little.

For the next ten minutes, anypony might have wondered what all the squeaking from the first aid room was all about. Dealing with my flinching, with me trying not to pull away too much, she did her best to clean it out to avert an infection from the smog-filled air. We sat, alone in the whole wing of the orphanage.

Eventually, I couldn't bear the silence.

"Coral?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Do... do you think she'd take me back?"

I yelped again as my nose stung. Coral Eve gently, but firmly, held me still and finished her work, before settling back.

"Glimmer? She already—"

"No..." I fixed her with a slightly pleading look. "My... my mom?"

Her eyes went wider, setting the bloody bandages to one side before placing her hooves on my shoulders.

"Of *course* she would! No mother would ever want to have their foal anywhere else in the world."

I looked to the side, out into the corridor. Through the station's glass back into the hallway, I could see the crayon. The foals all happily smiling beside one another. No adults.

"They weren't wanted..."

"Murky, dear, that's not the same. You told me she was nice to you from what you do remember. That she offered herself to the slavers in an attempt to make them let you stay? Doesn't that say something?"

Coral brought my head back around.

"She clearly loved you from what I hear. Any mother who wanted a child would want to see them again."

"But it's... it's been so long and... and I was..."

"Was what?"

From behind her, the sound of something metal hitting against wood echoed through the orphanage.

We both startled, hopping to all fours. My head whipped to the side, spotting a thin grate near the floor. The source of the noise!

"What is it? What do you hear, Murky?"

I listened, hearing a small pitter as something moved away down the vent behind it.

Lowering myself down, I tried to see but my eyes couldn't see into it even after I let them adjust to the darkness.

"We're not alone, Coral..."

"Probably a radroach. Come on, let's get going."

She moved to the doorway, but I stared again into the grate. I could still hear the sound moving farther and farther away. Standing up, I made to follow Coral, before remembering my unfinished sentence. Nervous and unsure, I ended up just blurting it out.

"I... I wasn't wanted." She stopped, hearing my weak little squeaky voice utter it. "I was an accident..."

Coral's eyes closed as she sighed sadly, holding the door open into the musty carpeted corridor again.

"Many ponies in this world are..."

She took a long breath.

"But it's not how it happens, it's what you do after it that matters. You're a good little pony below all that dirt, blood, and toil, Murky. After all this life, you're still so innocent with a beautiful big smile when you really let go, so I hear. If *I* want that, I'm sure your mother would too. Just keep dreaming about her, dear."

I tried to look up and smile, I really did... but I couldn't seem to make both sides of my mouth cooperate very well. It was enough for Coral, it seemed, as she smiled back and ushered me back out into the orphanage.

"Now, we need to make tracks. The dormitories are down here, I think. They'd keep them near the first aid station."

Closing the door behind us, I couldn't help but glance at that grate once more. But my mind was more firmly on Coral's assurance. Would my mother still truly want me? Her little colt who didn't even remember *her*. What if she'd forgotten me too? I was the seventh. Maybe there'd been others since. Maybe she liked them *more*...

No! No, keep dreaming. She was out there! She was still a goal. Something to dream about. One more thing to stop my mind from going to the edge. It *was* possible

"I'll do my best. Thank you, Coral." I spoke as we trotted toward the corner.

"Just remember she loves you. *We* love you. We don't want to lose you."

"I'm sorry..."

She only glanced down, as though debating saying something, before finally putting it into words. "Just... don't go off alone if we can help it, okay? Stick where we can see you."

Nodding along a little meekly, wanting to assure I'd be fine, I instead just kept my mouth shut. I could see we were at the front of the building through the windows, the ruined garden behind the fence drooping out below me. Light from the crater washed through the darker twilight, casting a glow through the half-broken windows. Glass crunched beneath Coral's hooves that I found myself naturally avoiding. I couldn't help but let my ears stay pricked and ready... eyes wary of every single vent. The slaves were still making a huge commotion as they gutted the place from the other end.

We had to step around various items, and I saw an old laundry trolley. It had been left when its owner had, no doubt, fled at the sound of sirens. Tipped on its side, its dirty bedsheets had long been eaten by insects, leaving only tattered and stringy remains to identify them.

"Bedsheets. The dormitories must just be down the hall." I muttered to Coral, before looking up, squinting my eyes, and gasping. "A toy!"

Outside a doorway ahead of us, I saw a little toy train lying on the floor, strings for a pony to pull it lay loosely in front of it. That had to be where the foals had slept! I galloped forward, and picked it up with accomplishment in my eyes, feeling the cheap plastic creak a little. Coral only chuckled, patting me lightly on the head. She trotted on past, laying a hoof to the door to pull the handle down. I could see a few faded flowers embossed on the door alongside a fancy type of writing.

“Looks like the foals liked to keep their toys near where they slept. Well, let’s have a look in—”

Her scream as she looked inside was cut short in sheer shock. Her motion to head in was arrested, and she instead stood and merely shivered at some sight within, tears began forming in her eyes. Through the half-open door, red light from windows I couldn’t see streamed across her suddenly aghast face. Her whole body froze, then began to tremble. I moved forward, but her hoof pushed me back, before Coral recoiled and slammed the door shut, before steadying herself against the wall. Caught by surprise, I had hopped back from her hoof... but now I moved closer, looking up at the older mare.

“C-Coral? What’s wrong? What’s in there? Was it... the... the...”

She didn’t respond, eyes tightly held shut as she pulled me into a fierce embrace... for her benefit, no doubt.

“There was a fire.”

That was all she would say as she led us away from the dormitory. A dormitory that I now remembered had been facing the crater.

Coral was silent for some time. Trotting behind her, I could hear her trying to conceal occasional sobs. Twice, she had stopped to rest against the wall when we had found any remnants. A little blanket or a bathroom with so many tiny toothbrushes along the line of sinks...

Normally, I was the one who reacted worse to these ruins of the past, but Coral Eve’s maternal instinct was not enjoying this place. I couldn’t imagine what I’d have done if I’d seen what she had.

We moved farther down the wing toward the back end of the orphanage, away from the dorms. A wide canteen had been long stripped of food by those who cared more for survival than catering for foals. The mess they’d made, so long untouched, was covered in deep dust that wafted into the air when I smoothed my hoof along a table. I wondered if they had been ghouls from before the Stables had opened, or just those lucky enough to survive the blasts.

I heard something like shuffling behind me.

I swung, hopping up onto one of the low, foal-friendly tables to look around. Coral spun, too, trying to spot any vents. But the sound had stopped. Even after a minute, the only interruption being the sound of other slaves crashing into the same dorm we’d passed, there was nothing more. All that I saw was a small bowl spinning from where it had dropped, near the corner of the tiled canteen. At least two doors led away from it.

“Still think it’s just radroaches?”

Coral breathed out, placing her two front hooves on the table I’d leapt onto. “I just think I want out of here. Come on, let’s check the kitchen. Even if we don’t find toys, I think

they'll appreciate any tools. Hopefully."

She turned toward the canteen's work tables near the back. I still stood on the thin metal table... watching the doors with narrowed eyes. I'd been in too many places with hidden secrets by now to believe in simple radroaches. Slowly, still watching the doors, I trotted over to them and pushed one aside.

Behind lay a musky room, dust falling from a hole in the ceiling, from what looked like a propped open door through to the attic. Two slabs of wood had crashed down here and destroyed a terminal that was embedded into the desk itself, like they'd been built together. Some form of small office... maybe the cook's? Or somepony who helped organise the orphanage? One large poster hung on the wall beside a rewritable board that bore scrawled writing. The poster held the yellow Ministry Mare, Flutter... shine, was it? Yeah, Fluttershine. She was proudly waving to a little cartoon foal being led away by two wonderful-looking ponies, one stallion and one mare. Behind Fluttershine, many other foals were waving goodbye from a building's windows. Even I could guess that this was advertising some sort of adoption service, even without reading the little speech bubble coming from the child. Those lucky foals.

I hoofed through the small shelves of books and folders, seeing a lot of carefully written script and graphs. They had to have been a unicorn to be this neat. I sighed and replaced it carefully before turning back to look at the drawers upon a filing cabinet.

They held little, just a few inkwells and a calculator alongside an empty bottle of alcohol. But I did notice a few rolling bullets near the back, big and thick ones that I'd never have been able to shoot. Hoofing one out, I wondered where the weapon was. Probably taken whenever this pony abandoned their workplace in the sirens.

My eyes fell to the ruined desk, finding something much more valuable. Another audio diary! Without so much as waiting, I hoofed the play button I'd long come to recognise by shape alone and sat holding it.

Click.

No... oh no, this wasn't going to be happy.

For the first sound I heard was that of distant sirens and the shouting of adults over scared children. But then the stallion's voice, mature and of good birth, cut through, speaking close to the microphone.

I knew I should have pressed stop.

"I failed! I... I failed! Miss Fluttershy, I'm so sorry! Please, forgive me!"

Even as I shivered, hearing Coral Eve poke her head out of the kitchen to check if I was alright, I simply watched the turning tapes inside the recorder. I heard someone hammer on the door, screaming for them to 'get their butt out and help,' but the voice overrode it.

"I'M SORRY! You asked me to find them parents that could afford the tickets, but I couldn't do it! They were just so rare! No pony had the bits, and I turned away so many good parents because they could never have afforded the Stable tickets! I thought I could save the foals, but now they're all still here! I told you that you could count on me, I'm so sorry!"

Sundial wasn't the only one trying. The idea of just how hard his task must have been cut hard. If an orphanage was so unable to get tickets for foals that they had to selectively pick rich families...

In the background, the siren kept droning. Somepony swore and galloped away, presumably from the door. Turning around to look in that direction, I could see how it had

only opened for me to pass because the falling wood had broken the lock.

"I didn't deserve your trust, there's no way out. Only one. I'm sorry, Miss Fluttershy, you should have chosen better. They're all still here. The four minute warning just went out. Oh, Celestia and Luna, how disappointed they must be, I swore to protect the foals. I swore!"

A brief pause.

"I won't hurt them anymore."

I pulled away as the sound of a gunshot blasted through the microphone. It fell from my hooves, clanging on to the desk before the sound of somepony slumping to the ground played out, just before the device clicked to a halt, spinning on a broken wind of tape.

I knew I shouldn't look. I *knew* I shouldn't, but heart in mouth, I bent over to see behind the desk before twisting and falling with my back to it, head in hooves. Yes, that was where the weapon had been. I just shook my head, feeling for all the world how it hadn't even been the balefire that had been the start of this world's end. Twilight had been right.

Coral Eve found me there, casting a brief glance to the decayed skeletal remains before laying one of the lengths of blanket over it.

"Come on, Murky. There's nothing we can do for this place now."

"They just wanted a mom or dad..."

"I know, dear... I know." She helped me up, turning to the poster at the same time as I did. "I'm sure at least some of them found what they wanted."

"What does it say?"

Looking at me in surprise, she raised her hoof to the words, letting me follow it as she read.

"It's 'The Ministry of Peace Orphan Adoption Service.' Then the foal is saying... heh, cute. It says 'I was lonely, but Miss Fluttershy's ponies helped me find my Forever Mommy.' I'm sure many did. Now come on, Murky. I found something."

We left the office, leaving the blanket covering the poor orphanage leader's remains. I made sure to close the door behind me. Breathing deeply, I followed Coral as she led me through the canteen toward a far set of double doors that had half fallen from their hinges. Smiling to me, she pressed open the doors.

Before me lay *all* the toys.

They'd been gathered here, what seemed to be a playroom they could come to after getting their dinner in the canteen! I saw a few low foal-size tables with stuffed toys and little plastic figures. A desk for a supervisor sat near the window, bearing little paper excerpts of crayon art all over it. Near the fireplace, some socks were hung up, while the floor had play mats and board games strewn about, still set up to play.

"Jackpot." Coral smiled to me, before setting down the saddlebag to start taking what we needed. "This should see us a comfortable way back for tonight."

I nodded, still looking around at it. Normally, I would have been struck by all this being abandoned, imagining foals laughing and playing. While I did imagine it, the sight wasn't sad because of the past...

...it was sad because I'd never gotten anything like this.

I felt selfish. These foals had been killed by the balefire, and here I was jealous of them having a fun playroom to grow up in and ponies who took *care* of them, not force them to work! I felt terrible for thinking it, but it just didn't feel fair. Morosely, I passed Coral to see if there were any drawing supplies on the desk. The same stick figure style covered all of

them, many of them with Fluttershy. But I found the desktop itself to be a little bare other than one last thing.

Not an audio recorder, but it was a link to the past.

One of Aurora Star's special memory orbs.

I reached forward, picking it up along with the stand I knew activated them. The larger-than-normal orb held under one leg, I hobbled to the centre of the room.

"Coral! Look! I... I've seen one of these before. It makes a pony appear and... and they talk, and it's the Ministry Mares and—"

"Woah, woah..." Coral held up a hoof, somehow silencing me with a look, with those unexplainable mother abilities. "It makes a pony appear?"

I was already drawing out the space to use it. Setting the stand down, I held the orb above it, feeling a slight pulse of magic in the air as it neared.

"Just watch!"

Slowly and ever so carefully, I lowered the orb. Clinking like glass into place before the magical snap flickered around the point of contact, making my ears pop and Coral's eyes go wide. I hurried back, almost clinging to her leg as I felt even a little nervousness creep in. I hadn't even thought of who it might be in this one! A growing swell of energy within the orb coiled and swam before shooting outward, little glittering gems of light that flew and circled in the air in all directions around the orb. More and more, before they arced inward, passing by one another and joining, gaining strands of light that grew into lines and then curves that bent into shapes that joined and grew and grew and grew...

Coral's eyes widened alongside my own. For before us, translucent and twinkling like a star shape in the night sky and radiating both golden yellow and soft pink, stood Fluttershy. We were in the presence of the Ministry Mare of Peace herself.

"Oh... I do hope Aurora doesn't mind me using it for this, but I couldn't leave without saying this to you, little... is this working? Oh my, it is! I'm so sorry, can I start again? I can't? Oh dear..."

She crossed her front hooves, her long pink mane still drifting down over one eye.

"I... I'm so sorry I couldn't come see you, Lilac, but they absolutely need me in Canterlot so very soon! I couldn't leave without being able to say this to you, you poor thing. I really hope Aurora isn't angry I used her super special few-of-a-kind memory orb to send one message, but I couldn't bear to go without making good on my promise. I hope you don't mind this. Please, come and stand in front of me, so it'll be like I'm actually looking at you? Can you do that, please?"

To my surprise, I felt a hoof nudging me. Coral was smiling, pushing me forward.

"Coral?"

"Go on, Murky."

She nodded to the briefly paused and thinly smiling form of Fluttershy, trotting forward till her eyes were looking directly at me. Apparently I was small enough.

Somehow, I found myself trembling as though she could actually see me.

"Now, I've left this with the orphanage master, okay? He'll let you have it whenever you want to listen, Lilac. As many times as you want. Mister Ferrous is very sweet. He'll take care of you and find you a family."

Her face changed, becoming harder, like this wasn't easy for her to say.

"I wanted to help you settle in myself. No little filly should have to go through what you did, but you aren't alone. Many of the foals here had mothers or fathers that went to serve

their country, too. When I heard they'd both been... I... the chances of it were just... I just couldn't help but come out myself and see you, you poor poor thing. I know your daddy wasn't in the army, but a zebra spy was caught at the war factory trying to sell plans to them and... and some zebras tried to help him escape. One of them had a gun and..."

She paused, looking up, as though hearing somepony else talking. I could only imagine saying that a filly didn't need to hear this much.

"You're a strong filly, Lilac Rose. I remember when I found you, and the first thing you asked was if you had to step in and do your daddy's job because he couldn't anymore. No, all you need to do is just need to play with the fillies and colts here now till somepony comes along to see you safe. You can do that, can't you?"

She smiled at me, turning her head so that the mane fell away and revealed two big, innocent eyes. She had me *totally* outclassed in that department. But then they closed as she knelt down, coming down to my level.

"I know you're sad. I know this must all feel like life has spun out of control and there is no way to fix it. I'm so *so* sorry this happened to you, but there's always somepony out there who'll care for you. Don't give up, dear. This'll all be over someday, and it won't hurt anymore. You'll be cared for and grow up into a wonderful pony yourself. Such a sweet little innocent mind is just what this world needs right now and I *promise* it'll all be okay... it *will* be okay. You've got your friends here with you, stay close to them, okay? They all worry for you, too, but they understand what you're going through."

I hadn't even realised when it had changed, but I wasn't looking at Fluttershy talking to a filly anymore.

I could believe that she was talking to... to me.

"You were kind and gentle even when your world got turned upside down. Don't lose that side of you, because you're a brave little pony. More so than you probably feel. You shared what *you* needed to get by with others and even drew your little pictures for them. That's why I know you're a wonderful pony, who the ones around you love dearly. Not because they pity you, but because you helped them even after all you'd lost."

Those eyes glittered, they were wet, and the little sparkles making up her body twinkled to show it...

"Your mother would be so proud of you..."

That line did it. I felt the tears flowing over my cheeks as I looked into her eyes, before the entire image of Fluttershy shifted, bent forward... and hugged me. She couldn't touch me, but the sparkling form wrapped around me, her hooves holding just over my back.

"You'll get there, my little pony. Just keep looking forward. There's always a way through. Others have shown you that, right? Trust in that."

"I will!" My voice cracked, but I didn't care how embarrassing my shrill little voice sounded. "She did show it was possible! I'll... I'll not give up so long as I know that!"

Fluttershy leaned back and smiled beautifully.

"I'll always be around, wishing the best for you. All of you. No matter where I am, alright? Now on you go, and keep that little chin high."

A transparent hoof partially passed through my mane, before her form became vague... fading as the little blinks of light gently shifted... swirled, and clustered together back into the orb, before fading entirely. I stood still, one hoof over my heaving chest. I knew it wasn't for me, that she had given up a priceless orb to let one little filly hear what she desperately needed to. The sheer kindness of the act, for somepony else or not, simply wouldn't leave

my heart. Because of her message.

That so long as there's a shred of hope, you can't ever give up.

Coral moved to me, laying her hoof across the back of my neck to avoid my tender back. No doubt she had some kind words or follow up to what we had just seen, but my ears twitched.

I'd heard a toy being knocked over.

I took off, scampering across the floor and leaping the toys toward one of the larger couches. Throwing my pained body over it, I landed in front of the vent. The small figure crashed into me, screaming and flailing. I *knew* I'd been hearing something! Radroaches couldn't make such noises!

I felt tiny legs kicking at me, and a rough, high-pitched voice cried out. We rolled out from the couch before we separated. Her leg caught my nose, making me fall back with a cry. Ahead of me, the figure backed off to scramble into a pile of toys.

"D-d-don't hurt me! *Please!* I wasn't spying! I wasn't!"

Eyes wet from as much the strike on my broken nose, I forced myself to sit up and look.

Before me lay a quivering little earth pony filly. A ghoul. Dressed in an often-repaired uniform, and with a coat that was still surprisingly intact, at a distance one might have thought she were a normal foal but for the horrid rings of broken skin around her eyes and mouth. She was visibly terrified of me, twitching every time I moved. I... how, but I wasn't going to hurt her! What did I do to tell the little filly to not be afraid?

The answer was, I wouldn't. The expert was in the room, and it wasn't me.

"Ssh... sshh, it's alright my dear. We're not going to hurt you. We were just scared as well." Coral Eve trotted across the moth-eaten carpet, holding up a hoof passively, before sitting nearby. "Are you alright?"

The shivering ghoul looked from me to Coral, large eyes bearing small pupils and a yellowed complexion. Quickly, she nodded. "I... I'm fine, miss! I'm sorry about your nose too, miss..."

Wait, but she hadn't hit Coral's...

...oh come on!

"*He'll* be fine, dear. He's a tough little pony. Tougher than he knows, like you to be out here, as well. Are you all by yourself?"

"Mhm..." The foal nodded, fiddling with her uniform. Her stranded, light purple mane bobbing about over a coat that had clearly once been a brighter yellow. "I... I live here. I got scared by all the ponies, so I did what I always do. Hide in the little places and watch them to see when they go home. But... but then I heard you talking to Miss Fluttershy so... so I came to see if you were going to take her away."

Coral and I shared a glance to one another. My friend leaned forward to the foal.

"What's your name, sweetie?"

She bit her lip, sitting up and looking a little bashful.

"L-Lilac Rose..."

There was a brief moment of silence... before Coral simply surged forward and swept the poor filly up into a tight embrace, ghoul or not.

"I'm so sorry. Oh, by all the forces in this damned world, *you poor thing...*"

I kept watch. Or rather, I kept an ear out for anypony approaching by sitting near the double doors. I'd closed them over to give us a little more cover from anypony who wandered into the canteen. Coral, meanwhile, sat beside the couch, the little filly right beside her as we tried to piece together the story behind this long-lost orphan.

"I went outside a few times, Miss Coral. But it's all nasty and the ponies shouted a lot, so I just galloped back here and hid. I felt safer here with Miss Fluttershy." Lilac's tiny rasping voice made me wince. It was such crime for this sort of thing to happen to a foal.

Coral, if she felt the same, didn't show it. A different side of her was on display; gentler, and offering more smiles than I'd ever seen from the often-pained mare.

"So you just made this your little hidey hole, huh? Did you do all those amazing drawings on the walls?"

"Uh-huh. I was afraid Master Ferrous would come tell me off, but it was getting so dark and dirty and it made me feel sad and I haven't seen him in such a long time... so I made it happier!" Her voice pipped up, squeaking through that worn throat. "So that any ponies who come here later will feel happy, too! Look, I even put stickers on the fireplace to make it pretty!"

Her tiny hoof waved excitedly up at the small flowers and suns that were scattered all over the marble sides of the fire. I couldn't help a little smile myself. Coral stroked the back of Lilac's mane, bending down a great big smile. I'd never thought I'd see that on her face.

"Those are so pretty, dear! Aww, we *loved* the crayon drawings, didn't we Murky?"

I could see that look in her eyes. One that clearly said 'Disagreement will bring harsh words later on.' But I just chuckled and nodded; it had been nice to see a little more innocence in an unforgiving world. Even if she did make silly pink ponies.

Lilac Rose seemed delighted by the response. Her eyes beamed almost as wide as her smile. She immediately started picking pieces of paper up to show to Coral.

"I've got lots more! This is my old house! And this is my mom and dad! And this one? That's Mister Ferrous, he was really nice to me, but he was very strict! This is the cat that sometimes came in the garden. She was smelly, but I fed her the bits I didn't like eating. I've done lots of Fluttershy, but I just use the ball she gave me if I want to see her. And this one?"

She had a wealth of pictures, so much so I saw Coral struggling to keep up with them but giving the foal abject attention she had clearly needed for a long time. Something was bothering me though, she was so childlike. still. No, she *was* a child.

I sat nearer to them, sucked my lip, and chose my words with care.

"L-Lilac? Can I ask you something?"

"Uh-huh..." She didn't look up from rustling around her drawings.

"Do you know how long it's been since the bale... I mean, the big booms outside?"

Coral's eyes flickered for a moment, before she caught on and realised the same thing. This child was over two hundred years old. Anypony should mature in that time frame, even allowing for a lack of adults around to aid them.

Lilac held her mouth open and looked at the ceiling, deep in thought, before shrugging. "I dunno. I don't really remember it much. I heard the nasty alarm in the city, and then the matron started screaming. But then there was a *really* big green flash, and I felt really sick, but I hid and didn't come out for a really long time."

Coral's hoof drew her in a little. "It's alright, dear. You don't need to remember all that. What did you do after it?"

"I... I think I fell asleep for a *long* time, because it was snowing when I woke up. I was afraid I'd get shouted at for not waking up, so I got out. But everything was like this. Some ponies chased me when I went outside. So I ran away. There was green flames. Like, huge ones! I couldn't see the sky, so I came back here to wait for Miss Fluttershy to come pick me up again like last time. But I think I fell asleep again..."

The filly toyed with her front hooves, looking up at Coral.

"Do you know where Miss Fluttershy is?"

"I'm sorry, dear. I don't. It's... it's been a long time."

She was clearly trying to keep her own tears in for Lilac's benefit. It made a little more sense, the feral ghoul janitor had seemed asleep until my presence had woken it up. It stood to reason that other ghouls might be capable of the same long, drawn out sleeps too. In Lilac Rose's case, for so long that she had neither aged mentally in the time she'd been alive, nor aged physically from the effects of the balefire.

It didn't take much time of letting all this sink in before Coral once again let Lilac snuggle up beside her. My friend's limbs wrapped around the fragile little pony protectively, as though by some manner of sheer will and wishing she could hold this one poor filly safe from the world she'd been cast into.

"Did anything hurt you? Were you safe in here, Lilac?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't go outside much. I had a sore tummy so I didn't really eat, but lots of ponies came here shouting to find food. Some of them didn't say words, they just shouted a lot and looked really slimy. They didn't take food, either. I hid from all of them in the little places, but even when one caught me sleeping they didn't seem to care about me. And this one time not long ago? I heard a lot of ponies shouting for help and galloping away. I went to look, but this really icky smell was coming from outside like mint, so I ran away..."

Coral squeezed her gently.

"Good girl. You've been so brave, you know that?"

"But they scared me. There was this beeping and—"

"Hush, dear..." Coral stroked her mane. "Being brave isn't about not being scared, it's knowing you're scared, but still doing the right thing."

I saw Coral's little wink at me. Despite myself, I actually blushed a little.

"But the scary monsters are gone now. It's alright, I'm here."

Lilac seemed to fall all too naturally into Coral's embrace, the little orphan seeking comfort and reassurance from the older mare. As though looking for any maternal and caring mare to be their...

It seemed all too quick and simple a solution that I found myself not quite believing it. It couldn't happen. We were *slaves*. Foal's couldn't stay with us. If My Master saw her, he'd—

Oh no.

I hastened forward, hissing quietly.

"Coral, can I talk a bit? Y'know, just us?"

She looked up, taken away from her whispered soothing words to Lilac as the filly told her about how she'd been lonely. I could see Coral didn't want to move away from the filly, but seeing the look in my eyes, she calmly let her down.

"Do you think you could make me a crayon drawing, Lilac?"

"Sure!" She bounded away to the paper, taking up her worn crayons as Coral and I met near to the couch.

"What's wrong, Murky?"

Scuffing the floor with my hoof, I didn't really know how to break this. But swallowing the lump in my throat, I looked out the window at the girders in the rain above.

"She can't stay here. The slavers are going to tear this whole place down for resources eventually. In a day? In a week? If... if it's *him* who has this job now, who's to say he won't be on the job when they find her? You know he will."

The realisation on Coral's eyes hurt me to the very core. I saw her look at the humming foal, happily scratching away with crayons across the room.

"We can't just throw her out into Fillydelphia, Murky. She wouldn't last a day! We have to take care of her." Her words cut hard. I didn't *like* confrontation, but I didn't like the thought of My Master getting another ghoul to throw in his mines. Foal or not. I remembered him saying how valuable they were to him.

"What about Weathervane? He's got a hidden basement, and he was a father!"

Coral's face twisted. "A dank basement she can't ever leave is no place for a child to be raised, never mind that Weathervane is close enough to turning feral as it is."

"She might help him hold on to life..."

"No, Murky." Her words were stern, silencing me. "Lilac needs somepony to take *care* of her, to help her adjust to this world. Do you really think being cooped up in a scary basement with a zombie pony who swears more than the rest of the wasteland combined is a good place for such a sweet filly?"

This was heading toward the only other option I knew, the one I knew she wouldn't like even more.

"Well, then..." I cast my eyes to Lilac Rose, talking almost to herself about which colours to use. "There's only one place in Fillydelphia that takes care of foals."

I could see it sinking in. See the rage building inside her. She outright scowled.

"*No!* I will *not* let that monster take her. After taking my *son* away from me? You can't seriously say—"

"Where *else* can she go, Cora?" I surprised myself with the interruption. "I don't want her to live the life I did! If she stays here, then she'll be tied to a chain gang in a tunnel till she's rotten and falling apart! I've *seen* it! I've already seen somepony I want to save taken there, seen Weathervane's friends hurt every day. Ghouls are kept working for dozens of years! I don't want that to happen to *her*, and it will if we don't find her someplace safer, the *one* place that's safer."

I wiped my mane from my eyes.

"Look I know it isn't the best but she'll have other foals, an education, and proper care. Yes, they are taught under Red Eye! I'm sorry for that! I know you hate what they did, but I don't see anything else for Lilac."

Coral seemed as taken aback by my outburst as I was, simply lowering her head. I stepped forward.

"Protégé visits the foals. He told me they're safe and happy. There's even another ghoul there, Lilac and her could help one another. They... they could maybe tell your—"

"Stop."

Her hoof raised, the bottom held toward me. I could see the tears drip from her eyes. This was such a harsh decision for her, more than anypony I knew.

"We'll... we'll do that. But promise me, Murky. Promise me when the time comes for you and Glimmer to try your plan. We won't forget them. I *will* not attempt any escape unless I know my son and Lilac will be safe."

"I promise." I said the words, but I had no idea how to make it happen. We had to get into the metro for ourselves, find Unity before that and then get Sunny out of the mines down there en-route. But we had a mission to rescue the foals, at least her son and Lilac now, too.

It seemed impossible. But part of me held that hope. Two rescues. At least Sunny was already in the metro. We could do this. Once Brim was back, we could make a try.

Escape *was* possible. We'd make it happen.

Drawing me from my thoughts, I heard hooves approaching!

I spun away from Coral, surprising the upset mare as I looked at the door, just in time for it to slam open. Two slaves, scuffling over a teddy bear, fell into the room. Lilac screamed, pushing herself back against the wall. The pair of bucks heard her and looked up and around.

They saw all the toys and then they saw Lilac and us.

"Shit! Shit, dude!"

"Yeah, shit! We hit the mother load! And a foal!"

Coral was between them and the filly before I could so much as move, stomping her hooves with her horn sparking.

"The *mother* is going to make you into a red *smear* on the wall if you come any closer to her! GET OUT!"

A wave of overpressure blew much of Lilac's paper drawings up as Coral's magic erupted into being. Ocean blue flickered from her horn, and a telekinetic wave surged into the two invaders. The pair didn't even get a chance to respond before they were blasted backward into the canteen, spiralling end over end before smashing through the flimsy rusted tables and out the far door into the hallway followed closely by the doors that had been blown clean off their hinges.

Staring with wide eyes at the power that had sent two fully grown bucks over twenty feet, I took a careful mental note. *Never* treat a foal with anything but abject respect when Coral Eve was in the area.

Horn sparking, eyes watering from the pain her fault magic inflicted for using such a strong spell, Coral staggered for a few seconds before righting herself to look for Lilac Rose. The filly had dove behind the desk and was peering out with wide eyes at Coral defending her.

I glanced out the door, hearing the slaves pick themselves up and gallop dizzily, calling for My Master. Oh *crap*.

"Coral, we've got to get her out of here. Now." I looked around, but clearly this room had been chosen precisely because it only had *one* way in or out to watch the foals more carefully. I even checked the fireplace, but it only went from this floor to the roof. There were two storeys below us to the ground.

The grey unicorn was already whispering to Lilac.

"Listen, Lilac dear. There's some very bad ponies coming here. We're going to take you someplace that's like an orphanage, alright? There will be lots of other foals to play with and... and..." I heard the hesitation, "*nice* ponies to take care of you. But you've got to be brave, alright?"

The filly was clearly terrified, holding onto Coral's leg and shivering. "Y-yes, Miss Coral. I'll try..."

"Good. You'll be fine, I *promise*. Is there any other way out of here?"

"Yes!" Lilac perked up, letting go and running behind the couch to reach up and pull a bit of the wall out and away, a hidden door! Behind it lay a thin staircase. "Sometimes the helpers used this... they said it was an old... old...um, servants way! That was it!"

"Good girl, Lilac!" Coral cast her head down it before nodding. "This will do, now quick, grab a couple things and lets get going!"

I had already fetched the Fluttershy orb, holding it ready for the filly. She gasped and pulled it into a little foal sized saddlebag, hugging me for the help. A feeling a little too nervous kicked in to gently hug her back. It was rare I ever was the one doing the comforting. After that, I helped her grab a few of her drawings and a very muggy looking soft toy pony doll before we met Coral on the stairs.

They were a bit of a squeeze, filled with cobwebs and shockingly steep. But Lilac Rose tore down them with practised ease while Coral and I blundered about behind her. Passing two doors we kept moving to the basement and carefully edged out into a somewhat less fancy kitchen than the pantry we'd been in before. This must have been where the servants of whoever owned the mansion before it became an orphanage cooked meals that weren't for special occasions.

Briefly, I felt struck by the odd nature that some ponies would willingly choose to be slaves to rich masters in such a time of apparent freedoms and light.

All the same, it was empty. Perfect! At the far side, past a bank of ceramic stoves and long emptied fridges we found an entrance they must have brought in the food by once, a trap door that opened outward. Already above us I could hear a horrid stomping sound that could belong to only one pony. Others scampered around, before muffled bellows as they no doubt discovered an empty room started to sound out. We had a head start. We had to move!

The dark sky met us when climbing out, Lilac sticking close to Coral as she felt the outside world's air on her body. The rain that fell through the trapdoor the moment we opened it made her recoil a little. The filly might not have left this place for a *long* time.

"Ssh, it's okay, dear. Stick beside me and we'll keep you nice and safe, alright? It's just a lot of galloping and it'll all be fine."

"Y-yes, Fillydelphia's scary now..."

"I know... I know, just stay with us, you don't need to look at anything. Here, I'll carry you."

We had finally all climbed out, me first then reaching back to lift the tiny ghoul out from Coral raising her up. Lastly, Coral herself joined us and we began to canter over the dead grass. This place had a huge garden with branches from old bushes still showing the form it had once taken. Across the back past the ruined fence lay the fouled back ends and delivery doors of old shops. Perfect cover. The rain that fell lightly, a mercy from the thunderstorm earlier, stung and burned at my wounds. But Coral's newly sewed cover would be invaluable, now, for keeping the worst off me. I tried to let my mane fall to cover my eyes, noticing that at least Coral still had some of her own ruined blouse. Lilac didn't seem to notice any pain. Probably a ghoul thing.

I led the way, using what sneaky instincts I'd been honing to find a way back. If we stuck to the back streets in this lonely part of Fillydelphia, we could throw them off then sneak through the shift changes to get to the Alpha-Omega Hotel where the foals were kept!

"Move!" I whispered. We broke into a gallop, Lilac on Coral's back. We had to move fast! Get away from the orphanage as quick as we could! Get to cover, out of sight before—

It was then I heard the window smashed open from behind us.

“Stop right there, slaves!”

Coral kept galloping through the slick ground, but I felt my hooves jar and deaden beneath me, almost tripping into the mud. I turned, looking back and seeing My Master staring down at me with furious eyes, his huge bulk having broken the entire thick window upstairs. Behind him I could hear the slavers rushing to the stairwell, aiming to catch me. My Master snarled, a look of displeased anger the likes of which I wanted to cower from passing across him toward his pet out in the rain against all orders.

“I demanded you bring anything you find to me, Number Seven. You disobey even now. Stay where you are.”

My legs trembled horribly. My mind in two directions. My... My Master was commanding me...

I turned, looking as I saw Coral and even Lilac eager beckoning me to get moving! I... had... to... obey... My...

Very slowly... one hoof moved.

Away from Chainlink Shackles.

“I COMMAND YOU TO COME HERE, SLAVE!”

The voice tore at my ears, harsh and sudden the moment he had seen that tiny glint in my eye. Seeing the brief inch my hoof had moved. I could feel his slaver's instinct washing over every aspect of my existence, seeing the rebellion and the conflict inside. But gritting my teeth I looked back up. Glimmer... Coral... *Fluttershy*... they'd all been telling me the same thing. Look to the one hope, so long as I had that I could keep going! For my freedom, for a foal's safety and life and for my friends.

I could... resist.

“COME TO YOUR MASTER, NOW!”

Sucking air through my teeth, I looked up. The rain pattered either side, hurting my ears and I felt every drip of blood from my nose... but I was focused, drawing all that hate and will to be free up through my body and through my sick throat, before uttering perhaps the most important word in my entire life.

“No.”

My heart lifted, my mind came back to me. Remembering the soaring of the Stable Dweller as she did the same, I turned and galloped away, seeing just for a second the surprise on his face. Before the fury settled in. Terrified, feeling I was doing wrong, but resisting all the same with every hoofstep on the rotten ground, I felt his words slap at my mind and pull on every little twitching nerve I had to shut down and ignore.

“YOUR MASTER COMMANDS YOU STOP, NUMBER SEVEN!”

Not a chance, not now! I fled with Coral and Lilac, splashing up puddles as I went and trying to not listen to the individual words beckoning my name, my status as a slave or appealing to the part of me that *wanted* to obey. I would pay for this, I knew it. Terror lurked in my mind of my punishment for doing this. But it had to be done! I wouldn't let this foal be dragged into the nightmare of the Fillydelphia metro mines.

I caught Coral's eye as we bounded into the alleyways between the large shops. She saw the fear in my eye but her look said it all. Or rather, repeated what she'd said before. Bravery wasn't about not being afraid.

It was about doing the right thing, no matter how scared you were.

Looking into the shivering little filly's eyes as her tiny and enclosed world spiralled out of

control, I knew I was doing just that.

The hard concrete brought us into a large courtyard of old benches, food shops and collapsed decorative trees. An old foal's playground lay nearby half collapsed into the ground but I could see the gaps between buildings ahead of us... just the thing to use to get away! Whipping my soaked mane from side to side, I checked the flanks of the courtyard before moving out.

"This way!" I swerved, passing beneath an old gazebo in the centre for even a momentary relief from the downpour. My hooves were searing as they went through puddles and splashed the acidic water up onto my fetlocks. But we made it to the thin street, populated either side by kiosks and high rise tenements above the shops. Behind us, I could hear the slavers spread out. Goddesses, how many times had I been in this position of fleeing?

The trouble was we weren't moving fast enough. I'd been in enough desperate chases by now to notice our progress. Or lack of. I was limping and staggering every time my barely-healed ribs were jolted or stressed upon. Coral was bearing the weight of a foal on her own frail body. Her route was swaying... that fever she had wouldn't be making it easy under the hot rain and stuffy atmosphere. This wasn't working... no sooner had we gone twenty feet down the thin street did I hear slavers charging into the courtyard behind us. If we could speed up I... I...

My vision swam, my legs deadening a little. I could *feel* the exertion catching up to us... there was no way I could make a sudden sprint. I'd just been beaten and abused too much. This short run was draining on my body and the adrenaline from resisting *him* was wearing off fast. Before I even knew it, I tripped onto the cobbles, rolling on my sides and crying out from my wings and battered body striking the hard rocks. I staggered and pushed myself up, seeing Coral stop to move back for me.

"In here!" I spun, pulling at Coral and trying to hop over a kiosk's blown in window, my back legs dangling as I kicked at the air and pushed my short frame up. "We can't outrun them."

Seconds later, I felt Coral simply push me in and climb over herself. Landing inside the dusty outlet on several empty tins and crushing them below us, we pressed against the back of the serving window's ledge and all huddled close. I could feel Lilac Rose gripping one of my legs incredibly tightly, her tiny heart thumping fast. My own heart instead felt like it stopped as eight sets of hooves tore by the kiosk window less than a couple of feet from us with such aggressive force in their pursuit that the ground shook.

Then the horrid thicker hoofsteps I knew all too well.

"I know you're hiding, Number Seven." His voice seethed out, barely restrained anger. I could almost imagine his smile, the smile of somepony beyond fury. "You couldn't gallop too far. There's a shout going out. They'll find you."

Feeling exhausted and dizzy, I still clung to Coral as much as Lilac clung to me. I... I could resist! Just don't cough by 'accident' to lead him to you, it doesn't work that way! Don't... don't... he'd never find you in this mass of hiding spots!

"You'll be back with me before the day's out, little slave! I **know** you can hear me! You'll come back when that collar starts to drag the life from you... start to get the blood and taint within you forcing you to return to your birthright! **You can't escape, slave!**"

My neck stung. I could feel the heavy collar rubbing my blistered and cracking skin in a ring around my neck. The stomping on the cobbles continued.

"You've got no place to go you won't be seen. Don't think I don't know what you're doing

with that foal...”

He stopped again, ten feet down the lane.

“I’ll see you there to reclaim you.”

Then he was gone. The sounds faded. I knew I could evade a cordon in such a maze of alleyways as this but the fear had settled in now. He was right, but all that mattered was this one proof that I could resist and take the punishment, prove to him that I was a free pony who believed in escape.

Lilac Rose was my challenge to prove it now. Between me and the hotel lay a network of alerted slavers waiting to keep her from Red Eye’s more protective gaze.

Please be proud of me, Littlepip. No matter what happened to you out there. I’ll do what you did.

I didn’t even know when I passed out against Coral, falling against her side from the spotted darkness in my vision and the pain of exerted ribs clouding my mind. The exertion of the run too much for my weakened body as I fell into a troubled unconsciousness of lonely foals and eternal chains against the sunset itself.

The trek across the quieter areas of Fillydelphia was not difficult. We had to have that rest, but before long I had been gently woken by Coral and bid that we continue. Groggy eyed, my hooves feeling like lead weights, I’d nodded and glumly set out for the efforts ahead.

I’d expected it to be grand, adrenaline rushing and heroic. It would likely still be, but the first hour for us to return to the busier areas while aiming for the hotel was mostly quiet. Occasionally, we’d had to shelter again. Either to rest and catch our breath or to dodge patrols and slave columns.

Coral had taken care of Lilac Rose en-route. Whispering between them, asking her what her favourite colour was (Red) or what age she thought she was (Nine and three quarters) to help the filly relax. She even played a little hoof clapping game accompanied by a quiet little sing-song in time to the claps once with a delighted smile on her own face. So strange that both Coral and a two-hundred-year-old filly knew the same rhyme. Some things *never* changed, I supposed. Here I was, seeing Coral Eve as the mother she’d always wanted to be, the one thing she loved being that had been taken away from her.

But now we’d come to the stretch that mattered.

About three hundred metres away from us as the bloodwing flew, the Alpha-Omega Hotel cast its lights into the dark haze of Fillydelphia. Protected by magically charged fencing and a newly dug ditch, it was also guarded by *far* more soldiers than I normally would have expected to see any time I’d passed by it. This was near the FunFarm after all.

I knew why. Many of those slavers and soldiers were... *his*. My mind was caught between names, what to call him? But I knew that they wouldn’t hesitate to drag us off to the mines and back to him. We couldn’t trust *anypony* to simply throw Lilac at them and hope they would recognise she *should* be in the hotel and not simply take her back to him.

No, we’d have to deliver her ourselves.

But between it and us there lay other obstacles nearly blocking the view. We’d had to approach from the more clustered areas among abandoned buildings that were taking the slaves years to dismantle. Lacking the massive equipment of the past, these firmly constructed places were proving a nightmare to bring down. I knew. I’d tried. Eventually,

we'd been told to leave them alone and been sent to other more important jobs. They would return once excavation equipment or more surplus supplies of explosives were made available to finish the job. For now, they were our hiding spot and our route among the variety of structures. Other competing hotels mostly, there were a square of them around one courtyard. The Alpha-Omega Hotel lay beyond this square.

Three hundred metres. Five buildings in a square. Lots of guards. A ditch. A fence.

And somewhere out there, *he* lurked.

To deliver her into safety, we'd have to overcome all of that. After that it didn't matter how we were caught.

Very briefly, it occurred to me neither of us had told Lilac Rose that we wouldn't be joining her in there. I'd decided to leave it to Coral Eve. She knew what she was doing with what to say and what to keep quiet. Lilac had spent much of the way staring wistfully back toward her orphanage or around her at the suffering ponies in abject confusion. Between her long sleeps and the bewilderment of anything outside her orphanage in a city she no longer realised, I could see the underlying terror in the filly's eyes. Yet she just kept moving with us.

Fluttershy was right. This was one brave little pony to take all this in and not break.

"Do you think you can sneak us toward the gate, Murk?" Coral whispered beside me. We'd been poking over a low window from the farthest away building to judge our route in.

I glanced forward again. Two buildings, one on either side, formed the closest ones of the square courtyard beyond. Behind them the other two at the far side. I concentrated on the farthest one, closest to the hotel.

A tall building of thick pillars and overhung windows was being dismantled by a swarm of slaves with grapple hook harnesses to hold them up. A pang of loss for my own saddle struck through me at the sight. They must have been just told to take anything from the rooms and rooftops that were salvageable. To strip out the places before leaving the undefeated foundations for later. Slaves might be a handy group to merge with.

Before that though, we had to get up to those two front buildings, we'd *have* to sneak through them first. I could see the patrols in the courtyard guiding slaves or watching the surrounding area. Huge piles of rubble offered some cover alongside a crashed skywagon nearer to us. If we could bunny hop from cover to cover and stay quiet...

"I think so. But this could turn nasty. R-real quick..." I stammered, mostly from my throat. I'd had to swallow thick wads of metallic-tasting bloody spit to clear it. I hadn't wanted to spit in front of Lilac.

"Nervous?" Coral cast a look of concern to me.

"Terrified."

"Glad you were the first one to say it. You know we're likely not getting away from this one, right?"

"Y-yes..." I nodded. "But it's worth it..."

Coral lay a hoof over my shoulders. "I heard what you told him. That's more important than anything that happens now. We should get going. They're going to patrol back here sooner or later, and she needs to be safe."

I nodded, hearing her turn back toward Lilac as I studied the layout of the rubble ahead. Once that patrol moved past, we could make it to the skywagon... then that pile of broken up chairs behind... then the rubble... then the building...

"Ready to go, my dear?" I heard her speaking to Lilac.

"Uh-huh, is that light over there the place for colts and fillies?" Her voice was tired; the journey hadn't been easy for her.

Coral stroked her mane away, nuzzling the little pony with a grin. "They're all just waiting for you, but there's some bad ponies in between us and them. So stay quiet, okay? Murk's going to lead us past them. Just stay behind him. I'll be right behind you. Nopony's going to hurt you. I *promise*."

The patrol moved away. I spun back to them again and nodded firmly.

"Alright, dear. Go!"

We burst from our hiding place, one by one galloping as quietly as we could around the edge. Under the red sky again, we rushed for the skywagon, twenty feet away. The patrol had just moved past our building but we still had to stay low. Any over the rubble ahead could spot us if they turned—

I saw one mare move her head and leapt behind the wagon. Lilac galloped into me and Coral rolled herself in beside us. I clutched myself and curled up tight to hide. Had they spotted us?

Horribly exposed from almost every angle, we waited, uncomfortable and fidgeting to move.

Nothing.

I took out my one trump card. A shard of a smashed mirror in the building we'd just passed, using it to check around the side of the wagon, waiting for the chance to gallop forward another set of cover. We only had to get close... close enough for one mad gallop to the fence gates. The guards *inside* the gates had to be safe to give her to.

Squinting, rubbing the dusty mirror clear of muck, I watched and waited. There were three groups of them. One on a balcony, one at the gap between the buildings and one I knew was out of sight but lying down against the back of the rubble. Had to wait for the first two groups to look aw—

Now!

I hissed to the other two, springing out low and rushing around the wagon. I watched their heads, listening to somepony shouting in the courtyard about their shift times. We made it in plenty of time, pressing in behind the stack of broken and discarded chairs. I had to take a second, get my breath back. My lungs felt tight, leading to me sucking air in with my front hooves low on the ground. Sweat poured from my body at the exertion. I couldn't go much longer. The only thing keeping me going was that one little fact, one little knowledge that escape was coming eventually.

The mirror went out again. Coral held Lilac Rose protectively close to her own underbelly. The filly was shivering despite the heat. She was so scared. I knew the feeling.

Angling the mirror, I watched the two groups I could see. We had one more rubble pile to get to and we could get around the back of the building before getting inside. If they saw us, they'd cut us off long before we got there. Thankfully, they were all still listening to the voice.

"Way's clear, go." I whispered in Coral's ear before creeping out. We had to go slower and quieter. Low to the ground in single file, we made the achingly slow journey in plain sight behind them. Yes... we'd done it. The first wave was—

My entire hoof found no ground to stand on. My front right leg disappeared, falling down a hole I hadn't seen! I bit my lip *hard* to quell the shriek as I looked down. A drain! My hoof had fallen down a drain while I'd been looking up at the guards! I tugged at it, but

the muck and dirt had fallen in with me, jamming the hole smaller than before. Oh no! No! NO!

Coral bent over me, her much stronger limbs wrapping around my leg. Even Lilac put her tiny hooves on mine as we pulled and pulled and pulled. The pain from being dragged up through the tiny hole made me grit my teeth, squeeze my eyes shut. I couldn't scream! Don't let that tickle in your throat make you cough! Not now! *Not now!*

Suddenly, a release. My hoof popped out and we fell back. I clung it close to me, favouring the scrapped skin. Looking up, I saw the guards still looking away. Coral put a hoof to my cheek, her face bearing concern, mouthing the word. 'Broken?' I shook my head and we got up to creep the remainder, thank the Goddesses.

Thinking the word 'crap' earlier must have displeased them, however.

The drain cap slid, came loose... and fell. Clanging, a full two-foot square of metal crashing and tumbling down and around as it broke up from the rust that we had loosened getting me out. Hearing the noise only grow and echo, I looked up with horrified eyes.

That same mare from before was looking right back at me. We met eyes for four long seconds before I saw the scowl grow into a scream of alert.

"RUN!" Coral shouted! We took off, heading for the building! Around me, I heard slavers shouting for confirmation, the mare shrieking and pointing. The third group came into view, immediately galloping forward.

This was it. One last rush to get her there before we were caught.

Coral swept up Lilac again as I tried to keep up. Hooves pounding on the soft ground we tore for the back of the building, we could find a ditch! Lose them and go around!

To my horror, I saw a *fourth* group emerge from behind the very place we were trying to go from the far end of the building. If we went around, they'd just double back and catch us! I stopped, pacing, probably praying, looking around. There had to be somewhere!

Coral thought faster than I did, stopping and looking at the half crumbled walls of the building bearing some old wooden stopgap over the concrete.

"Into the building, we'll lose them in there!"

"How!?"

She answered with her magic. With a great *WHOOM* of sound that blasted back off the building wall and flared my mane back, Coral blasted the crude makeshift wall into the room it had once protected. Splinters flew inside, shattering old paintings and remnants of windows like shrapnel as my ears rung terribly. When she was pushed, Coral's magic was *terrifying*. I briefly underlined that mental note to never anger her. Just for extra emphasis.

She and Lilac were first in, with me following, breaking into the corridor beyond the front room we'd smashed our way through. I could see Coral swaying, that spell having taken a lot out of her. Even through the shouts from outside, I heard her whimper. That faulty horn of hers sparking and bleeding magical energy in a method even a non-unicorn could imagine the pain of. We didn't even look at what our path was like, we simply chose random doors in the effort to lose them. A set of double doors to a restaurant... another kitchen... a freezer with a broken wall to a bedroom... back to the corridors until we found the front door.

There we stopped. Slavers were swarming the building after us, seeming far more efficient than I had ever wanted them to be as they spread out to cover every eventual direction we could have taken. That wasn't fair!

Even worse, if I poked my mirror through the front door, I could see was being watched.

I ran to the only closed door not leading backwards. It lay beside the reception's thick glass window with only one small area to hand money through. Wishing hard, I pulled on it. Locked! NO! NO!

Slamming my hooves against it, Coral shoulder barged the heavy wooden doorway, but only bounced.

"It's a staff door! The keys could be anywhere! Where are—"

Before she could even finish, I saw her eyes go wide. Spinning myself, I saw Lilac's tail disappear through the reception money slot. Ten seconds later, the door clicked and it swung open to a shaking but smiling filly.

"Is... is this better?" Her voice sounded painfully innocent given our situation.

"Good girl!" Coral beamed, sweeping her up. "Such a quick thinking, clever filly! Now come on!"

I locked the door again behind us as we entered the office. A face appeared at the reception window, then a gun muzzle through the hole!

"Down!"

Buckshot tore into the office, blowing old papers off a desk and shattering the screen of a terminal. Coral had fallen. My terror of her being hit was relieved only when I saw her gallop on. There were three doors in here. We tried the first to find a dead end office with two clutching skeletons draped over the desk. Recoiling, before screaming from the buckshot that tore into the room again and shattered the far window, I almost fell through the second. There had to be a way out!

Behind us, a second weapon fired on the door but missed the lock. They wouldn't be held long.

Looking up from falling, I pushed the second door open while Lilac and Coral took cover behind a further back desk. I made to run inside before finding it to only be an identical office. *Oh come on!*

Another sharp rifle blast blew splinters from the locked door. They wouldn't miss again.

Almost crying out in frustration, I bucked the third one open. We all dived into it without even looking as the main door burst open and the slavers rushed through. We scavenged, not seeing anything other than a desk that we threw against the new blocked doorway. I knew it wouldn't hold, it was too light.

And this room had no way out.

Not even a window.

It was another identical private office.

I stomped, bucking the wall and screaming at the door. Frustration, anger, terror, and adrenaline all fighting for attention in my head. Lilac hugged close to Coral, who simply looked around and bit her lip. I saw the same realisation. We were trapped.

As if to merely remind us the door was rammed, already starting to list on its hinges.

"Get out here!"

"Master wants you!"

They were *his*.

"Murk? I... I don't see a way out. Any ideas?" I couldn't imagine how hard it was for her to admit that around Lilac Rose, but I only shook my head while stepping back into my natural spot. The corner.

"I... I'm sorry! I... I thought there'd be a way."

I stopped, an unusual feeling on my hind leg. Why was my leg feeling a breeze?

Looking down, twisting back on my body to the point my ribs protested the movement, I saw one little hope. Emphasis on little. A tiny vent. One I could barely squeeze through if I had to. Bending down, hearing Coral questioning me and Lilac pushing her nose beside mine (I might have found it cute any other time) I cast my gaze through it and saw the outside world.

"Wait, there's a vent, it goes outside! But it's tiny..."

I had never saw Coral as anything but strong, but the speed with which she made the decision reminded me more than any other moment I'd known her in till now just how strong a pony she was.

The unicorn gently pulled me aside, smashing it with her hooves to get a purchase... and began to pull the vent upwards and off. Even as she pulled, I felt and heard the slavers *push* on the door. One hinge fell off.

"Coral! What are—"

"Shh, dear." She put a hoof to my mouth carefully. "This is as far as I go. I don't regret it."

"They... they might h-hurt you bad..." I stammered, my mind only now catching up to the horrible realisation of what she was asking of us.

"I know, dear. I know. But you said it yourself." She nodded toward the quickly confused filly, wondering why I was looking sad. "For the life of a child, it's worth it. Lilac, honey?"

Coral turned, her hooves resting on the filly's shoulders.

"M-Miss Coral? Why aren't we g-going? You should go first! Your leg's hurt and... and..."

"I'm sorry, my dear. But you're going to have to keep going. Murky will get you to the safe place, alright? You stay with him." Lilac opened her mouth to protest, but Coral cut her off. "I know we only just met, but you're one of the sweetest, bravest, and most wonderful fillies I've ever met to have done *all* that you have. We'll see each other again, I promise."

Lilac's eyes went very wide, throwing her little hooves to Coral's shoulders.

"B-but I l-like you, Miss Coral! Y-you're nice! I've not met anypony nice for... for really long!" I felt my own eyes dampen... seeing the filly shed her own tears.

Coral simply hugged her close. I could hear the door breaking in, but I couldn't dare bring myself to separate the two. The look in Coral's eyes showed conflict though, as though she was trying to decide on something. Eventually, she let Lilac go, but held their heads close to one another.

"When you get there, Lilac. If... if you meet a little colt..."

I saw her glance at me. I only nodded. This was hard beyond words for her, the closest she'd ever come to her son knowing she was only bringing another foal to the same fate.

"A little colt called Chirpy Sum. Tell him his mommy loves him very *very* much, can you do that for me? Please?"

Her voice cracked on the last word, but the filly only nodded, grabbing the older mare again. I shoved the desk back against the door once more. We didn't have long!

"Coral!" I shouted to her, holding the vent open for the filly. She nodded... gently pulling Lilac from her to go to the vent.

"I will! I promise I will! You're really nice, Miss! I'll do it. I've not met anypony nice for a long time and I've been really lonely..."

"I know, dear."

Lilac seemed to look hesitant, before biting her lip. "They told me they'd find me a nice mom to take care of me but they never did. M-Miss Coral, when you come to... to pick us

up? C-can..."

Her tear struck eyes looked into my almost grieving friend's.

"Can you t-take me with *you*? To... to be my Forever Mommy?"

For just a few seconds, even the banging at the door seemed silent and pointless in comparison to the wonder that was the expression upon Coral's face as a little orphaned filly asked that one question. As though nothing else mattered in the world to her but the plight of one child.

Matting down Lilac's mane, hooves seeking to find all the ways she wished she could comfort the poor filly, Coral simply leaned over to kiss her forehead and held her tight to her breast, Lilac gripping around her neck with those tiny little forelegs.

"Yes, my dear. Yes, I'll do that for you."

A hoof crashed through the breaking door. I hated leaving her, but we'd both known this would happen in some form or another. I just had a bit to go first. I let go of the desk, galloping to the vent. Seeing them coming, clearly not wanting to let go, Lilac had to be gently pushed off by Coral. With one last hopeful glance, she disappeared through the vent. I started crawling through, turning back only briefly.

"I'll get her there."

She smiled, the door falling to pieces behind her.

"I know. That message orb she carries, you understand it means a lot to you as well, right? Don't forget that."

"I won't. G-good luck."

Even as I pulled myself through, I saw the door crash. On either side of Coral, I witnessed the slavers rush into the room. The last sight of Coral I had before I fled was the light of her horn over her fearsome face. I knew she would buy us the time we needed. Ignoring the pain on my back, I let Lilac ride me as I tore off away from the building, hearing the furious pressurised slams of Coral's magic and the cries of slavers caught in it.

Lilac's hooves hung around my neck tightly. Burying her face into my mane as we ran. We'd come out the opposite side of the building. There was one more building ahead, the huge tall one with the slaves all over it in grapple saddles. Just past that one and I could make a mad sprint to the gates! Somehow, anyway. Just... just *somehow*. I had to get her there! I'd promised!

"*There they are!*"

How many guards were there? Glancing toward the shout, another group of four were rushing across the courtyard from where they'd been waiting to guard the front door. I couldn't outspurt somepony that far!

"Mister Murky!" A hoof above my head pointed to the tall building, seeing one door ajar as a slave limped out on a bad leg to see what all the noise was about.

"Good girl!" I changed direction, dodging and hopping over the rubble. Two slavers were in the way, but in all the mud and in their vision-restricting gas masks, I could weave around their stumbling efforts. Was this how Littlepip felt? Free to escape and go and dodge and not care about what they shouted!

The slave leapt aside as we went in. In one end, out the other! I arced around the old food trolleys in the hotel's main route and sent a few slavers to the ground by bumping past them. Not too far! There were slavers behind me, slavers either side in the common rooms that tried to leap through doors! I managed to keep away! We were getting there!

Up ahead, the far side door opened. A bulky soldier stepped up with a full battle saddle

primed. I could see the radio on his helmeted head. He'd been told to cut me off! Feeling Lilac grip tighter, we skidded to a halt, and I spun on the spot. Exhausted slavers in air restricting masks lashed their whips behind me. The big brown and dark blue soldier grinned, knowing he'd been the one to trap me. Either side, the slavers watched their own flocks, casting me foul glances.

"Come on, now slave. Give up the ghoul."

I could feel those terrified limbs around me. No... no I couldn't let her go to those pits. Not turn into one of the unfortunates like Weathervane's friends. Falling apart with broken bodies...

"Sh-she's not going with you!" I tried to sound brave, I really did. But they just laughed. I kept looking my eyes around, but the only way was upstairs and there was no other stairways down I could see! If only I had my...

Oh yes.

I gave them no warning or one liner, I simply bolted upstairs. They were slow about pursuing, presumably knowing I had no way out. But I went up floor by floor, tramping the thick carpet until I found what I wanted. A whole ton of slaves around their equipment stash. I grappled one of their grapple saddles and kept running upstairs.

"Where are we going, Mister?"

"S-safety!" Was all I could think to say. Opening a door on the top floor, we were at what I'd hoped... an open walled room, blasted by balefire or torn down long ago, I didn't know. But ahead of us, only thirty feet away I could see the illuminated Alpha-Omega Hotel. Its thick and protected windows well lit from powered interiors while I could see the air conditioners on the top even functioning properly! On this side, I could even smell the food. Good, warm, and healthy food...

I had no time to savour it. Taking every piece of furniture I could, I started barricading the door behind me as thumping hooves neared our room. Shoving a desk, a chair, and, with far too much strain, an empty chest of drawers against it, I bought us a little time. I even had to grin as I saw Lilac grunt and lift a tiny desk lamp onto the pile to weigh it down a little more.

"Is that the place that's safe?"

"Yes it is!" I looked over it. Partially, it occurred to me that had I been brought to Fillydelphia a few years earlier I might have been eligible for its comforts and an educated life. "That's where you'll be fine."

Sitting on the bed, startling and squeaking just as much as Lilac, I heard the door thump behind me. Picking up the grapple gun, I aimed as best I could with this larger model near to the ground of the hotel. I had to make sure this was just right. Too high would be a disaster, and I only had one shot.

"Careful... careful..."

The furniture was jumping, being pushed back.

"Mister Murky! They're getting in!"

Now!

I pulled the firing mechanism with my hoof, knocking me on my rump as the grapple sprung off from compressed air and shot right across the fence. It struck the wall about seven feet from the ground... and stuck.

"Yes!"

I wished I had time to answer Lilac's questions, but I quickly pulled the gun apart to get

at the remaining wire, before tying it around a segment of rubble. Behind me, slavers swore and chanted numbers to time their smashes on the door.

"Lilac! Come here." My words were not the carefully chosen ones of an experienced mother, but she approached me as I started fiddling with the saddle itself, beginning to tie it around her.

"I... I kinda didn't tell you before but... if I go over there, they'll kill me. Th-that's what they do to slaves who try and break in..."

"Slaves?" She looked at me even as I fastened the saddle to accommodate her smaller frame.

"You... you don't know what a slave is?"

She shook her head, looking perfectly innocent. I just stood and blinked.

"A... a slave is... me. Like... somepony like me."

"You just look like a normal pony to me."

Somehow, those words meant more to me than I could conceive right now.

"Thank you. You've been more than I could ever tell you in the time we have. Helping me to realise a few things. But I'm sorry, Lilac, this is where you go on yourself. They'll kill me if I go there. It's only for foals."

The door pushed another few inches in, they were screaming at me. Screaming *my name*. Lilac looked horrified, shaking her head and clinging to me. But I held her back to finish my work.

"Listen, Lilac, this is very important! There's another pony you have to look for, too, when you get in! She's called Starshine Melody, and she'll tell them that you're supposed to be there, alright?"

"But she doesn't know me!"

I pulled the last fastener taught, eliciting a yelp from the foal, but I wouldn't have her slipping.

"Just tell her the little pony sent you." I tried to smile. "She'll keep you right. Keep Fluttershy hidden from them, though, okay?"

"Uh-huh..." She looked at me, before her lip quivered, and she leaned in to hug me tightly. "Why can't I stay with you and Miss Coral!? Why? I don't want to leave you!"

Feeling the cold wetness on my cheeks, I held her back, as comforting as I could be.

"I know this must feel like your whole life's just turned upside down, Lilac. But we live in a very bad place. The world isn't what you knew it was. We just need to keep you safe right now, Lilac. Somepony like you doesn't deserve what's out here. I know it's confusing, and even I don't understand it all, but you must go to a safer place till we can come and take you to a new home. We will come. Escape from this city is possible. Because somepony's shown me it. Because I know they can. I know we can, and that's what keeps *me* going. We'll get you back to Coral. Now come on, you have to go now!"

She didn't understand. She just didn't understand, but the world of post-balefire Equestria simply couldn't be explained in such a way so quickly. I helped her up, hooking the back of the saddle onto the wire.

"Gallop around to the front and they'll let you in. Foals always get in. Stay safe, Lilac..."

"Bye-bye, Mister Murky..." We touched hooves... before I let her go, the filly building momentum and sliding down and away from me to safety. Just as I'd promised Coral.

The door broke in behind me. I saw Lilac's horrified look, but I simply waved to her, tried to comfort her that I'd be alright. But the slavers were not kind. They threw me and struck

me. But I simply watched as I saw one foal saved.

One who didn't ever have to become a born slave like me.

Like me *or* somepony else I knew...

Manacles slammed shut, a chain snapped onto my collar... and I was dragged away.

My tender underbelly slapped onto the drying muck, tripping over my chains when pushed. Groaning, I rolled to my side, clutching my own chest before finally opening my eyes.

A thick pair of huge hooves stood just before me. He was here.

I'd been tugged outside and thrown before him in the courtyard. Surrounded by slavers in weather that looked ready to unleash another downpour any second, I was one lonely little slave looking up at his Master come to reclaim him.

"I told you I'd be waiting, Number Seven, yet you came anyway. Galloping right into the trap I'd *told* you was here." His voice was quieter than normal, calm and arrogant. "I told you that you'd always find yourself galloping back to me no matter what."

"I... I didn't come here for *you*. For... for her, to get her safe."

His hoof lifted me up and hurled me. Screaming, I landed five feet away. My nose stung and bled.

"You forget your place, slave! You will call me 'Master!'"

I should have been scared. I should have been begging. But after all this, after turning my back on him before and after knowing what I knew in my heart, I could not. My delay led to another fierce yank on my chain, flipping me over. I heard slavers laughing at one little pony bearing the attentions of such a huge leader in their chain of command. Whether at me or simply the appearance of it I didn't know.

But I *wasn't* going to call him that.

"Not... not going to be here."

"What was that, slave?"

"I said... I'm not going to be here forever!"

The chain pulled, I lifted from the ground, swung another ten feet to crash through a bench, impacting on a pavement concrete. I was sure I'd heard a slaver cry out 'Look, he *can* fly!' before more laughter kicked in. Just the sort of mindless kind he attracted.

The skies broiled, wind blew. Looking up from the ground, my body hammered and exhausted, I could see the clouds. They didn't look quite so dark anymore, the storm was almost over. Then his face appeared above me, furious. I took heart. It *angered* him to see me resist, to realise I wasn't going to be in these chains as long as he'd like!

"Oh, I'm afraid you will be, Number Seven. You need only look to your own skinny rump to know that."

"I'm not going to be your slave forever!" I choked the words out, rolling to my hooves. It hurt, oh it hurt, but I stood on my own power, looking him in the eye. "You *won't* own me!"

A silence. The slavers cut their laughter. *Nopony* had ever talked to the Master this way. His anger was still visible, but he only glared back, daring me to go on, *daring* me to do this now.

"You... you want me as your pet! Like some slavery that never ends! Well it won't last!" My throat felt raw, but I cried out with all the volume I had, stomping a hoof before the

colossal pony. *"You won't own me forever!"*

The chain clanked as I kicked it aside.

"You can punish me! And hurt me! Shout at me and chain me up and put me on enough shifts to almost kill me, but someday I'm going to... to get over that Wall! I'm going to live my life how I want to with... with all my friends and find my mom and strut into that radio pony's studio and *tell everypony how I escaped you!*"

Tears were in my eyes, and my mind whirled in terror. Every instinct I had being fought against. I was riding the knife edge here, but as I looked at those lowered eyes, that simmering look upon his face, and I knew I couldn't stop.

"You... you know why!? Because I know I can get out! I've *seen* somepony do it! I've seen somepony tell Red Eye that he wasn't going to own her! That one sight is *all* I needed, that proof to always give me that one hope that no punishment you could ever dream of would make me forget! I... I won't lose that!"

Turning, I looked to the nearby Wall, the same section I'd once run at.

"I'm going to be free, because all I need to do is keep in mind what I saw, and I'll know that there's a way out. I'll dream and wish and hope. Someday, *someday*... I'll dare! Maybe not make it... maybe I'll need to be hurt and cry and need picking back up again and again and again but I will *do what she did!*"

I took a rasping breath, screaming with all my life's hurt and desperation into his face.

"I WILL BE FREE!"

I collapsed, chest burning and trying to keep the hacking and coughing as small as I could, lying on my side. The effort had taken what remained of my physical strength. I couldn't move... but I... I had won.

The Master furrowed his brows, looking down at me. I anticipated the scream, the shout. The hoof to crush my head and sentence me to unending shifts.

I didn't expect him to smile.

"You really believe that, slave?"

Hesitantly, my head juddered to nod. He only laughed, shaking his head as though it were some half-joke shared over a drink.

"You really do... well, well." He barely muttered, turning behind him to nod and then incline with his head. Through the smog, a couple of his aids drew something up, big and bulbous with fluttering wings.

A sprite-bot, one of those strange ones with a screen on the front. The master tapped it with one hoof.

"These things. They see everything, you know? The Ministry Mares did their work all right. They still work. They still respond to the same triggers to watch for ponies talking and then observe what they're saying. The eyes and ears of the Ministry of Morale... such a wonderful tool. I had a feeling this one would come in handy today after you said 'no' for once."

Turning back to me, his face hardened.

"Now you resist and tell me that you'll always want to be free? Because you saw her escape? Perhaps you should see something."

A tap and a spark, a few buttons beneath a hatch pressed made the sprite-bot jump and flicker, that screen springing to life and turning to static multiple times before stabilising. Black and white by appearance, it began to show moving images at last. Confused and wary, I watched it with wide eyes.

A rooftop, wait, I knew that one! It was the Ministry of Morale! The FunBarn!

Amongst the flickering bars, I saw figures run out onto it, two of them. Leaning closer, I squinted before feeling my heart beat faster.

It was her.

Unmistakable, surging out onto the roof with that zebra in tow, Littlepip looked quickly around her, judging her location. Wait... I knew this, I'd seen the balefire phoenix fly to there! This must have been when it happened!

Sure enough, even as I saw Red Eye's cybernetic terror dog, Winter, creep out of the door after them I saw the glare on the screen. The light approaching as that colossal flying beast came to play its part in her escape!

Flaring to and fro, catching glimpses of it as the sprite-bot watched the encounter, it burned the balloons trapping her! Sending them crashing to the ground with immolating fire that I remembered all too well, I had been lying just below it all in the mud! This was it, I'd see her when she escaped! That dog even fled!

She simply stood there, looking around, scowling.

Was she just gathering her energy? When was she going to move on? What was it she was waiting for? A gap in the pursuers? To let the zebra get her breath back?

I felt my hooves quiver, I leaned closer, wide eyed as I saw her just stand there. Guards ran out of the stairwell and guns pointed. Come on, Pip! Take them out! When was she going to do it!? Do the... the thing that let her...

At gunpoint, she was led away.

The screen began to flicker again, turning back to static. Beside me, I felt My Master lean down, a hoof across the back of my neck, speaking almost oddly calmly in a voice I'd never heard.

"You really thought she escaped, didn't you, Murky?" I didn't turn to look at him. "Right to your little core. But the truth is, nopony escapes from in here. Her capture was as ignominious as it was inevitable."

"No..."

My mind seemed to slow, become clouded and fuzzy and hard to process anything. I just kept staring into the screen as the shiver spread over my body. No... no no no...

He reached out, tapping another button. The picture changed, highlighting another scene... that of the main gates of Fillydelphia from the outside. Hovering about, the black and white recording paused and turned to face a gathering of ponies as I saw her led out under guard to the drawbridge and two waiting ponies, one a Ranger and the other a lithe mare. I saw Red Eye himself behind Littlepip, smiling calmly from behind an alicorn shield.

"She didn't escape. She became just another agent of Red Eye, little Number Seven. She *joined* him in doing work for him."

The recording let out a buzz of noise, the sprite-bot's sensitive spy microphones picking up one line through the haze as I saw him lean down to her, whispering in her ear.

"Remember my offer, Littlepip..."

I closed my eyes, shaking my head to clear the well of tears building in them. I heard the machine click and turn off. With a little bump to its chassis, it beeped and continued on its merry musical way.

I had no words. All the courage, the belief... the proof, and *faith* in my heart. It simply died. The energy to speak up and know I was going to be alright just flowed right out of me.

My Master sat down, patting my back.

"You really thought you were something special, didn't you? The next in line to be like her? The slave who would break free? But the truth is you're just a pony. She was a legend, Number Seven, and she didn't even come close to a way out. But don't worry, this isn't something unusual."

From my hooves over my face, I peered up to him, his light green eyes staring into my own. He stroked our mutual scar.

"Every slave rebels at some point. Every slave comes to that point when they fight back and make a try to be free. They either die or they get over it. It's like a form of adolescence, a rebellious stage. I've seen it happen to *hundreds* over the years... you're no different from them. And it's such a very hard stage to go through. But it's over now. You can go back to the life you know."

Around us, I saw columns of slaves forming, being led to various places. I recognised a few, ones from the Mall. Within them, I saw the battered body of Coral Eve being thrown in, barely able to stand. But there in the line I caught the wonderful azure eyes of Glimmerlight watching me. A slaver was having to repeatedly push her back in. I saw Sunny Days too...

All of us slaves.

"This is just how it goes for ponies like you, Number Seven." My Master stood up, pulling the chain. "There is no way out. No grand escape. Fillydelphia is your home and your place is by **my** side."

His voice was returning to its strength.

"Now you **know** it, she was caught and joined us as much as any other pony. She is out there working **for** Red Eye now."

Arbu... Bucklynn Cross... it made so much sense, he... he was *right*.

"So now we'll simply see about returning you to a crash course in handing away control. You are a **slave**, Number Seven. It's time you remembered that. Your punishment will teach you this more than you would ever need to have us direct your life from now on. **Wormtail!**"

The wretched aid of My Master crept over. He cast me a smug little grin as I sat shivering; wide eyed and barely thinking. No, I was thinking, just not what I wanted to think and see and... oh Goddesses.

I'd been believing in a lie all this time.

There was no way out.

"**Take this disobedient slave for his punishment before returning him. He'll work a shift somewhere to help him get rid of feeling like he's anypony that matters. Perhaps at the old merchant's new place...**"

"At once, Maste—"

"**NO!**"

The scream wasn't mine, I turned to see a slaver belted across the face, before Glimmerlight galloped out of the line of slaves and skidded to between me and My Master.

"Can't you see you're hurting him enough already! You don't need to do that!"

He snarled, raising a hoof. "**Get out of my way, slave!**"

She did not.

"Please! He's barely hanging in as it is! Don't do *this* to him! You... you can..."

Her body quaked, but I saw her raise a hoof, resting it on her own chest.

"...you can take *me* instead... not him! I filled his head with all this, helped turn him to

making attempts! Please, just let him go back to the Mall with Coral, and take me for this punishment.”

There was a silence, My Master bearing down, staring into her eyes from far above her height. Behind her, I simply gazed on in amazement... my head hurting, the scar thumped and my cutie marks itched... the feeling of the chains shutting all too clear. But to see her do this... *offer* this in my defence...

Without warning, he raised up and crashed his hoof to her face, knocking Glimmer clear to one side and into the mud. Striding over, he kicked her.

“You have no say! If I wanted you to be there to be punished, *you would be!* You have no bartering chips! No say in matters! You are a slave like he is and you will not attempt to ever believe you can change my mind!”

He turned, twisting back to me.

“Take him back to the Mall and throw him in the cells until I arrange his presence for Morass. He’ll want to get the customers lined up. It shall become his new place of work after *my* shifts for him are done. After today, he will be split from other slaves entirely. You will learn what control is by the hoof of those that could seek it over you, Number Seven. You will serve their pleasures as the obedient slave you always were.”

Slavers grabbed my legs and chain, dragging me through the mud and over concrete. Glimmer struggled from the ground, trying to move toward me but being held harshly in line, kept away from me as we were dragged and returned to the Mall.

A journey that I spent quaking and crying as Wormtail spoke of how I was but a slave, a crude imitation of his own Master.

“Oh... oh Murky, they weren’t going to...”

We’d been thrown in to our shop cell for me to await that dreaded shift.

That was his plan to remind me that I was the bottom of the pile, and always had been, no matter what I’d believed before I was shown the truth.

I’d been thrown to rock bottom. Hitting the floor hard and being cast into a grey neutral world in my head that just didn’t make any sense anymore. Like I’d gone back to sleep.

It felt like I had over the years before.

“Murky, I’m so so sorry...”

I didn’t even feel anything... just... just...

Numb.

I lay in Glimmerlight’s gentle grasp, feeling my shoulder wet from her tears. I hadn’t cried since we got back. I simply couldn’t bring myself to. I just lay still and gazed at the wall, at the markings of generations of slaves beforehand, and feeling nothing at all.

I didn’t know what exactly was going to happen any more. But I didn’t need to for it to make me feel sick. Sick and worthless.

They were taking everything away from me. My hopes, my dreams, the mare I’d so shamelessly admitted I’d had a stupid crush on, and now they wanted to take my dignity itself just to remind me of my place.

My Master had seen the potential Sooty offered with me. Feeling me whine in fear, Glimmer tightened her grasp, whispering that it’d be okay, choking on her words as she looked into my vacant eyes. I didn’t really see her. I simply looked through her, feeling my

body settle into its old routine and tell me 'I told you so.'

"We'll sort this, Murky... s-somehow... we always do..." Glimmer muttered again, she'd said it a dozen times. "Brim's coming back soon, he's going to be at the next shift, we'll see him there, okay? M-maybe he can get to you in time or... oh Murky, I'm so sorry."

Why did that matter? Even he couldn't fight all of Fillydelphia.

Even with him, there was no way out. Protégé hadn't offered me one. Red Eye hadn't given me one. Littlepip's way out had closed. The plans wouldn't work, you couldn't escape this city as a slave, not from behind the Walls. Not even from outside them for me.

My life was here now. No way out. No way out at all.

I could see Coral sitting quietly against the wall, her head buried in her hooves and looking shaky from that fever I knew was burning strong inside her. Glimmer's heart shaped face was covered in dried blood and grime. We were failing. We couldn't manage this.

No, my life wasn't here... it was in the hooves of My Master. He owned my life.

I felt Glimmerlight hold me as though she could somehow stop them from doing this. But I couldn't even muster the energy to fight back. What was the *point* now? Nopony could escape slavery.

Nopony could escape Fillydelphia.

But there was one little thought in me, one last little glitter that refused to go out. One train of thought. One desperate realisation.

There was *one* way out.

Half an hour later, our shift began. All of us were marched from the cell by the slavers, out of the Mall. It was there I took the chance, slipping away from the line like a ghost, before they could take me to Sooty's place. Only one pony saw me go, the pony who had been holding onto me and felt me leave.

Even as I sneaked away, blank-faced and grey of mind toward the one avenue of escape left to me, I heard Coral Eve shout, scream, and beg as she tried to make me hear her. She'd seen the look in my eyes. But she was dragged back in, chained down along with Glimmer and taken toward their shift, unable to follow me. Unable to do anything but try to make the slavers hear her pleas to catch me.

"Generous souls of Fillydelphia, I thank you. I thank you for your sacrifices. That day after day you place your own lives down to help prepare this world for a better generation. With our next scheduled event in the Pit coming tomorrow, I offer a day of rest then, that I would see you understand my gratitude for this effort. Even now, as I hear the reports of progress on all fronts, I feel indebted to the work you, as better ponies, have done."

Hoof before hoof, I trotted my way through Fillydelphia, taking the route I now knew. Down toward the Ministry of Arcane Science. Master Red Eye's voice boomed from the speakers that were lashed to signposts and lamps all over the city.

"Let it never be known that there is not good in the world. By being here, in Fillydelphia, you are doing a greater good than has been done in two hundred years of fruitlessly wandering the wastes outside. This great spectacle, the majesty of your blood, sweat, and tears... it shall be your monument to the future, the one place when you found your purpose."

I turned off the street, and headed to the quieter areas of Fillydelphia. The voice faded as I moved away from his infrastructure, coming into the silent grey streets.

"Yes, some may ask me, 'Why? Why do you keep us here?' Because this is the only place that anypony need be. There is nothing outside these walls but misery, spite, betrayal and pain to be found. Only in the future, through your sacrifice of time and energy, will we make..."

It became a mumbling, passing beyond the distance I could discern individual words. I stepped onto the one particular street before one building.

Cross Street Orphanage.

The doors creaked, an entirely empty interior meeting me with nothing but dark shapes and grey dust floating in the heavy warm air. What passed for twilight in Fillydelphia streamed through windows, tinted grey by the muck sapping colour from its strands. With each hoof making naught but a tiny click, I began to trot through it. My body felt so weak; my broken nose, diseased lungs, head cold, bloodshot eyes, and so many whips, scars and lesions along my body that I felt like a ghoul. Every step was shaky. My mouth hung open and my vision swam. They had wanted to destroy me. No freedom... with no dreams in any cold cell to warm my broken heart.

Almost a ghost of what a pony should be, trotting alone in the abandoned halls of the past.

I lifted my PipBuck. Reacquiring it and my journal hadn't been hard, I knew the way to sneak into his room now, as I'd prepared for coming out here. I'd wanted them with me for this moment. They had to be with me. Clicking through channels, I set it to the only one I cared about.

"—far be it for me to guess, my ponies of the Wastes, but I'm afraid I cannot say that we can expect any information readily any time soon. The warning stays on the airwaves. Just avoid the Stable Dweller until we know for sure that this travesty is nothing but a falsity."

I'd seen the proof myself, I knew that there would be no truthful information coming.

Limping my way through the halls of the Orphanage, I passed crayon drawings of a world I'd never see. Happy smiling stick figure ponies laughing and sharing time together in fields, slowly darkening off to a ruined wall where balefire had scorched the pictures clean. The good had been *purged* from Equestria long ago.

"It hurts me more than I can say that our hope is faltering, wastelanders. Just... just wait, please hold on a little longer and—"

Click.

I turned it off. That was all I could bear to hear.

I reached the stairs, moving up flight by flight, steadily approaching the way out to the new floors of girders that had still been left unbroken. Covered in damp puddles, the sheet metal and sodden wood creaked and plopped beneath my hooves.

Shaking, I began the ascent in the suddenly cold wind above the Orphanage. They... they wouldn't get me. I was going to escape. They weren't getting my *life*. Not to abuse and... and send to that place.

My heart thumped hard, my head aching and my teeth chattering, I reached the top of the unsteady construction. The nut I'd been trying to remove was still there. Sitting my ragged, untidy, and damp self down beside it, I sat and waited with my journal. There was

just one last thing to... to maybe help me. While I sat quivering... I tried to draw.

A shaky line... led to a wobbly curve... and a stupid shape.

I hit my journal with a hoof, leaning my head down. I tried again. Raggedy figures and terrible sketches that made no sense and had no direction, I almost drew things by accident. The only times my subconscious led me to draw was when it was something about him.

Wanting to scream, I very nearly threw the journal from the top. Instead I just clutched it close and tucked it into my saddlebag.

Beep!

I almost screamed in fright, I was so on edge.

Beep!

I'd been startled by the very thing I'd waited for.

"Please, Sundial... *please*."

Click.

"I... I... oh no, I don't have long!"

I could hear shouting, a fumbling with the PipBuck and a desperation born of exhaustion in his voice. It sounded wrong. Sundial was in a better world! He wasn't meant to sound like this!

"They got me! I was going back to my desk and they were waiting! With their cuffs and their batons and... oh help me somepony, they're going to take me away as soon as they get through this door! I'm so sorry, Equestria! I just wanted to protect her!"

I clutched the PipBuck close, feeling my own tears double up for him. Oh Sundial no... why now, why you? I wanted him to get by and be happy and have a family before the end!

"So please, if you find this, please tell her I love her! Skydancer, she's the best thing that ever happened to me! Please! I'm so sorry Mom... Dad... I just don't know what's going to happen to me now! I'm—"

A crashing sound!

"Suspect, come here!"

"I'M SORRY!"

"Get down off the ground now! NOW! Get down or I'll—"

Click.

I simply sat and held the PipBuck. It had been the first thing I'd found that really became, well, mine, in this city. The first thing in here that mattered to me. It had *always* been there for me, but that was it.

There was no happy ending. Not for Sundial... not for Littlepip... not for me.

I began to shake, worse this time. Not from the cold, but from conflict. Fear of what lay ahead.

Slowly, I stood up, trotting forward. They wanted to hurt me every day, and I wouldn't let them...

My front hooves stopped at the edge. Before me, the sunset. Casting my quivering head down, I saw the same hard gravel and thickened mud below.

I was alone atop the only world I was ever going to be allowed to see... alone, cold, wet, and scared. I turned, looking behind me as if expecting to see somepony rushing up to stop me, but I knew nopony was there. Nopony would be there for me now that I'd come out here. I was just the lonely pegasus... as I'd always been. Some may want to help me, but they couldn't *save* me.

Nopony could.

Slowly, I closed my eyes, entering into my own mind and my imagination. I heard every thump of my heart, a thick and deep sound in my ears. I had only one thing left to do.

Please... make it not hurt...

Hesitation. Fear.

But one little realisation, a memory that popped up. P-Pinkie had told me about this, hadn't she? In that creepy letter...

"When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not... you'll know what to do."

The time was here... I knew what I had to do to protect myself.

I felt myself edge forward, the tips of my front hooves rested over the edge. I couldn't look down. I just clenched my eyes shut. Shaking, crying, whimpering, and trying with all my might to think of all the pain that would end.

They had taken my freedom.

They had crushed my dreams.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Glimmer... Brim... Coral... Protégé... Unity... I'm so sorry... I... I..."

I didn't even feel myself lean forward past the point of no return.

Simply a motion, a whisper of wind against my body, and the loss of all solid ground as I fell.

There were no dramatic last thoughts as it happened.

My little body left the rooftop, not even turning as it plunged. One last escape from the nightmare. Nopony to witness me or find me. I would just disappear with as little celebration as I had been born.

Nothing but a number.

The speed picked up, every minor detail somehow finding its way to my mind in the few short seconds of my fall.

My eyes saw the ground move, tumble, and spin. My whimper grew to a scream... a scream to end all of my pain.

From being torn from my mother, to the horrid anvil and hammer, through every lash, cane, slap, and stomp... to the carts, back breaking work and lost hopes. For my whole life... I *screamed*.

A simple and anguished cry of sadness that grew and grew as I saw the harsh ground of Fillydelphia again and again as I spun and tumbled, those broken wings plastered to my sides.

It would all be over! One little pain I'd had the courage to face! My only way out of this city to be with the Goddesses at last to await my friends in their merciful embrace!

But the scream grew, beyond what I could. A roar... a brutal cry as something exploded and shards of wood and brick flew all around me. My body slapping into something hard, and I felt hooves grasp me in midair, crushing me against a huge chest.

Brimstone Blitz caught me. Diving *through* the wall of the orphanage, he had thrown himself with that mighty cry, hooves out to grab me. Thrown off course, we tumbled. A slam and shock of pain as we hit the adjoining building, crashed through flights of scaffold and bounced from loose brick we fell together, over and over...

Before crashing to the ground. Pain overcame me, and my vision turned to black.

But the pain didn't end.

Slowly, growing, that spark of life led my eyes to open. He was there, lying still and breathing as his hooves held me against him, stopping me escaping, stopping me crying out

and running away from what he'd done.

Even as we were surrounded by the slavers that had chased him, he held me tightly. I struggled, beating at him with my hooves and crying aloud for stopping me! I wanted out! *Why, Brim? Why?*

"No!" He hissed, a more emotional tone than I knew he possessed.

Cradling my head and shivering as I broke down crying and hollering in his hooves, I was completely stopped from moving, restrained even from choosing my own end. Yet he clasped and embraced me.

"It's not that bad... it's *never* that bad..."

His eyes shifted up, to the slavers.

"This will end better for you. I'll see to it."

A low and ebbing growl emanated from his chest, and I sensed the rage building in him.

"There will be a reckoning for whoever made you come to this..."

Footnote: Perk Lost...

Lucky Break – Sometimes a break only lasts so long. Whatever item gave you that luck to just scrape by time and time again has lost its meaning now. Your Luck characteristic has been reduced by one. Guess you're just an unlucky number...

Rage of the Warlord

"Don't bother with the white flag for that brute's clan, my little ponies. They'll only strangle you with it."

"What was it like? That is, realising how much he'd broken you?"

I didn't realise it, that was the problem.

From the moment he'd shown me that sprite-bot's truths, that everything I believed in had been a lie, what did I have left to believe in? I'd believed I could escape, but I had failed. I'd believed that I needed to become like Littlepip and be brave with my friends to escape like she did, but then Arbu happened. I'd taken my last solace in that she had *done* it, that no matter what I'd be able to somehow do it if too if I was only determined enough.

Then I found out that she hadn't even come close. I'd simply been telling myself what I wanted to hear all along from the very start in the Pit. Just a delusional little slave who thought he was more important than he actually was.

His methods to remind me of my place, that I had no dignity, hope, or control. It was like I was back under that anvil, feeling it coming but being unable to stop it no matter what I tried. It took all that spunk and inner strength and corrupted it... made me feel worthless.

I'd needed something to believe in... a way out. I didn't throw myself from that rooftop because I was broken... I did it because I thought I was escaping. You don't do these things to yourself knowing that you're racing to your death. You do it to get *away* from what's hurting you. Every avenue I could have believed in had closed, directing me down the only path that my mind felt made any sense just to make the pain *stop*.

"But you'd come so far..."

I know! My friends knew too, and it still stabs at my heart knowing how much I hurt them by doing what I did. They never said anything about it but I could see it in their eyes. Even before I'd met any of them properly I'd at least been able to maybe quip off inside my

own head or... or after I'd met them, laughed, and joked! They'd made me happy, and for the first time in my life, be it while being teased or feeling joyful, they were proud of me for the things I'd done. But after it all started to go downhill, I was turning into the slave I'd been before Fillydelphia all over again! I just couldn't handle that; to be given such a glimpse of the pony I *could* be only for it all to be ripped away moment by moment again and *again!* From losing Unity to the broadcast about Arbu; making things worse for Sunny to the second news report about Bucklynn Cross, and then to find out that she really hadn't escaped? That she had failed in everything I'd dreamed of and *joined* Red Eye on a mission for *him!*

Could I really be blamed for thinking there was no other way to escape slavery? I'd been deluding myself the entire time that there was a way out of Fillydelphia. That city, it's impossible. Slaves have a saying, you know? That once Filly gets a hold of you, then you'll only ever get out if you lose something, be it a life or a soul.

"But Brimstone saved you, didn't that help remind you how important you were in the lives of others?"

Yes...

Sorry, I don't mean to cry.

"It's alright."

Thank you, but no. It *should* have but I just couldn't shake that numbness. I'd been saved, but for what? All I could see was another slaver coming to take me to a shift. I couldn't live like that, and so I simply retreated. I ran away from life itself into my own mind, desperate to make it all just blur past until the day I staggered... tripped... and just fell over to be swept away by time.

Really, though? I wasn't the real problem.

"Sorry, I don't follow."

A reckoning, he'd said. Vengeance. A fury drawn deep in a pony that fought his own battle against the born life he could never quite escape.

Even as I found The Master's ownership breaking me into the slave I had been born as, the first of my allies was finding our treatment bringing his own past to the surface of his mind. All he'd needed was something to give him a reason to set it loose.

For a long time, the Great Warlord had been dormant.

No more.

I spent that night in My Master's tiny office cell, hunched and shivering within its cold confines and trying to pretend that those crawling sensations over my body were just my imagination in the pitch black. My back stung, for the cost of my survival had brought with it further punishment for disobedience. A burn on my side spread into an aching across my ribs and surrounding joints. That shock rod he carried had been the newest implement to try and 'bring me in line.'

I'd been thrown in. Ordered not to sleep, but to think on my place in life.

Life...

Did I even have one? Could I even have one?

Front hooves resting over my muzzle and coughing every few minutes as the collar worked its sick purpose, I felt the tight swelling in my breast remind me that no, I couldn't.

Outside the Wall was no paradise, no place of health and relief from what life had 'blessed' me with inside, either in my mind or body. My Master was right.

Sniffing, I couldn't help but feel upset that Brimstone had saved me. I knew why he had. I'd have done the same. But from my perspective, all it meant was I had more of the pain to go yet. I couldn't escape Fillydelphia and I couldn't escape my life. No matter how much I wanted to. Knowing that deep down hurt more than anything, the thought that I had *wanted* that escape.

Really, for the past few hours I'd done nothing but keep thinking over all these things. I'd been ordered to.

My head perked up, ears twitching as I heard the door to My Master's office being flung open. A heavy tread—it was him! Quickly, grunting and moaning in pain, I stood up in the cramped space as best I could to turn and face the doorway with my head lowered and ready.

"Time's up, little slave!" He called from outside even while I heard the keys jangle and turn in the thick locks. "I hope you've been doing as ordered this time!"

Grinding and screeching as the metal door dragged across the hard floor, I squinted against even the office's vague light. That light soon turned to shadow when My Master stepped forward, stroking the thick coat on his muzzle with a hoof and leering down at me. My eyes tried to stay low, but I couldn't help but see the heavy whip and inactive shock rod sitting on those leather bandoleers, or the loop of chain around his neck. Suppressing the squeak of fear, I simply abased myself.

"Y-yes Master. I have."

"Gooood... and?" One of his hooves rested on the door. No doubt to slam it shut if I said wrong.

"I..." I sniffed. "I don't choose w-when to stop my work and d-die, only when My Master chooses for me..."

"Very good." I felt the cloven hoof on the door move down to pat my head gently. "Anything else?"

"I d-don't think so—"

"Oh but there is." My Master stepped back, I saw him reach for the whip!

Yelping, I staggered back into the cell while shaking my head rapidly, my whole body trembling. Oh please, don't! Not more! *Think, Murky, think!*

"Yes!" I shouted the word oddly out of place, seeing him hesitate and raise one eyebrow above those beady eyes. "Th-there... there isn't anything for me out there anyway. No heroes, no better life. Nothing I'd understand how to deal with or live in. I... I realised where I belong..."

There was a silence in the dingy office. I knew what he was doing. He was letting it sink in. But I couldn't take him just watching as if wanting more.

"I realised there's no way out, you are who you were born to be and... and there's nothing else after that. I was born a slave..."

Finally, My Master nodded.

"Seems we've finally gotten through to you, Number Seven. Don't you worry, every slave rebels at some point, it's all natural. Now you can go back to a life you understand. You are a slave. That's all you are meant to be and you've just had a little period of adjustment in your adolescence. You'll settle in eventually like they all do, just another number."

I hated his voice. I almost wished he'd shout. This 'day by day' tone that simply talked of

experience and expectation *terrified* me with the thoughts of that this was *my life*.

It was.

"Now, we have a *lot* of work for you, little runt. Get your chain on and follow me closely. You are to be left in the plaza until arrangements have been made for your schedule. An event in the Pit is scheduled later today, accompanied by one of Red Eye's, hmm... *break* days. So not many shifts are going into the latter half of the day, but don't you worry, slave! We'll make sure you get the chance at something. Sooty is *eager* to have you, you know?"

The moment he'd told me to get the chain on I was already pulling it around my collar and falling into step beside him to begin the journey. But that last line had drawn a shiver from me and made a sickness rise in my throat. I wanted to scream, to beg and plead with him not to send me there.

He chuckled when we left the office, hearing no complaint from me.

"Very good, Number Seven. No words means you're remembering how to act. Now come on, you'll get to meet your little friends again. You'll like that, eh? The two mares will be back soon, and the raider seems, heh... eager to meet you. I'm sure they'll be *excited* to see the real you. Show them who you *really* are, Number Seven."

There was no choice in it, I had to stay silent and obey.

Simply had to do what I did before.

Don't think.

Don't feel.

Don't wish.

Don't dream...

"All right, wretches! Roll call is over, now get back to your holes until we require you!"

Dozens of slaves began to limp away from the redesigned plaza, passing around the smokestacks, incinerator, and the strange solitary confinement holes. As they left, slavers trotted behind them and slammed the cage doors shut. There was no such thing as the freedom to wander the plaza that they had once had under Protégé's rule.

I had stood alone during the entire event as I always was instructed to. The only pegasus in a group of his own, still chained to My Master. Glimmerlight and Coral Eve were still out on work, but Brimstone stood above the crowd, glaring at My Master with death in his eyes.

"Red Eye's rest day will begin in six hours, until then you will all produce a full day's worth of smaller tasks in your cells to make up for that lost time! As by his orders you will be permitted to leave the Mall to attend the Pit by your own choosing. However! You will *all* be back before noon the next day; slaves not returning will be subject to punishment duties."

He stood near the old fountain, as though taunting me with the temptation to drink from its muddy waters. My throat was burning, dry as the ashen ground of Fillydelphia, while the ground below me held a few spats of blood from my coughing. I'd seen Brimstone glance over every time I'd convulsed.

"And you..."

He turned to me, unclasping the chain from my collar.

"You will remain here while I arrange your next shift."

"His shift where?"

The entire plaza seemed to stop moving, ponies both slave and slaver alike turned back from the movement.

Brimstone Blitz stood, having not moved at all from where he'd watched over the roll call. Standing straight on with My Master, he had his chin lowered, eyebrows narrow and eyes hard. I heard My Master chuckle and turn with a shake of his mane.

"Of no concern to you, *slave*. His shifts are—"

"Well overworked. He's done more shifts in the past day than any slave is meant to in three. You think somepony wouldn't notice? By Red Eye's rules he's earned a day of rest. He will have **no** shifts today."

There were gasps. *Nopony* disagreed with My Master these days, but they all remembered the hoof-wrestling match. They knew the bad blood between these two. I shivered, feeling far too close to the two largest ponies around here. Please... please Brim, don't do this.

My Master grinned, arrogant and sure of his position. His authority was absolute here, turning his head to me with no chain to my collar.

"Red Eye has his rules, yes. But I didn't say that his shifts were *from* Red Eye. They are **my** request to him. **My** order. From Master to slave. Number Seven is my personal little pet slave now, so why don't you ask **him** whether he wishes to obey my personal requests? He accepted this position after all, and Red Eye does permit a slaver to hold a personal *assistant* if the slave agrees to it and wishes to work for them. Well, Number Seven? You don't *have* to do work, but I've *ordered* you anyway, what do you say to all this?"

The shivering turned to a quaking. Eyes wet and mind racing, I turned back and forth between the two. My Master only stood confidently. Brimstone finally turned his head and I could see his eyes pleading. In the scant minutes before they'd torn me away from him I'd seen how much he had come to care for me as well.

I wanted to go to him. My Master said I could if I chose to.

Feeling my bandaged wings dampen with the sweat of a blistering indoors and the pressure of fighting choice and chains, I tried to fight both sides of it. My... My Master might... might do things if... if I didn't...

"Murky? What's wrong, he can't do anything but ask you! Come on!"

I looked up, seeing Brim looking almost impatient in his stoic fury. Clearly my situation was all that was keeping him from launching forward.

"Just **walk away**, Murky!"

"From your life, Number Seven?" My Master's voice cooed behind me, just quiet enough for me alone to hear. "Defying your born Master? Chained to me by fate since before you were even born... you can't defy that which owns your very mark's meaning."

Brimstone stamped hard enough to crush a small piece of rubble on the ground.

"What are you waiting for!? This sick **bastard** can't force you to do any more today!"

We had tried to escape together more than once. Escape... no, it couldn't happen. I couldn't. Some things were too important.

"I'm s-sorry, Brim. B-born a slave..."

Slowly, my head lowered and mumbled the last few words as I trotted back to My Master's side. A low growl from Brimstone was all I heard while My Master's hoof stroked my mane and effectively pulled me in against his repulsive sweaty body.

"What?"

"See, raider? Number Seven knows his place in life at last. You are what you're born as... he's not the only one either, looking at you ready to frenzy up. **Now!** All of you! Back to

your cages while I set the planning out and meet with the merchant. Come when I call, Number Seven. Might have even heard of a few ponies lined up from the merchant, heh."

Setting me down, I simply nodded and lowered my head in submission. Trotting away, I made a slow pace for our shop cell out of habit.

Brimstone Blitz glared at My Master as he left, before whirling around, picking me up and stopping just short of slamming me into the wall. I screamed, covering my face with my hooves, before feeling him put me down... realising what he was doing. Making a short snort, he bent down.

"Why did you agree!? You don't have to listen to what he says! What's this 'merchant lining up ponies' piss-talk? You've worked enough to not need it, you stupid—" He cut off, stamping a hoof to curb his anger. I knew it wasn't really at me. "Why, Murk?"

"I'm a slave... I obey..."

I simply trotted on by him into the cell, hearing him turn to watch me go into the back room, aiming for a corner.

"Goddesses above, what has he **done** to you while I was away?"

"HE'S GOING TO MAKE HIM DO *WHAT*!?"

I winced, my ears *aching* along with the very cell shaking at Brimstone's roar from the front of shop. Accompanying it was a heavy slam. A part of the wall bulged inward into the back room where I lay curled on the couch in a blanket. Pieces of degrading plaster flew off and fell across me.

Glimmerlight had returned earlier, staggering her way in with her initiate robes ripped on the back from a whip. She hadn't shown what injuries lay below, but even I could see the effort it took to keep the pain from her face. She and Brimstone were in the front shop now where I had heard her telling him what I was being pushed into doing.

Now I only heard her seem to suddenly panic.

"Brim! No! He's scared, he needs space!"

The floor quaking beneath me, the giant form of the raider stormed through into the back. A full shelving unit, flung aside for him to take a more direct path, crashed across the ground before the huge earth pony almost seemed to snarl *at* me. Yelping, I withdrew to the corner of the sofa, curling up, my eyes open wide. Teeth bared, muscles twitching and bulging, a great raider bore down above me demanding my answer. I... I was scared of him. I hadn't been *scared* of him in so long!

"Is this true?"

Squealing, I covered my ears and shrunk away, pulling my blanket over me. I heard Glimmerlight gallop in behind him, shouting for him to back off. But my safe little world beneath the blanket was torn away, pulled clean off me.

"Is. This. *True*?"

I knew he wasn't going to hurt me! But the look of anger and rage just terrified me! At feeling him bearing over me, lighting up every imagined horror awaiting and of every huge Master I'd ever had.

Screaming, I found myself scampering off the sofa and diving into the darkness.

"YES!" I cried as I went, feeling the tears flow and the horrible hurt of knowing what had become of my life being admitted in my own voice, before it fell to a choked and diseased

gasp. Looking back at the huge pony standing there I saw Glimmerlight rush in to stand between him and I. But I could only nod gently and fearfully from behind her.

“...Y-yes.”

There was a pause. A silent pause as the heavy and scarred figure simply stared at me. Filled with anger, but in those eyes I saw care. I saw a protectiveness that now felt it had failed. Only now did I really see how much I meant to the big pony, how small and innocent I must have seemed to him.

Now to those same eyes, through violence, oppression, and intended violation, that same innocence was being stripped away.

“He has gone too far this time.” Brim’s voice was dark. Without any hint of the stoic demeanour I had known him for. “Every day I watch him hurt ponies, abuse them, and destroy their lives and free wills.”

A bucket unfortunate enough to be close by him was flattened, bucked across the room.

“I see him throw you to raiders for your wings to be *torn off* and find him working with them to try and kill the one slaver who actually had a heart in this fucking building!”

The sofa flipped, spiralling and crashing to the floor.

“He strikes Glim and leaves her a malnourished wreck, bit by bit, after sending me from her. Now this? NOW THIS!?”

A full shelving unit was picked up, hurled into the wall where it shattered into its component parts. Boxes once arrayed on it spread everywhere as Brimstone snorted and stamped.

“This has gone on long enough. He has hurt *too* many ponies. He thinks he is some kind of sadistic slaver god, he does not *know* the meaning of rage and darkness in the hearts of the raider clans of old! Enough is enough.”

It built slowly. A tremble of his front hooves. A snort. A closing of the eyes. Grinding of the teeth and a slow rise to his full height as that *immense* muscled body struggled to contain the absolute and unbridled *rage* that was seeking to explode.

Yet explode it did. A bestial *howl* of anger and fury echoed around the room so hard that even Glimmerlight fell to her haunches and covered her ears. My head turned into splitting agony from the sound in my sensitive ears. But before me came a whirlwind of violence, a desk picked up like it were a *toy* and smashed against the far floor. The very concrete of the walls cracked under a ferocious buck.

Before a very sudden and very deliberate turn toward the door.

Glimmerlight spotted it before I did, galloping forward in front of him.

“Brim! NO! That’s what he wa—*ARGH!*”

My jaw dropped in shock as I saw Brimstone knock her aside like anypony else.

Brimstone. Struck. Glimmerlight.

The sight seemed impossible, but all the same I saw her thrown backwards to scatter on the floor. She simply lay back, eyes wide in shock more than anything. Helping her up, we both ran out as we heard the cell door completely fail in its purpose to stop anypony exiting the cell, just in time for it to be slammed back and jammed shut in our faces from a hind leg buck.

He was in the plaza. Still trotting slowly, deliberately, he moved to near the fountain and turned his head to the balcony above the main door out before taking a deep breath.

“SHAAAACKLES!”

Ten seconds passed before another great bellow of the name, he shouted again and then a

fourth time. Every time sending the name echoing all over the Plaza and throughout the entire Mall, enough that I heard the few remaining panes of glass *shake*. Glimmerlight was fighting with the door, trying to get it open from its wrecked but jammed lock. I simply stood back from it, staring through the bars with wide eyes.

“SHAAAACKLES!”

Slaves were gathering at their cell doors. Some slavers, the easier-going assistants who kept an eye on us and brought us food, *very* wisely decided not to approach him if they were already inside the Plaza. They weren't particularly nasty ponies, often long term slaves themselves who had simply found a menial role in Red Eye's workforce as a way to escape true servitude. All the same, they did not want to risk garnering his attention at all. But after that last shout... he appeared. The *true* slaver in here. Atop the balcony above, that leering and grinning face. As though he had expected this reaction... as though he had been *expecting* it. Placing me in here just so Brimstone could find out from *me*.

“Well... if it isn't our little captive raider who wants atten—”

“Shut up and get down here NOW you pathetic sack of worthless flesh! Stand before me!”

A hoof slammed into the ground before him, making a slab of concrete snap in two with one side popping up from the ground level to fall at the side. I was not witnessing my friend Brim... this was the Great Warlord Brimstone Blitz. His voice *rang* with authority and power, completely eclipsing that of My Master.

“You forget your place, *slave!*” My Master cackled, glancing to either side at all the cells... his eyes found me. “You have **no say** here, raider! You are no warlord. No king of raiders any more! You are *nothing* but my slave. You shall remain there to simmer down.”

If Brimstone Blitz showed any sign of caring for My Master's orders, he didn't show it. A violent snarl through almost foaming teeth led to a hurling of the slab of concrete at the balcony. Flying upward, it crashed into the softer brickwork and smashed one section of the balcony around where My Master stood. I saw him have to flinch to the side to avoid the shrapnel.

“You will stand before me and answer for this or I will destroy this petty prison to find you! GET! DOWN! HERE! FACE ME, COWARD!”

My Master lowered his hoof from covering his face against the rocks that now fell and tumbled down back into the Plaza. *That* grin persisting... *enjoying* seeing Brimstone trapped in the Plaza and raging an order he would never have followed. With a cackle, he simply turned and left.

I thought that would be it. That Brimstone's anger would explode in violence against the guards who were *very* hastily retreating into one of the cells to hide.

However I had never seen the Warlord at work when his ire was truly raised.

Roaring after My Master, rearing up and bellowing his protest at somepony turning their back on him, I saw Brimstone instead cast an eye to the new thick door that protected the way out. No doubt specifically reinforced *just* for him. But I saw his eyes then turn to the slavers watching above with rifles. He knew it as well as I did. That if he took time to destroy the door, he'd be gunned down.

When I had first met Brimstone Blitz, it had been his cold and calculated practicality that had terrified me beyond anything else. That capability for intelligence through the frenzy. To think, plan, and execute even while throwing all control to the wind to brutalise that which stood in his way. Here again I saw that. His eyes found something else as they

travelled to the side, viewing a cell full of ponies.

Glimmerlight saw it too. Banging her hooves on the cell, crying her eyes out as she screamed and begged him from afar. To no avail. I saw him turn to the cell, slowly trotting toward the place all those slaver assistants had tried to hide in. The place they had *trapped* themselves in.

"Brim! BRIM! Don't! PLEASE! You're better than this! You're BETTER!"

He didn't hear... or he didn't care. Even as the guards above finally realised his plan, it was too late to aim and fire before he charged. Braying his war cry, the raider warlord disappeared into the cell before the horrified screams started. I couldn't even see it, but I could hear all too clearly the crunch of bones, wet splats of blood and every body-aching crash amidst the whirling movements in the dark around a dark red behemoth that began to systematically and mercilessly *slaughter* the assistants.

One even managed to get past him, bearing a crushed cheekbone and staggering out on three legs, his fourth was...

Oh Goddesses.

I had to turn to retch even as the assistant collapsed in a red pool, squealing for the help that would never arrive in time to save his life. I heard Glimmerlight sink down at the bars, wailing as loud as she could for him to stop.

Up above, panic reigned. They saw a large portion of their workforce being massacred and struggled to bring their weapons to bear. Slavers ran all across the upper level, none daring enter the Plaza to reach its new built bridges. But Brimstone had chosen his plan well and the inside of the cell was hid so tightly away from the balcony that they could never reach him. Eventually, perhaps in desperation, I heard the order shouted: 'Get in there!'

Hooves clattered down stairs. I heard rifles cocked and shotguns racked. I wanted to warn him, to shout out and tell him to stop! But I could only sit back, witnessing powers and authorities *far* beyond that of my place in the world act out unstoppably before me.

The main Plaza door swung open and Brimstone was there to meet it. Blood splattered across his body, pupils dilated from the adrenaline and thundering forward he rushed for the doorway. Two slavers who galloped in were simply crushed below his hooves. Ribcages snapped as Brimstone simply ran over them as the third tried to retreat and close the door. With one mighty swing, Brimstone slammed it shut himself and crushed the pony in the door frame. Retching as he screamed, the slaver became a door block to all his colleagues trying to pull him inside and seal it.

No chance.

He tore it from their hooves, swinging it open and disappearing through it. I heard everything. Gunshots went off, slavers shouted for reinforcements and to *'just fucking shoot him!'* Flares of gunfire lit the area just outside the door and the smell of gunpowder reached my nostrils. But the violence only kept going on, slavers ran back into the Plaza pulling their brutalised comrades to escape the carnage that went on behind those doors. I heard the sound change, moving further away, higher up. Crashes, raging cries, and sounds of walls and all furniture being absolutely destroyed in his path simply went higher and higher... he'd found the stairs!

Glimmerlight pulled aside one of the broken bars, bucking the doorway over and over as it taunted and teased her with only *just* not opening. I was frozen, listening to Brimstone fulfilling his very promise by sound alone in the distance. No, wait! Not further! They were

A squeal of terror sharply cut the Plaza as a slaver crashed down from the balcony before going utterly silent in a crumpled heap. Even *my* recent mind couldn't think too deeply as my eyes were drawn upwards to see the sudden light of gunshots and debris of battle combined upon the balcony. Slavers appeared now and again, dozens of voices! Brimstone was taking on the *entire Mall alone!*

But there was another voice, I only heard it for a few seconds in the distance. Swearing and accompanying the titanic crash of two huge ponies wrestling back and forth. I saw My Master back toward the balcony! Then Brimstone's head briefly appeared before they both disappeared again.

What was—

All my thoughts were put on hold at the sight that occurred. Charging forward, ramming My Master ahead of him in a crushing tackle, Brimstone Blitz screamed bloody murder and came rushing off the edge, My Master below him as the pair flew into thin air! Hanging for a second before my wide eyes, surrounded by the broken remnants of the balcony's marble barrier, the two biggest ponies in my life arced and fell from Brimstone's rampage down multiple storeys. Tumbling, spinning... My Master was on the bottom as they landed, obliterating the surrounding wall of the fountain and sending a thud through the ground so hard I felt my insides judder.

Water poured out, washing through the rock dust that had kicked up around them that cleared to the sight of the most ferocious raider in perhaps Equestrian history unleashing all that anger upon one pony. Guttural shouts and curses on every movement, Brimstone beat My Master into the ground, grabbing his head and slamming it repeatedly off the fountain's remaining structure. Only pausing to slap aside any attempt to fight back, I saw that my thought of them as huge equals was not even close. Brimstone was straight up destroying him! Blood poured from both My Master's head and Brimstone's mouth, whether from injuries or ripping attacks before, or simply from biting himself in the frenzy!

Slavers *swarmed*. From all sides, they leapt upon him. Whips, clubs, shock rods and even *buckshot* flew into Brimstone's body without any apparent effect! Three slavers were grabbed and hurled across the Plaza from straying too close. One of the heftier raiders was dropped with a solid butt from Brim's skull before throwing himself back at My Master. Taking note of the water he shoved the Slave Master's head beneath it, aiming simply to drown the slaver!

"COWARDLY BASTARD!"

Dragging him out, Brimstone slammed a hoof into his chest and threw him right back underwater, hooves cutting into his throat!

"I WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER, YOU FUCKING SADIST!"

Hooves slammed down again and again even as he held the struggling slaver's face below water. My Master's hooves battered at Brimstone, cutting him on his hoof's edge, bruising with his own huge strength but ultimately not doing anything to penetrate the blood rage that had overtaken my friend.

The slavers finally got their act together. Glimmer cried out as she saw three high-powered rifles brought to bear.

"Fire! Fire!"

"BRIM!" Glimmer bucked *hard* upon the cage, jarring it, but not quite getting it open!

He paid no heed, veins standing out, and shaking his victim beneath him.

"YOU ARE NOTHING YOU—"

The rifles fired in a quick volley. The raider was flung to the side, struck three times along his torso with enough force to make him buckle, stagger and fall. Collapsing into the pouring water out of the fountain that was washing over and mixing with the blood spilled all around, Brimstone dropped.

With a clang, finally the cell door sprung open! Glimmer galloped out and, not knowing what I was doing, I followed. I saw her make a beeline for Brimstone, putting herself between him and the slavers. I only got a few feet before I felt somepony grab me from behind.

“Come here, runt! We’ll need a little insurance!” A whiny and nasal voice; Wormtail!

I felt a barrel pressed against the side of my head... and I went very still.

Brimstone was getting to his hooves again, *somehow*. He was clearly hurt and bleeding profusely, but still limping forward to continue.

“Stop! Raider! You don’t want him hurt? Well, how about this?” Wormtail cried out, pressing the muzzle harshly into my ear, making me whine.

Across the crowded Plaza, past the battered and exhausted slavers, the barely moving heap of My Master in the fountain and the tear-stained Glimmerlight pleading for Brimstone to stop... I saw him finally give pause.

There was a silence between them, the gurgling of water as it flowed around the unmoving and brutalised form of My Master, drawing his lifeblood with it. Limbs flopped, his messed mane floated over the fountain’s surface. He had just been absolutely torn into, an example of Brimstone’s capability when truly angered.

Growling lowly however, Brimstone stood his ground from my situation.

“Let... him... go...”

“So you can break me? Hah! Move one hoof forward and your little stunt earlier won’t mean *anything*!”

I simply stared at Brimstone, seeing the willpower it took him to resist the urge inside driving him to keep fighting. He didn’t take one step forward... but did move backward, turning to put a dent in a cell before using it to lean on.

“Sick bastards... he is *innocent*!”

No, no Brimstone. I’m not innocent, I’m a *slave*. Please understand, doing what they want is what I was *meant* to be doing. I don’t want it, but I’m not worth ruining things fighting over. I only wished I could dare speak out of turn to tell him.

Wormtail didn’t have to answer... for in a splutter of water and thick blood My Master rose from the fountain before falling back in, his body failing him to land spreadeagled and coughing thick wads of bloody spit up, all too similar to me. Yet even on his back, strewn in injured ruin... he *laughed*. He laughed *long* and he laughed *loud*. Arrogant, *triumphant*, and utterly satisfied.

“I told you! HAHAAHAAA!” He turned to my friends, twisting shattered teeth through a sick grin. I saw Brimstone’s pain in his eyes mixed with the anger, dearly wanting to cave the slaver’s skull in.

“I told you! Told you I’d find a way to *hurt you*! BAAAHAAHA! You remember? You said there was *no way*, raider! But there was! That runt fucking *pegasus* got into your big ‘tough’ heart, raider, and I have him set to be *ravaged* just to show you that there’s no beating your Master! He will *always* find a way to punish you for trying to act high and bloody mighty before him like you have a choice!”

He coughed, falling out of the fountain and beating slavers away as he came to his hooves

and clearly struggled to get up.

“Now you’ll get to die knowing just *who* controls who hurts and who lives around here, raider!”

Brimstone snarled and clearly made to charge, but my throat constricted from the hoof around it to the point I shrieked at hearing the trigger mechanism of the pistol against my head tighten. The massive earth pony ceased, growling lowly.

He... he did it all *just* to get at Brimstone.

He *used* me like his personal weapon to hurt my friend. Just some tool, some *belonging* My Master possessed to use however he wanted, for whatever end!

Just like I was being *used* now, like the pathetic and incapable slave I was, to keep Brimstone in check. The horrible thing was part of my mind was only telling me this was supposed to be my role. Just a slave. A slave who strayed too far from his purpose.

“Heh... you just **stay there, raider!** Slavers! Restrain him and find him some healing potions, he’ll need them.” My Master limped toward the door before turning back and speaking loudly after spitting upon the floor. “For the disobedient *slave* Brimstone Blitz will be sent to die in *the Pit* later today for your amusement, and to show that you do *not* disobey in *my Mall!* Get him in the strong cell till it’s time, go!”

That was that. Even as Brimstone, Glimmerlight, and I found each other’s faces, I just couldn’t keep up with the conflicting emotions of anger, guilt, pain, and despair between the three of us.

All I knew was that I just wished I had fallen from that control tower long ago, so that maybe none of this would have happened.

Even the day was dark. Some slaves that had returned from trawling the hillsides outside Fillydelphia for scavenged materials were claiming they could see the end of the storm coming near in the great blanket of clouds above. But for now Fillydelphia was still firmly locked in its embrace. Beneath the rain, pools of water formed in the Plaza under a harsh battering on the metal roof above us.

Thankfully, this darkness only aided me.

The lock hadn’t been repaired on our cell yet. Awaiting a chance, I had sneaked out to try and find him. It wasn’t hard, most slavers had retreated from the Plaza to treat the wounds or say a goodbye to their comrades who had not survived Brimstone’s onslaught. Frankly, I thought, the fact that they’d not simply killed him on the spot was a miracle in itself. Presumably My Master wanted the drawn out nature of the Pit.

The huge bars just ahead marked where they’d taken him. Slowly, creeping hoof by hoof, I shifted up to them while trying to ignore the fear of being within reach of him. Oh come on, Murky, I chided myself. That’s stupid to think! He’s your friend! Your... friend.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness well, seeing the massive shape of him near the back of the cell. Sitting down and hunched over, completely unmoving. His head turned when I tapped lightly on a metal bar with a hoof. The sound was tinny and weak, nothing compared to the thick sound of him rising to approach the front with those immensely thick shackles around his hooves dragging under him.

“Murk.” A simple and rather curt greeting. “You should be in your cell with Glim.”

Shuffling on my hooves, I glanced back at the cell I’d left, before shaking my head.

"She's re-watching one of the orbs from before that we looked at. Trying to distract herself, I think."

"All the same you need your rest more than ever right now. I don't need the rot to tell me how sick you look. It's like you've just switched off upstairs a bit, lad."

No... no I'm fine. This is just how you're *meant* to see me, tired and blurring life by... nothing but a slave. I'm fine..."

He snorted, the rush of air blowing my mane to one side.

"Your very coat is falling out in places around your neck, Murk. I can *see* how pale you are beneath it. The bones on your legs are visible with malnutrition. You are **not** fine after what they put you through just to get at me."

A low growl accompanied the words, gritting his teeth before the big raider slumped down... anger extinguished to simmer below the surface. Looking at my legs, I leaned on the bars.

"My Master would probably have done it anyway. I... I think. It's horrible... but he asks and I have to obey. J-just how it is for a born slave."

I felt myself well up a little. Brimstone only snorted again, blowing my mane in the other direction even after I'd fixed it.

"I just don't get why you want to let him control you. I don't get it at all. Maybe it's just what we're born as. Slave and raider. But I won't see you just giving yourself up to all that. To him or to life. Just... just fucked up. With my life, that's saying something. At least I chose to do all I did."

"Sorry..."

His head turned sharply, before just sighing and shaking his head. I really was sorry though! Sorry that he didn't understand. Maybe because he'd actually had a life, and tasted what freedom was, even if what he'd chosen to do with it wasn't right. Perhaps that's why he didn't understand why the only choice any slave ever had was when it should end.

But I had to ask the question that had been on my mind.

"Will you, um, be okay in the Pit? It's like before, I'm scared Brimstone."

He gently lay against the bars, as though sitting beside me.

"Just been sitting here thinking the same. Maybe once I could say for sure, but this body's getting on a bit, Murk. Shackles won't make it easy, probably round up what's left of the Big Four. You've seen Barb, he was my *lesser* in a Clan that rewarded brutality and bloody spectacle but you saw how dangerous he was. The others are here too."

"I... I've met Wildcard."

Brimstone's head whipped around to me, eyes containing a concern and a fury. I hopped back from the bars like I'd suddenly seen Barb appear behind him, the anger catching me off guard. My nervous feelings flying up. Shivering and feeling so weak, I tried to force myself to sit down again.

"Wildcard? That maniac? You are lucky to be alive. Where?"

I told him, explaining the incident with the meeting and later on with Sunny, my tone low and without much spark in it, something I knew Brim spotted. But his eyes narrowed as he heard how Wildcard was working with My Master to some extent too. Clearly the notion that the 'Big Four' and the slavers were further in league was not a happy one to him.

"He is one of the more dangerous, as much as Barb could be, for sure. I don't know how Shackles managed to secure him to do anything. Took me beating his face into a rock eight times over two months before he finally saw me as leader and did what he was told. Nasty

sod. The power of a combat unicorn with the body of an earth pony and one fucked up mind that didn't give two flying shits about pain or danger. You *avoid* him, Murk. Don't ever try to predict him or trick him."

"D-do you think he'll be in the Pit?" Quaking, I rubbed one leg with my hoof.

"Almost certainly. If he knows I'm in, he'll be there. This is still a fight, aye, but Shackles will try to make it an execution."

I hesitated a second, but part of me was curious. Raising my voice up, tiny in front of his deeper tone, "Who were the others? The Big Four, I mean?"

As though realising he was resigned to not much but me to talk to about his past, Brimstone rolled out his neck and settled back, looking rather grim.

"Barb was the youngest of them... but he had his uses in ways I'm sure you know well enough. Wildcard was too dangerous to not let be in charge, he'd been a warband chieftain long before, with his own drugged-up crazy lot. The others?"

He scratched his chin with a hoof, the chains clanking.

"Well, not all were ponies. Had a great big minotaur. Big Brutus, we called him. Wandered into the camp one day and challenged me. Right out of the damn blue. Tough fucking fight. Couldn't make him anything but one of the four after that."

Big Brutus!?

"I... I met him too!"

The look on Brimstone's face was almost funny in its sudden look of surprise.

"M-Master Grindstone has a minotaur called that! His bodyguard! He even chased me once... he was at that meeting too, all, um... cy... cyba... cybamentinic! Like, robot arms!"

I waved my front legs about a little, as though trying to demonstrate what I meant, before realising how silly that seemed from the lack of any change on Brim's face and pulling myself back in. A little slave instinct told me to quit drawing attention to myself. Guttled inside, I couldn't quite beat it back down.

"Cybernetics? Sounds like him. Always was pretty determined to find a way to make himself stronger than me. Wildcard may have challenged more times but that was just for fun to him. Brutus was the *real* leadership challenger I had my eye on to probably someday put me down. Following Grindstone though? That doesn't make any sense... Big Brutus *hated* being led. Those enhancements must have done something to his brain."

Brimstone snorted again, flipping my mane backwards to expose my forehead and that accursed scar. I tried to snort back when I corrected it, but simply sounded akin to a filly's sneeze.

"Probably a good thing, he's better off not being ambitious anyway. But he was already a nightmare for those before him, with bionics he would be a fell foe indeed."

"So, who was the last?"

An odd look came about him.

"The last... now there was an interesting pony. Not a straight up fighter, but he was the one who kept us all going. Clan that big? Needs somepony who can know where to get the food, the kit, and where's good to go and chib when we needed something. Fancy-thinking stallion called Rough Diamond who dealt with all that and who got what. Well, once me and the others got their choices from any loot, anyways. Even raiders have a bit of organisation, and he was the one who did it."

I was suddenly sat wide-eyed. Glimmer's memory had had a stallion she'd called 'Diamond' in the time before the raiders attacked!

Oh no... oh no...

"Basically, Diamond would go out, find out what he could as a trader, and then bring us in when he felt the time was right. Sometimes even open a gate from inside if Barb wasn't around to do it. No pony fucked with him, even if he was a piss-poor little wee thing for fighting by raider standards. Cos' if you did, you had me to break your skull. He was too valuable; intelligent minds don't often find raider clans."

Do I tell him? Do I ask? He hadn't mentioned Glimmer, he'd said he wasn't involved in Creaky Hollow's destruction when they destroyed Coral's home! Oh, I didn't know. I had to be vague, find out more before I risked causing another incident here.

"Is... is he at the Pit?"

Brimstone shook his head.

"Nah. He's long dead now. When I got to Creaky Hollow I found him among the bodies. Happens sometimes, got a new raider up soon after but we were caught by Red Eye within days so it doesn't matter. Always was an odd stallion, Diamond. Never quite fitted in with us, little sassnach, I used to call him."

"A what?"

Brimstone blinked, before chuckling in that gravelly deep voice.

"Lowland born. Wee of body and flighty of tone. Quiet and not like us, he'd sit off or go elsewhere when the brutal shit started. Probably why he often got trusted by settlements more than any of us, with that silver tongue of his. Got on well with him, probably the only one I didn't expect to backstab me. Made me wonder what his game was being in a raider clan, sometimes."

Brimstone rubbed his chin.

"Whatever, he's maggot food now. The Goddesses can judge him for the liar he was. Right now I only need to think on what they will think of me. *That's* what I've really been thinking on. Whatever happens tomorrow, if I were to die in a Pit of rage and violence in front of ponies who would see my life ending as justice... is that enough for the Goddesses above?"

There it was. What sounded like curiosity, but I could hear the tone of fear underneath. Not a fear of anything bad or scary, but a fear of himself and with what the Goddesses would see in this brutal figure for his life. But that was a lot to think on. Rough Diamond was one of the Big Four! It was starting to come together, or was it? I hardly knew the full tale.

Looking up, seeing Brimstone, I had enough things to concentrate on right now rather than something I couldn't change as he spoke.

"I cannot ever allow the rage to take me again, no matter what happens. I have done enough damage by letting the Dragon roam free. Even if it robs me of my fighting spirit, I will *not* fall to that ever again."

"The Goddesses are kind, Brim. You helped me and—"

"Is it enough? Go to the wastes and watch every fucking settlement be afraid of me. Look at the fifty-plus years of killing, torturing, looting, raping, and burning that I caused upon hundreds of lives. At all the slaves in here because *I sold them in*. That's all I wonder, when is it enough? At what point will I be forgiven and at what point I could forgive *myself* for what I am? Just a rage-filled old pony with a life of death behind him."

Brimstone sighed.

"I cannot allow that rage to control me again... not for anything. For fighting or for

anger... never again."

Once more, we went a little silent as I curled up near the bars to stay in the shadows. I never knew the words to say that would help things... so the most I could do was simply be there to listen to him. However Brimstone turned to look down and toward me, softening his face.

"Murky, you grew up with the Goddesses in your belief, didn't you?"

"Y-yes. My mother taught me it. S-she said that where she grew up they all believed it."

"What..." He paused. "What do they do after you die, Murk? On the eve of a great challenge, I have to ask. What does this faith of yours tell is judged for a pony when they fall?"

Shifting to sit up, I blinked a few times and rambled through my patchy memory to try and recall it. I remembered the prayers through repetition and desperation, but what happened after death wasn't something I'd thought on in a long *long* time.

"Well, m-my mother told me that it was like a rush? A release?" Taking a breath, I felt a few memories pick up, words of wisdom on the mercy of the Goddesses. "That as it happens... as life ends and the darkness comes to your vision, it will flow around your senses and leave you as you were dying, awaiting the peace to soothe any pain."

My voice began drifting, closing my eyes. Imagination of it all beginning to soar and truly remember my mother's teachings.

"A moment of calm to reflect on that it has happened alone. You will be left to your dying moment for reflection before the Goddesses above, mighty Celestia or watchful Luna, will come from on above to stand by you. As the world recedes like a silver fading veil they will be there to comfort and ease your passing when they carry you into the great sky as mercy for your lived hardships."

The world had faded to just Brimstone and myself. His presence was easy to hear with my eyes closed, clearly sitting and thinking on it.

"There, when they have arrived where the sun and the moon spiral eternally... they will turn to you, and... either one or the other will speak. Asking you about the life you have led and you will answer truthfully, for they know lies from honesty. It takes as long as it takes, until they have heard all. It is not judgement, but simply a process before they will lead you to a new place in peace. What you tell of your own life will no doubt make you think and change before you are left under their watchful rule in a new world."

I sniffed, wiping an eye.

"Some place out of reach from all chains of birth, far beyond the stars in a place not so different to the world you know. You might see the same lands you remember, or maybe your home, but it is where past and present might be reunited through a new journey you shall take to find the friends and family you left behind within a better world than what you left. To seek them out and be together again after your escape. That's what she told me, I mean, I... I think..."

Bowing my head, I leaned on the bars, hearing Brimstone shift. Softly, one of his giant limbs reached through to settle around me. The moment it touched me, I couldn't help but flinch and jump. Gritting my teeth and feeling guilty, I fought past the my shattered nerves to not pull away. A friend, Murky... a *friend*.

"Aye, then they shall hear my life and look sternly upon my brow, but I shan't hide from them. Thank you, Murk. No matter what tomorrow brings, if it has to happen I will gladly tell my life at their behest."

Without much indication, he drew over a small bowl of the rank food they'd handed him. Too small for his needs, but he slipped it through to me.

"You need this more than I do. Go on."

Looking up at the big raider with wide eyes, I pushed myself into his awkward embrace through the bars. Under the quiet time of rest in this early morning amongst the Mall, interrupted only by the sobs and moans from various cells, I just lay shivering beside him at the bars and finishing the food he had given up for me.

"I don't want anything to happen to you in there, Brim..."

"What happens, happens. Glimmerlight will always be there for you. If it's time for me to meet the Goddesses, then I shall still look upon you all from on high. Now go, Murky. Glim needs you just as much as you need her."

I didn't go immediately, but spent time shivering and trying to wish I could rest there without being eventually spotted. Only when the clatter of keys in locks signalled a slaver patrol coming near was I finally forced to break away and creep back to my own cell.

Behind me, lowly from the cell, I could almost have sworn I heard that deep voice of his murmuring unsure words.

A prayer.

"This has all happened before, Murky. Don't you worry."

Glimmer reached across and gently ruffled my mane with a thin smile. We were sitting in the back of our cell. My belongings had been left there. Allegedly, Blunderbuck had retrieved them from storage when My Master had rid his office of them. My journal, PipBuck, saddlebag, and the statuette Unity had given me at least anyway. Anything else was either in the armoury or storage chambers. My fleece, I had heard, was beyond repair after being used as a cleaning rag by My Master. The sting of loss for that warm companion I'd had to hide my pitiful wings since my first attempt ran deep.

The statuette, I hadn't dared look at. I'd simply stored it in my saddlebag. It didn't truly mean what it used to anymore.

As such, possessing my journal again, I'd sat staring at a blank page, not sure what to draw. Or even if I could.

Truth was, I was being quiet and still. So much so I was sure Glimmerlight was rather concerned at my mental state. I didn't blame her, seeing the slave instead of the pony, the slave who'd sought the only choice he could ever make not a few hours ago.

"R-really?"

"Oh yes." She nodded. "Brimstone's been through the Pit three times now. Four if you include where you met him. Every time he had to fight. Every time he completely destroyed them. Brim'll be... okay."

I heard a hesitation, it was fairly obvious what it was. Brimstone had faltered, fallen back into the murderous pony he'd been once more. Biting my lip, I sat up and turned away from my journal to more properly face her.

"Are, um, you okay, though?" My voice sounded raspy. Truth be told I was feeling quite weak of limb and dizzy. Only scant thought to not make things worse than I had already was keeping me from trying to show how badly I could feel that... *thing* swelling in my lungs.

Glimmerlight kept smiling, but only with her mouth. Eventually, seeing me looking up, her ears drooped and her head dipped. Like a mask falling off, I saw just how hurt she was from what had happened.

"He... he hit me. Just to get me out of the way. It didn't hurt, not like a strike, but he just threw me aside. He's *never* done that. I haven't seen him like *that* since... well, y'know?"

Her hoof lazily gestured to her small bag of memory orbs before she lay back against the sofa, hissing in pain from her whipped back before settling on her haunches.

"Brim *killed* all those ponies, Murky. Just slaughtered them, defenceless and just trying to stay out the way. Not *every* pony in here is evil! They didn't deserve that, I knew a few of them by *name* from bringing us food! Ponies like Blunderbuck could have been in there. Folks like him are just good ponies in a bad place with no way out, the same as us. I..."

She sniffed, wiping her eyes.

"I want to forgive him, but it's just turning into an urge. To reach for an orb and just... let it go. Go back to only remembering him as he was. Emotions clashing with temptation. An addiction of sorts, making me weak. Sorry, I've not been as happy as I like to be lately."

Picking up my blanket, I huddled up beside her, placing it over her back as much as my own. Brimstone had told me to be there for her and though I would have done it even without his wishes, I wasn't about to let him down. All the same, Rough Diamond was a harsh topic, one I didn't want to bring up lightly, yet one that bore down upon me. The stallion who she thought she'd loved was nothing more than Brimstone's raider spy taking advantage of Glimmer's casual nature. No wonder Coral Eve was angry.

But I had to believe for Glimmer, believe that she could come past this, find the truth, and put an end to that chapter of her life. It was for those reasons I picked up her bag of orbs before sitting beside her too.

"If... if you're feeling bad about wanting to use orbs and get rid of things, maybe do the opposite? M-maybe trying to find out more will h-help you distract yourself and... and come closer to working through it?"

She looked weakly at me, then at the orbs piled in her bag. Then she giggled and laughed, trying to force it through the hurt on her face.

"So if this one's another tonsil tennis session, you'd be alright? You seemed a little flustered last time, maybe if it was a certain unicorn we know..."

I simply sat quietly, before I realised that was humour. Was I really so *numb* to the core that I couldn't even recognise a tease from Glimmer? Letting her words run through my head again, seeing her concern, I felt the harsh pang of reality hit home. I doubted I'd ever think of who she'd meant the same way again.

"Oh... um... I don't think she'd ever—"

"Pfft, who said *she*?" Glimmerlight pushed a grin through a split dry lip that had long gone without enough moisture. Looking up, she saw me blink and only get it after a few seconds, before giving a knowing wink as I baulked.

"I... I... uh, um... mares!"

"Sure, lil'bro, sure..."

Leaving me to have my mind racing on the words to tell her that I liked mares (Honest! Really!), I saw her digging around the little glowing spheres. How she told the difference between orbs was beyond me, I just saw colours. But then it was her talent after all. Laughing as I blushed and hugging me tight with a kiss to the forehead, I could do little but appreciate the kind gesture. It reminded me of better things about contact between two

ponies when my mind was fighting the hateful imagination of something much more vile.

"Th-thanks..." My voice felt weak while she dug out an orb.

"Hey, I may be the gal who is more than happy to tease the clothes off somepony, but I know more when someone's hurting, Murky. Just... just try to not think about it." She lifted the orb in her magic, a pale pink sparkling one. "Let's just drift away for a bit, alright? Go someplace else, fight another battle to find out what really happened. Forget about the one we're losing in here. That sound better?"

Gently, feeling my emotions on a knife edge as they were right now, I nodded. It did sound good, being able to see another life and pretend I wasn't a pet slave for a while...

Settling down beside me, keeping the blanket over us, Glimmerlight brought the orb between us before her horn's light from telekinesis shimmered and grew.

"Just let go for a while. You need the break, Murky..."

Things didn't change much.

In the world I'd left I was snuggled under a blanket with my sis', but the feeling didn't disappear as I felt myself enter a larger and stronger body than my own. Somepony was still snuggled into me.

Murmuring happily, Glimmer opened her eyes to find she was huddled up under a blanket outdoors under the night sky. Well, the dark clouds in calm weather anyway. The light wind with the night's chill was positively *refreshing* after the stuffy and furnace-like atmosphere of Fillydelphia, the clean air filling my lungs as she breathed gently.

Huddled up with her was an earth pony, Rough Diamond.

A strange sensation, for sure. I wanted to tense up yet she only relaxed further. He lifted drowsy eyes in return and offered a warm smile.

"Hey there, my pink dream." His informal and smooth voice cooed out, stroking her side. "We've got hours yet till dawn, y'can sleep if y'want..."

"Nah," Glimmer rubbed her eyes with a hoof, before toying with his thick brown mane and giggling, "I'm happy just here. Never was one for lying around. Better to be up and active. Fixing something, doing one of a dozen little things I know. Jack of all trades, I can be, when I want to. Just get bored easily."

"What like?"

"Oh *everything*, helping with the crops, prospecting the hills, learning to shoot with my mouth, how to cook, or even just playing with all sorts of technology. Oh, and massage, can't forget massages, I know that too."

I felt her eyebrows wiggle, making Diamond laugh.

"I'll have to remember that one someday! Be more comfortable on a bed though, such a pity you're not allowed to take me there. I'd love to see this peaceful place you talk highly of. Maybe meet your friends, Coral Eve and her son? They sound lovely."

Glimmerlight lightly tapped him on the head with her hoof.

"You know fine I can't until I bring them around to you, hun. I could say the same in return for your caravan."

Diamond rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. But really, that's not a good idea. They don't like folks seeing their full stock, you know? We have to maintain some degree of our secrecy. Plus, the boss is... well, to put it simply, I'm the good guy while he's the one who hashes out the

really tough deals, let's just say. Doesn't take no for an answer."

"Sounds like a swell stallion." Glimmer muttered sarcastically, stretching as she got up. I could see her eyes dart towards somewhere in the woods for only a second while Diamond's back was turned, probably the location of Creaky Hollow, but the thick woods even when dead hid the dull spotlights they used to see. "You traders should be careful though, our scouts spotted a *huge* raider warband in the area yesterday. They say that it might be him. The Dragon."

Rough Diamond got up, walking to the edge of the hill they'd chosen to lie upon and placing a hoof over her shoulder.

"Don't y'worry about me and the boys, love. We know how to avoid them, good caravan drivers can outrun anypony on foot if we've got a mind to, and we've got enough firepower to see them off. Like my trusty little piece over there."

He nodded toward his pack, where a bolt-action rifle lay propped against a tree. Even I with all my unknowing of weapons and specifics could see it was very well maintained, despite clearly being remade a few times from various woods and metal pieces. The stock of the gun bore a chipped-in symbol of his cutie mark. Presumably just to identify it as his. Glimmerlight's eyes ran all the way from one end to the other and I could feel the approval on her face at the fine piece.

"I had noticed. I'd ask to take a few shots, but the timberwolves go after sound around these woods. Still, you should let me toy with her. Take her home for a bit and I'll give her a work over and upgrade for you in exchange for some orbs, maybe?"

Diamond laughed, pulling his mouth closer to her ear and whispering, "Not a chance. She's the other love of my life and I don't think she likes threesomes or swings the same way you do."

Glimmer snorted and laughed, playfully pushing his head away with a hoof.

"Aah, ya silly buck. Keep her all to yourself then, just wait till she desperately needs to go to some war and you'll wish your pal Glim had given her the once over with Steel Ranger trained techniques! Give me a good platform and I'll make her something incredible. But really... take it safe out there. Those raiders were *awful* close to the main roads out of here. You get that boss of yours to stay clear of them and stick to the hills, it's safer there."

Diamond nodded a few times as she spoke. "Don't worry, he listens to me. I've... well, I've been trying to talk him into a few things lately. Honestly, he's big and nasty, but sometimes I feel there's something else in there. He's a pony you could trust to do something. I dunno... no one else seems to see it but I keep thinking he's got another side under all the anger that makes him deal so harshly. Heck, he took me in, and the trade caravans are usually all about the stern merciless dealers, y'know?"

Glimmer nodded, leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek. "I don't imagine you get to be in charge if you can't recognise somepony's worth. Like, gauge them at a glance. Hell, I do that too sometimes! Just instead of gauging the size of your capability I gauged the size of your pe—"

"Heeey!" A smirk as he playfully butted in.

"Whaaaaat? I was gonna say personality." An innocent look.

"Sure." A deadpan stare.

"Honest!" A bright smile.

"P" and "e" don't even sound the same for 'personality' compared t'what *you* said." A rise of his eyebrows as he leaned in.

A few seconds passed of them looking at one another, before I felt Glimmer's mouth unable to avoid jerking and giggling... before both just burst into laughter.

"Ah, Glim. Hahaha! You know, I've been to a dozen villages over the years, met a good few mares along the way, I admit. Not that you're one to talk."

She seemed to shake out her mane proudly. No shame at all. "Live life to have fun. Wasteland's bad enough, why not have a beautiful moment between two ponies who just want to forget it all for a bit?"

He smiled. "Yes, good times with many, but I don't think I've met any as downright *fun* or interesting as you. I admit, I look forward to coming here every time. I don't mind admitting that I wouldn't perhaps overlook asking that when the trades are done if you could see about me coming to live, y'know... permanently? Part of me wants out of this trade, find someplace quiet to get away from the harsh life it entails. Things you see... I think I'm just wanting out of it."

Glimmer seemed a little taken aback. I felt her front hooves trying to hide the little nervous pacing they made.

"Well, I'm not going beat about the bush here, Diamond. I'm not a mare who's used to the whole 'settling' with one person, y'know? At least yet! I'm young, free, and I left that stuffy bunker to live without order and rules. Go wherever, live however, eat whatever, love whoever. To just go out and do what I wanted while I could, until the time came to think about anything more. But, all the same, it'd be nice to have you around, y'know?"

She smirked. Truth be told, I had to feel even a *little* happy to see the playful teases until I remembered who this was she was speaking to. That Diamond was seeking any way he could to get that village location out of her! He really was a master at this, his face looked *genuine!*

"I'd love that. Now, I've got to go in a few hours, so let's get something to eat and see about making a trade for some of those orbs, huh?"

Glimmer nodded, trotting toward their discarded packs for the brief meeting in the woods.

"Yeah, I've been running low lately, lots of things to get out! Better out than in, right? But here, first? I got you something..."

She began to rummage in her pack, watching Diamond for a second to take in the shocked surprise at this gift. Slowly, she drew out a long bullet. The tip of it glowed light blue from a soldered and filed down rough join. It reminded me of the things she'd stuck on the end of her rifle during the battles against Barb's raiders but in a much more condensed form, to be fired from the gun instead.

"Glimmer... what is this? It'll fit in my rifle, I know..."

"My own personal little creation! Learned how to do so from my father, it's a small magic charge stored in the tip of a bullet drawn from a targeting talisman on a high powered energy rifle. Basically, using spark connectors to channel the magic energy from it into a new small talisman that I then solder to the end of a bullet casing. Simply put, it's your wonderbullet!"

She floated it over to him with her magic, Rough Diamond taking it in his hooves.

"Glim... this, I mean... you're giving me it?"

She laughed, bopping him on the head.

"Course I am, you silly thing! Now it's channelled with the power and accuracy of a high intensity energy weapon's targeting system spell, so it'll fly truer than any bullet you've got

and detonate on striking. They're impractical as hell because the stuff they come from is so rare and often put to better use elsewhere. So if you ever fight anything too tough to kill, anything that's got you on the ropes and about to stop you coming back to give me a welcome home buck in the woods? This'll bring you back to me safe the one time it matters."

It wasn't often I heard Glimmerlight being truly sentimental and heartfelt about even a loose relationship, but even I felt moved by this. Her way of showing that even if she was never going to properly settle right now, she wanted him to stay safe, to return to her. He simply stared at it for a few seconds.

"That's... a first. Somepony giving me something. You never see that with the boys..."

Glimmerlight grinned brightly, rubbing her nose against his. Heehee! That tickled! Stop it sis', come on!

"Just come back safe and I'll have a chat with Coral about seeing what I can do for when you decide to come join us and disappear from the world for a while."

Leaning inward, I felt her lips graze his.

"I'll make it happen, you deserve a break. Trust me, it'll be absolutely stormin'!"

Her mouth pressed in further, working hard with her lips as they fell to the floor and snuggled, the blanket being drawn over even as I felt myself begin to leave her body, life and memory...

So this was confirming it. He was finding a way to get himself into the village in order to know its location for Brimstone's clan. What a *weasel!*

With the thought of what he would do to her eventually in these orbs, I could feel my heart break even now for my poor friend.

The feeling of being snuggled was still there even as I came to with Glimmer, even tighter than I remembered. Warmer... closer... rougher coat...

Wait... what?

"Morning, sunshine!" Wildcard singsonged.

There was a half second pause... before both Glimmer and I screamed in shock at the large raider snuggled in between us under the blanket. What... what I... *WHAT!?* Glimmer fell off her side of the sofa, thumping against the floor while I somehow found the body energy to propel myself up and over the back of the sofa, my kicking legs disappearing to fall in a heap upon the other side.

I heard Wildcard lounge back and yawn, had he been *sleeping* there!?

"Aah they always do that, so come on! Today's the day! It's today!"

Glimmer and I found each other around the side of the sofa, her covering me against him while the crazed raider shifted and turned to sit up on the sofa, stretching. Mid yawn, I saw those scars on his face twist and do strange things to the shape of his mouth and snout. Running his cracked hooves through his multicoloured mane he got to his hooves.

"It's early evening." Glimmerlight muttered to him, slowly trying to back up toward the way to the front door.

Wildcard cocked his head.

"How do you know that?"

"What? It was late morning earlier and we weren't out for long in that orb so—"

"Do you *know* you were only out for a little time? What if it was... ooh!" He gasped, a hoof to his mouth. "What if it was a year? How do you *know* with nothing to prove it? Perhaps it was two days? Huh? Huh? Only makes sense right?"

He hesitated, before narrowing his eyes and trotting forward. Backed against the wall, too weak to do anything, we simply had to shiver and wait as he came right up close, looking directly at Glimmerlight. Suddenly, he sniffed sharply... then took a long sniff along her mane. I felt Glimmer *aching* to hit him before she jumped when he let his tongue lap out and lick up her cheek.

"Ahaaa!" Licking his lips as though tasting something, Wildcard leaned back and clapped his hooves. "I *thought* it was you! I remember you, little missy... just needed to get the tongue going to remember!"

"Of course, you're the bastard that burned our village!" Her muscles tensed. I could feel how hard she wanted to attack him, but he was far beyond either of us.

His eyes glinted, face twisting into a more predatory glee. "Aw, c'mon I can't take all the blame. That's arrogant you know? You being a yesman-pony-mare-thing? I don't *like yesmen!* But you got in on the action too, I knooooow... it was fun wasn't it? The houses screamed! I hadn't known a house could scream, I thought they were just a house..."

"Those were my *friends!* You locked them inside to burn!"

Wildcard paused for a second, before laughing outrageously and slapping her clean from her hooves. I went with her, Glimmer's hooves around me meaning I fell upon her chest. Before I knew it, Wildcard was leaning over us, going from laughing to snarling with drool leaking through his broken lips.

"I was having fun *remembering it*, you bitch! The HOUSES screamed! I didn't want it *spoiled* that it wasn't the *houses!* FUCK YOU!"

His horn glowed, one of those brutal machetes sliding from his side sheaths. Frozen in fear, I just clutched Glimmer whom I felt tensing, somewhere between anger and terror.

"I swear, every *time* you folks just think you know better, you gotta go ruin a pony's *dreams*, huh!? You get off on it or somethin'? Can you scream like a house? I want to hear the scream the houses made!"

He got off us, spinning the machete before immediately hacking into one arm of the sofa, sending stuffing flying everywhere. Screaming his head off, laughing and then wailing again. Finally, when the arm of the chair had been destroyed under the torrent of slices, he turned to us and grinned.

"You hear it? Did you *hear* that? That was *so cool!*"

Glimmerlight almost seemed to growl lowly.

"You're insane... what do you even *want!*?"

"Hey, hey!" He trotted up, pointing a hoof. "You think you can order me around like some fucking slave, huh? You think you got something that says you get to order me to answer? Cos' this is my world..."

His eyes opened, going wide and letting his mouth hang open... looking down at me before letting his muzzle glance upwards toward Glimmerlight, viewing every side of her head.

"Cos' I remember *your* scream. I don't cut it out of my head, no..."

There was a chill to his words, a deliberate choice. I felt for Glimmer, I really did. What I'd been through at the hands of Barb's portion of the raider clan couldn't have been anything to what the raiders likely did to her. How did Coral even stay *sane* without

stripping memories?

"What do you even *want*, Wildcard?" Glimmerlight spat the words back, I could feel she was fighting not to hit him. I wasn't surprised. But Wildcard blinked a few times and sat back.

"Oh, now you ask politely. Well why didn't you say so? It's cool, I'll forgive you, big pot of forgiveness I am! I'm just here to be nice and give you a little heads up spoiler for my Pit." He nodded frantically. "Oh yes... just to tell you, the big red guy isn't gonna come back, y'know? Oh he's in for a good fiiiight... Shackles and I had like, this bonding session over all the fighters! He's got goooood taste."

He winked at us.

"Besides, I've got my own little surprise even he doesn't know. A wildcard, get it? Haha! Bet you can't guess who it is!"

"I wonder." Glimmerlight glanced to the door, lightly bumping me toward it. I'd been sat silent, simply listening and shivering quietly. Something about him felt more unsettling than normal, like some part of me was repulsed by him being even *near* me. I simply retreated into my own blank slave mentality. Just don't notice me, please.

"Well, don't guess cos' I won't tell! HAH! Anyway, go go go! They're coming to take him there and you don't wanna miss it do ya, little squealer?"

Looking down at me, I yelped and hid behind Glimmer. Wildcard just laughed, trotting away to the door. Waiting a few seconds, Glimmer followed with me in tow. Taking a few seconds to check I was all right, she just found me as I was. Numb and scared. A hoof on my shoulder, she turned to check for Wildcard through the door. Nothing. Good, I hated that pony. I just didn't know when he might decide it was fun to gut me!

"We'll be alright. He's gone now, we can—YARGH!"

Her words were cut off, Wildcard's machete coming streaking through the door in his magic to leave a ghastly slice over her shoulder. Screaming, falling to the ground and clutching the wound, both she and I turned to see him pop his head back in.

"See? You *can* scream like a house! HAAAAH!"

With that, he turned and pranced away, leaping up to click his hooves together as he left the cell. Pulling all the rags I could off the shelves and helping her to the front of the store, we sat by the door to await the Pit convoy while tying up her shoulder. It wasn't terribly serious... by Fillydelphia standards anyway. All the same, I kept adding rags until I could stop seeing red seeping through. Shivering, sweating, Glimmerlight ruffled my mane.

"I... I think that's enough, Murky..." She breathed out and hissed in pain while I tied a knot in the bandage with my mouth and hooves, feeling my 'slave tooth' as I'd come to know it aching all the more and wobbling in its socket painfully.

Taking a few breaths, she tried to offer a smile.

"I'll be fine. He's crazy. Didn't know what he'd do. Least I can still move it... just hope I can get a potion so it doesn't scar. I don't think the Brim look suits me, huh?"

I sat quietly, nodding. Only after a few seconds did I realise she was being light hearted and tried to force a smile.

"A-are you okay? You know? Like the o-orb?"

Glimmerlight seemed to think for a second, looking across as we saw slavers start to enter. It was time.

"We've got enough worries right now for Brim, Murky. But yes, I'm alright. Just sickened that I slept with and gifted a damned *raider*. I think it's obvious to see how this is going to

end. But... thanks for helping me, Murky. I'm not sure I could do it without somepony here."

"H-huh?" I didn't understand.

"For sharing the journey like you— argh!" She adjusted her bandages, before trying to smile to me. "Like you promised. They've hurt you bad, but you're still the pony I know deep down who doesn't forget the promises he makes. Without somepony there I, well, I think I'd not do another one."

"I'm so sorry it's bad, sis'."

"Me too, Murky." She sat back silently, before her unhurt front leg went to her forehead. "I just feel like such a *fool*, so concerned about my own pleasure and fun that I didn't even see what was right in front of my eyes. I watch these memories and I just want to... to— fucking *hell* why can't I *ever* learn?"

As sudden as that, it was like a tidal wave of emotion coming from her.

"I wanted so *bad* just to live this free life of loving who I wanted and going where I wanted! But there's always somepony going to take advantage of it and now it's landed me in this fucking city! All because I didn't realise he was a damn raider! Coral even *warned* me and I... I just kept it up! Oh, Murky. We need to get out, I don't think I can live here forever knowing what it was I did that brought so many ponies in to die here! It's the curse of memory. Forget your mistakes and you're always doomed to make them again."

"I, um, I... it might not be all that? M-maybe there's something else? Maybe you did figure him out but they stumbled upon it anyway! Maybe, uh, you just removed it to forget that he'd fooled you at all before?"

I was grasping at straws, I knew. She was in some state, so the best I could do was simply trot forward and put my hooves around my big sister best friend forever and remind her that she wasn't alone.

Not that we had much time for a moment of bonding.

"Right, slaves! This wretched break day is here as declared by Red Eye in his eternal 'wisdom.' You will all be back before noon tomorrow."

My Master limped in. He was still caked in his own blood, limping with one leg in a splint while covered in bandages around his head. A huge rib compression vest was around his body. Brimstone had *really* gone to town, but My Master, like his chain, was eternal. He would always manage to find the way to get back to command. Seeing us leave our cell, he only grinned at us.

"Don't think you're getting off to visit that Pit, you've still got a shift left to run!"

Glimmerlight stepped before me, wiping her eyes and stepping up in my defence. As I'd learned lately, hurt ponies that cared were more willing than any.

"No he doesn't! Red Eye has declared a break and all up to date slaves can take it!"

"I wasn't talking to him, whore! I was ordering *you*!" He roared, striding forward and knocking me aside to shove her toward a group the slavers were organising. "You've been sick too many times to avoid shifts that you've quite the backlog to make up for. If you wanted to watch your raider 'friend' then *perhaps* you should have thought about that!"

"H-HEY!" She shouted, trying to move past him before being blocked off by the slavers, Wormtail included with his smug grin. "Murky! Don't go to the Pit! Not alone! *Don't go off alone, please!*"

I knew why she didn't want me going alone.

I knew why *all* of my friends thought that. That thought stung me hard, like they weren't

trusting me. With good reason, I concluded.

But I felt a hoof on my shoulder, soft and gentle.

"I'll take him."

Bruised, swollen of lip and beaten badly, Coral Eve had limped beside me, returning from her own wearying shift. I saw Glimmer look somewhat surprised and grateful.

"You? Why? To watch Brimstone have to go through it? To watch how they try to kill—"

"I'm not going for that *beast*, Glimmer! Don't put words in my mouth. I'm going for Murky. The raider can die for all I care after what he did, but I'm not after vengeance. No, I won't let Murky wander off to think bad thoughts." She leaned down, turning away from a somewhat shocked Glimmer. "We love you, Murky. But we're worried about you, please understand we can't take chances."

I looked to Glimmer, I looked to Coral, before I finally nodded, trying to fight back a couple of tears. She was right. I felt so hollow, abused, and violated that the thought of where I'd be taken at noon tomorrow was still scarcely sinking in.

"O... okay."

"Good, my dear." She looked back to Glimmerlight, receiving at least a thankful and forgiving slow nod. At least when it came to me, they could for once agree.

Behind us, I heard a great commotion. Shouting orders and shock rods sparking, I saw them dragging and leading Brimstone Blitz from his own cell, ready for the Pit. His hooves were shackled thickly with massive weights while the burliest slaves grasped him tightly. The chains were so tight that he could not do anything more than simply hobble and shift inch by inch. Clearly, even at the risk of a slow and impatient journey, they were not taking *any* risks.

While My Master set to ordering the slaves yet to finish their shifts, I saw Wormtail sneer and begin to trot up to Brimstone.

"Sooo, the big nasty tough warlord, stripped of his dignity, eh?"

It was a pale imitation of My Master, the scrawny and weasel-like buck simply being a cocky little shi... um... yes, that word. Brimstone merely stayed silent, lowering his eyebrows at the irritating aid before him.

"Thought you were so big to go on a rampage? Well who was it that stopped you, eh? Me! You know why? Cos' you're just soft now. The Dragon's been de-clawed, that one little stupid buck is enough to make him start caring! Now look at you, aaaall in chains..."

He edged close, leering.

"I'll bet you wanna hit me, don't ya? Well get used to this, because you're our slave. Get used to not doing anything! You can look down and act all tough but you're trapped! Your hooves are chained on the floor, go on and move em! Try it! You can't hurt me, I'm one of your masters now! You can't do any—"

Brimstone headbutted him.

Slowly, the slavers looked to one another, to Brimstone, and then to the splayed out and unconscious figure of Wormtail, before simply shrugging and leading Brim away without a single punishment.

Okay. Even in these dark days, that made me laugh inside.

The fanfare and explosive sound of the Pit was like an old hated fear coming far too cleanly

back to my mind.

In a convoy, we had been marched toward it through the dense smog of the city cooling off its infernos for a day of rest. The toxic stink was heightened, steam gushing from holes in the ground around us to mark the extinguished furnaces and forges. Marching past the FunFarm gates, I had seen that hateful Pinkie Pie cut-out still waving with that creaky hoof perpetually. It seemed to be welcoming me home. Once past the Petting Zoo and rollercoaster, we were directed toward the colossal ice rink and split up into various queues.

A building of wood and concrete, gaudy pink paint peeled from all sides and hung with long dead party lights. It rose tall, with massive gated entrances for the crowds and smaller ones on either side for, presumably, staff back in the old Equestrian times. The light from within lit the clouds above as huge floodlights aimed both in and out of the open-topped roof.

Around me, relieved and excited slaves met apprehension with bloodthirsty anticipation. Cheers, whoops, and great roars from those already inside being worked up by an announcer boomed across the FunFarm and hurt my ears enough that I clung to Coral while we limped inside. Slavers met us, far more than had been here last time. The tall sides for the stands were littered with makeshift guard posts bearing long rifle equipped guards watching every area of the crowd. Red Eye was taking no chances of another riot after last time, preferring to shove and push us onward to specified places rather than allow us free reign to choose our own entrance.

Even as we were thrown and forced into the tall gateway, I felt my body clench with familiar fear. Last time, I'd been in chains to be sent to my death. The sweaty and filthy bodies pressed around us only kept me uncomfortable and feeling much the same way.

"Once you are past the gates you *will not leave* until the event is finished! All slaves are to remain within the Pit's grounds until *we* move you out!"

Calls and instructions were shouted from above, over the entrance tunnel I saw a unicorn with a loudspeaker standing upon an old security balcony.

"There is a shoot to kill policy in effect for any misbehaviour by the order of Red Eye himself."

The entranceway widened, brightening up as the interior lights flickered over the inside ringed corridor that ran under the stands and around the entire Pit. Old stands of confectionery, fast food, and souvenirs littered every side beside symbols for toilets and foal changing facilities. But most surprising of all to me? It was all *in use*.

Slavers and even slaves had taken them over to offer their wares and acquired foods or goods from their own stocks. The toilets apparently worked, while the Roamer slaver bar had brought a portion of its drinks for purchase from those lucky enough to still own any caps. Slaves flocked around me, watched from above by griffons amongst the rafters that held up the stands, buying and selling frantically in a whirlwind of excitement before the event. Above me in the stands, I could hear ponies stamping their hooves and crying out in time with the counts of the announcer. The entire ring of the corridor around the Pit was a flurry of activity.

Amongst it all, I felt very small indeed.

Already, I could feel my chest tighten. This thick air inside wasn't helping me at all. My Master had given me a portion of RadAway before locking me in his office cell to ward off the rising effects from my collar, but under so much stress I was sure that the effects were accelerating every time.

We didn't talk. Coral and I could barely hear each other amongst all the haggling and cheering. I was sure Sooty would be around here *somewhere*. But our attention was drawn to the biggest stand, a huge twenty foot wide raised platform bearing six ponies that were frantically taking money and only giving pieces of paper in return.

"What is that?" I muttered the words, inaudible to people, but Coral must have seen my curious glance before bending down to my ear.

"It's the betting stand!" Even for my hearing, she had to shout. "That big chalkboard behind them is all the names of ponies involved today. There's two sets of games to come because Red Eye's here to view it and the last one didn't finish!"

Even the reminder of the last one made me shiver when I looked at the chalkboard. My name had been on there once, probably with the lowest odds in Pit history. Ponies had bet *caps* on the assurance of my death.

Oh Goddesses... I wanted to be sick again.

"They're still adding the name for the second bout, Murky!" Coral shouted again, looking up at it. "But Brimstone is number three on the first set of six. The odds against him are pretty high, word must have got out that Shackles and Wildcard want him dead for sure in there!"

"Hey! Get out my fucking way, you two!"

A heavyset mare was walking right toward us, carrying a betting ticket and placing a heavy bag of caps back on her harness. She shoved right by, knocking both of us apart and sending me to the floor.

"Watch yourself!" Coral cried out after her, receiving nothing but a rude shake of the mane when the mare deliberately ignored her. "You alright, Murky? Sorry, it's so busy in here..."

Getting back to my hooves, I coughed through closed teeth, the reason for that being all too clear when I looked up at Coral and saw her look of shock and sudden smile at what I held there.

The mare's entire bag of caps.

"S-sorry, it's, um, habit?"

"Well, well, well. Good to see you've still got it in you, Murky." She glanced up at the betting board. "Go on then, I know you'll want to."

They laughed when, nervous and stammering, I finally got the proper words out to be heard after waving my little hoof up at the betting platform. I was shoved from the side and made fun of for betting on the 'chosen death' by the 'big guys,' but I just did all I could to tune it out. Something felt wrong about betting on the deaths of others, but if Brim won then it would make life a lot easier to buy supplies for our escape!

At least one pony would be supporting him in the Pit.

That was what friends did? Right?

If the ring corridor beneath was busy and loud... boy I hadn't prepared myself to remember what the stands were like.

I almost fled instantly. The second I saw that cage before me, memories of wailing and begging not to die beside a metal gateway came back all too strong. No longer was her escape from the Pit that hopeful memory and all that was left in my mind was that crippling

terror.

This was where ponies died.

This was where I'd been sent to die.

The colossal stands rose to the edge of the ice rink stadium near the roof, open to the cloudy sky above. They were almost completely filled with ponies crammed into a small space for their numbers. Below me, floorboards creaked at the weight when we were shoved and corralled by slavers into a specified area a few rows back from the cage itself. Ponies shunted me from either side until we sat down, even then trapped amongst a sea of bodies that stomped in time, crying illegible chants as one.

A converted ice rink, solid and grey with the ice long gone within the heat of Fillydelphia. Around it lay the cage that ensured combatants could not escape their fate of fighting to the death before ponies in the old stands.

Red Eye had been doing some upping of security, that much was obvious. The cage was repaired since last time, no longer with a roof access as last time. Griffon snipers were more prevalent, nestled in the scaffold framework holding up the roof above us, while guards patrolled up and down the stairways of the stands. Above us, every so often, a Pinkie Balloon reared its freakish watchful face in the gap above as they watched the surroundings. Occasionally, a griffon would swoop overhead and make me flinch. To one side I noticed Red Eye's chair awaiting him upon a raised balcony, already packed with his inner circle. Old Grizzly was visible, the rest being a motley collection of thick and thin, tall and short. One bore what looked like a bird of prey upon his back, chained to his raggedy armour that bore feathers all over it as decoration from a dozen different birds. Another elderly looking pony was actually blind by a rag around his eyes, navigating simply by touch. A couple were immaculate, decked in what looked like pre-war military dress uniform with greased manes and shining newly made rifles at their sides. All curious ponies no doubt acquired for selective skills to Red Eye's usage being treated to this day at the Pit.

I strained to see if I could spot Protégé among them, praying he was recovered. For a moment I thought I saw a black unicorn, but it was a mare bearing a cybernetic jawline and an armoured Stable jumpsuit.

But before me... the Pit.

Stained in blood till its concrete surface was varied in shades of red and grey all over, it lay behind the metal cage with the scars of past battles. Chips from gunshots, tears I recognised as auto axe swipes, and even a few bones shoved into the corners out of the way marked it. Above, twelve barrels were suspended containing weapons or hazards and linked to pressure plates beneath them.

"This is horrible..." I muttered to Coral. "Why are so many ponies here just to watch us all kill one another? I don't get it."

Coral had actually been looking around us to the crowds.

"Well, we're here. I don't imagine some of these ponies are looking to be here for their friends too. But yes, this is a disgusting monument to Red Eye's madness. I can't take his words seriously while this place exists."

Hearing her words, I looked at the crowd near us. There were many grinning and cheering for the fights to begin soon. But every so often I saw some clenched in fear, holding another pony sometimes. My heart went out to them, their friends were in there as well. No matter who survived today, there would be tragedy.

"Workers of Fillydelphia! Upon this day of rest given by our leader, Red Eye, we bring to

you a double helping of this popular event!"

Stern's voice boomed across the sound system even as the crowd shouted their enthusiastic approval of this. How? How could they be so miserable and yet immediately find entertainment by this brutality? I wished I could think why, but I just hunkered down on the bench, covering my ears and leaning against Coral. I didn't like this. Too cramped. Too crowded. I needed space. Everything stank of the watered down alcohol the Roamer had brought over and of unwashed ponies crammed in while excited and active.

"But first, will you welcome your master himself. The one who makes this utopia of generosity exist to further our world... Red Eye!"

One shout by Stern and there he was, walking calmly to the balcony watching over the cage. Flanked by two of the mighty green alicorns, his inner circle backed off to allow him room for his seat. By his side I saw that hateful mutt, Winter. Motioning to Stern, he took the microphone.

"My wondrous workers, it is rare I have a chance to address you all so directly, face to face rather than through the impersonal medium of a PA system. I say 'thank you' so many times, but it never quite feels the same. And thus... thank you, for your sacrifice and your willing hearts."

Yeah, right. Even I could make a raggedy little snort about that line. Even if I had to clutch my throat and choke madly afterwards.

"I bring to you a chance for relaxation and for your own entertainment. The Pit is brutal and often tragic, but never forget its purpose as a choice for those who will it, and as a punishment for those who seek to undermine your efforts. Yes, workers. There are those in this world who would take what you have shed blood and sweat for and selfishly destroy it. Let their efforts before you today act as their will to survive and once again prove themselves in your eyes, not mine. With that said, I see no reason to hold your event any longer..."

There was a huge chorus of cheering to his words. Red Eye stood, raising a hoof and seeming to look past all our eyes one by one with a carefully calculated sweep of his head around the audience. Feeling that baleful gaze come upon me, I shrank back. He was my master too. He wanted this to happen, felt it was best to raise his army and punish slaves who got out of line. That made sense, right? He was the one in charge, the one ordering my life from afar, he wouldn't be a master if he didn't know best, right?

My head hurt. I buried it in my hooves even as Coral snorted up at Red Eye and wrapped a hoof around me. Why did free will have to be so complicated? I hated Red Eye, but I felt indentured to abide by his reality inside. Had I fallen so far?

Stern took up the microphone.

"As Red Eye commands, it shall be! Let the Pit event... BEGIN!"

The floor shook. Ponies stomped until my shaky slave tooth was wobbling and my bones seemed to rattle inside my thin chest.

"Our first contender! Hailing from Friendship City, we have Top Quartz! Is she harder than her name's crystal implies? We'll have to find out! Bring her in!"

The gate at the far end of the Pit clanked and slid open to reveal the dark behind. Squinting, I could see various dark shapes behind the scared little mare being shoved out. With the door slamming behind her, I could see the visible terror on her face. She didn't want to be here. Oh Goddesses protect her.

But to get out she'd have to kill six ponies. Looking at the white and grey earth pony

below, I could tell she didn't have the heart at all.

"Her opponent, all too appropriately, is from that same statue of the old world! From Friendship City as well we have one disobedient slave that tried to steal food from all of you! This is Toolkit!"

The second gate slid up, a young buck hurled through it after clearly been having fighting to get away from the door. But landing on the concrete with the door closing, he was trapped. Shivering, he stood and looked across to his opponent.

Then the true horror sank in. I could see it in their eyes.

They *knew* each other.

Trotting forward hesitantly, I could see their mouths moving. This close to the front, I strained my ears to block out the crowd as they shouted over the sound.

"Toolkit! No! I... I thought we'd be put on the same team!"

"I don't know! I just don't know, Tops!"

They were *friends*. Already, I shivered, my mouth hanging open and trying to form the words to express the evil of this situation. They didn't want to fight, meeting near to the middle, they just looked from side to side, hearing the jeers and demands that they battle to the death. They were looking for a way out, a method to end this without killing the other!

The thunderous boom of an anti-machine rifle echoed around the ice rink, blowing a chunk of concrete near them apart so hard that the shrapnel made them both cry out and wince back.

"Enough delaying. Two will become one for survival in this arena, the crowd has an expectation! If a combatant is not dead within the allotted time limit then both shall die regardless!"

Top Quartz and Toolkit stood around one another, beginning to panic. I couldn't hear them talking, the shakes of their heads. Toolkit began to cry. The crowd brayed for blood from the two who had no wishes to draw any from their old friend.

Gradually, I saw them begin to realise the reality of their situation. After one more warning shot, I saw Top Quartz shouting an apology as she moved forward in a terrified and unwilling charge. It began hesitantly, worriedly, but for every small attempted strike the panic grew and the other began to hit back. Survival slowly overcame friendship as a strike became a grapple and a grapple became a savage fight. Rolling upon the floor, both screaming and lashing out with little skill, I felt my stomach turn.

Neither was a fighter. Neither had any idea how to kill quickly or efficiently. It would be feral, brutal, and slow. One second Toolkit was on top, banging Quartz's head across the concrete. Then she recovered, swinging him over even as her vision was blocked by blood. Hoof after hoof fell, crying and screaming in equal measure.

Toolkit blocked some, lashing out with a snapping sharp hoof that knocked Top Quartz off him. He rolled off, looking at his friend streaming blood from her nose and forehead and clearly hesitating. In that moment, she was back on him, driven wild by need to live that she simply bowled over the scrawny stallion and continued her unskilled gradual killing with beating hooves.

Tears dripped from my own eyes as I heard the distinctive crack of a skull. Toolkit went limp and hazy with blood pooling beneath his head. Toolkit lay very still.

Only then did Quartz fall backward, breathing hard... and scream.

Against her wail of anguish at the sight of her beaten friend by her hooves before her, the crowd picked up in delight. Some threw tickets to the floor while others leapt and whooped!

I heard Coral swear beside me, an unusual sound from her. This was so wrong!

"Our first victor! Survival of the fittest in this Pit, workers! Top Quartz shows her will to survive was greater than that of Toolkit! On to round TWO!"

This was *sick*. I'd been down there but I'd never seen an actual event in this way. There were ponies *enjoying this!*

"This time we've got Friendship City's rival Manehattan bringing us a contender! Years of working as a guard in Tenpony Tower led him to venture for a more exciting life in the wastes! Well he found it with Fillydelphia quite by accident! This is Shovels!"

The gate opened, releasing number two. Another stallion, tall and lanky with a filthy dark brown mane. A unicorn this time, he regarded the mourning mare before him with hesitation. Quartz lay over the body of her friend, as though she could bring him back to life by her light sways of his form and tears alone. I sent her and Toolkit's soul every prayer I could remember. Please, Goddesses, descend from on high and put a stop to this madness!

Coral wasn't even looking, averting her eyes in disgust.

Shovels was clearly more willing, as much as he looked aghast at this. The crowd chanted, *'KILL! KILL! KILL!'* when they saw Quartz had her back to him, making me wish I could somehow tell them I wasn't with them! I had no wish to be associated with this! If not for Brim...

Using the time, Shovels edged toward a pressure plate, pressed it and immediately leapt clear. A drawn breath amongst the atmosphere while the barrel opened and revealed a long knife falling to bounce off the concrete and drop to the ground. The sound made Quartz turn, blood-soaked face looking on with terror while Shovels picked up the knife in his green magic. Slowly, he shook his head. He was out to live, even if he frowned at how it had to happen. I saw his mouth form the quietly spoken word, too quiet for me to hear. 'I'm sorry.'

It began again, with not a shred of dignity given to Toolkit's bleeding corpse upon the ground. Shovels charged, the knife at the limits of his magic's range while Quartz only waved her hooves in desperation, pleading and screaming for him not to! Before my eyes, no quarter was given, the knife whirled forward and slashed across her chest, drawing a thick bloody stream and an agonised squeal from the mare. A buck beside me screamed almost in my ear, *'GUT HER!'*

I squeezed away from him until I was holding Coral tightly. Nearby, I saw two ponies holding each other in tears. No doubt other friends of those in there.

Quartz was not going down without a fight though. Inexperienced as she was, the mare had the guts to rush forward and catch the unicorn off guard. Running past the knife, she went for him until both of them stumbled backwards in a rough wrestling bout. The knife fell nearby as they fell to the ground, Quartz' blood blinding her opponent. Better fighter or not, he couldn't hit back while blind.

Furious and desperate, he rolled her again and again. I saw them nearby to a pressure plate before their next roll carried them right over it. With a clang, the lock on the barrel opened and spilled its contents. I gasped, the bright green radioactive goo (chemical or tainted? I had no way to tell!) erupted forth and led to both fighters diving away to avoid the grim death such a spill would allow. Scrambling away from the fluid gushing over the ground, I saw Shovels take a spill on his hind right leg and scream. Before my eyes, his skin melted away until the clean white of bone was visible even at this distance. His screams only went on and on, clutching at his leg with wide eyes, like he could somehow fix it.

Quartz made use of the time, taking up the knife and limping back to him. Looking upward to her, he lifted his hooves before she descended. Without elegance, she jabbed her mouth holding it in again and again, each stab puncturing his coat and drawing a yell. Ten or more times in rapid succession she did so against her helpless foe before one scream turned to rage. Grabbing her in desperation, a vicious headbutt dropped the knife into his magic, turning it on the spot to fire right into her throat and extended from the back of her neck.

The poor mare fell, dropping to the side with twitchy spasms in death. Beside her, Shovels tried to stand before almost looking down to realise how much blood was flowing from him. Pale and weak, he only managed a few trots forward before collapsing and dying as well.

The crowd was more than happy with this brutal performance. No, no more. I wasn't watching this! Even before me I saw how the pit was filling up with bodies. Untreated and without being carried away they leaked blood and left corpses around the area. By the end of both sets of six this place would be a carnal pit!

Before me, one of the two ponies clutching one another wailed loudly, clutching his female companion tightly for comfort, all too similar to me. My eyes were burning, my throat and lungs too. I needed air before I passed out.

"What an upset! A double way kill in this very Pit!"

Stern's voice offended me by making a game out of this nightmare, every pony that died in there I knew the fear of!

"The betting stand will collect for the first death, so supporters of Shovels you are in luck! Thus we move on with our next two contestants!"

She left a dramatic pause in a place I highly disagreed with, allowing the crowd to simmer and sort their tickets. Suddenly, I felt very guilty about my own bet for Brimstone. But it had to be done, that money could buy us some desperately needed things on the slave markets.

"First up! All the way from Hoofington we have an ex-gang member! By his own claims he left the Hoof because it was 'too easy' and he wanted a greater challenge! Let's see him in, this is Roaring Tiger!"

The gate opened and 'Roaring Tiger' came speeding out. An earth pony, skinny and somewhat muscular, he darted across the concrete floor before leaping and spinning in the air to land dramatically. Taking a fighting pose, he raised a hoof and cried out.

"Let whoever faces me beware, the Tiger's strength flows in my veins!"

The crowd liked that one, finally somepony eager to fight and a little charisma. Something about his nature felt off to me though, I'd seen Barb and Wildcard up close and the look in his eyes held none of the same weathered resolve. He thrust his hooves up even as Stern continued. The other team had lost two members now... I knew who that meant.

"His opponent! Second only to Xenith in Pit events won, we have the Dragon himself to face the Tiger! The Great Warlord of the Bloodletters! The Scourge of Ponyville! The largest pony you'll ever see! This is... Brim! Stone! Blitz!"

I expected a cheer. It never came.

The crowd *booed*. Even as the gate raised, as I saw my friend slowly stomp his way onto the concrete with little fear in his eyes, they jeered and spat. I heard ponies decrying him and shouting for loved ones long gone. Others seething about him being why they were here. I'd never thought of how those outside the Mall thought of him, but now I was seeing

it.

The wasteland saw him as nothing but a monster and a beast. If it affected him, he didn't show it, simply moving forward to the centre with his eyes only on his opponent.

"An unpopular pony for sure, workers. But! If he is to win this set of six, he will equal Xenith's record! So there's a lot at stake here as our current highest rated fighter enters the arena! Can he still do what he once did? Or has the Great Warlord long gone past his prime? Let the next fight... begin!"

Roaring Tiger was bouncing from hoof to hoof, having gone a little quiet until now. He shouted across even as Brimstone advanced slowly.

"Get ready for the storm, raider! Hoofington gang gonna wreck you right here!"

Brimstone stopped and snorted. But his voice was low, simple and direct. Others might not spot it, but on hearing his bass-filled voice over the sound I recognised regret and an unwilling tone.

"Enough boasting. Lie down and I will ensure it does not hurt."

"Y-you kidding?" Roaring Tiger seemed to look around, before snarling. "You better lie down, cos' this gang's going to wreck you!"

He began to cartwheel and leap around the sides of the arena.

"You ain't got a clue how hard we got it in the Hoof, you're all soft out here!"

Landing on all fours, Tiger grinned.

"So get ready, the storm is *coming*! Better just give up now! It'll be easier!"

"So come do it then." Brimstone hadn't even moved.

"Oh I will, better start running!"

"I'm right here."

Roaring Tiger growled, whether or not it was like a tiger, I didn't know. But he scraped a hoof on the ground.

"Here it goes! Get ready, here I come! YAAAAH!"

He galloped forward, leapt, and spun before landing on his front hooves and flipping forward with a flashy and dynamic spinning kick! High in the air from an impressive jump, he came down to impact on Brim's side at high speed, moving his leg faster than my eyes could follow!

Brimstone didn't even move an inch as Roaring Tiger's hoof struck and sent Tiger falling backwards, dropping him as though he'd leapt directly into a brick wall. Brim hadn't even flinched.

Yelping out loud, clutching his hoof, Tiger looked up to see Brimstone stare down.

"I know all the gangs in Equestria, you are not of the Hoof."

Roaring Tiger didn't even get to finish the scream as Brim's hoof descended in one fatal snap of the neck.

The crowd went silent, murmuring to one another. That hadn't exactly been the fight they'd been expecting. I heard sighs and distasteful curses from those who'd lost bets on a cool-sounding name. Others simply bemoaned that there hadn't been any 'real' violence.

"Well, that wasn't quite all it was made out to be, Brimstone Blitz is our winner! Can he last the four more fights to a record-equalling victory? Bring on our next challenger! Number three from the opposing team, this is Long Trot! A caravanner and prospector that has weathered raiders, gangs, and beasts all over Equestria! Some say that he was also a hired assassin, but who knows for sure? Let's find out!"

Stern was clearly moving it quickly along past that unexpected 'disappointment' of a

fight. The crowd had lost much of its bluster, but was beginning to pick up the pace again as the door slid open.

From within came running a tall and well-built earth pony. Dark grey with a light brown mane, he lowered his head and sprinted before any comment to even begin had started! From here, I had to squint to try and see his cutie mark, was it a wagon wheel?

Even if I couldn't tell what it was, I could certainly still tell the direction he was headed! He was making for the corpses of Top Quartz and Shovels, going for the knife! Brimstone clearly saw it too, realising he was much further away. Looking for a weapon of his own, Brim reached to the side and stamped upon a pressure plate. The barrel creaked and jarred open, before dropping a pile of a dozen little objects!

Brimstone leapt away, landing and rolling over on his side to get as far away from them as possible. Little beeping plates of metal with blinking red lights fell and scattered across a section of floor.

"Looks like the Warlord doesn't have the same luck! Anti-personnel proximity mines, workers! Anyone gets too close and you're in for a light show!"

The crowd loved that one, Brimstone having to dive away led many to cheers of laughter, stomping their hooves in approval as Long Trot yanked the knife from Quartz's neck with a horrid spray of blood. Between the green spillage of chemicals, the mines, blood, and corpses, the Pit was already beginning to gain its hazards quickly. Shifting closer to one another, I saw Long Trot take a cautious and stalker-like stance. Hearing the calls to knife Brim, I couldn't help but feel a pulsing will inside to want to shout back in support of him!

But something didn't make sense. Brim wasn't rushing in to attack. Why not?

Long Trot took the offensive, darting forward and feinting to one side before making a vicious slash at Brim. The larger pony had his eyes fixed on that knife, hunched and ready to move. Seeing the attack, he shifted backward, then to the side to avoid a follow up attack. Grimacing, Brim swept forward and threw a hoof toward his opponent, but the tall earth pony leapt out of reach.

"That's not right." Coral muttered beside me.

I nodded. "Brim's much faster than that, I... I've seen him take on ponies with weapons and just stomp over them!"

"That's what I meant. I don't know what's with the raider, but for his sake he better clear it up. They will have worse planned for him, every wound will count, he's still got three more if he wins this one."

"He will." I whimpered it, clinging to Coral's front leg. "He will. Please, Brim..."

Long Trot cautiously moved around with intent focus, keeping his front to any hazards in the area. This pony knew what he was doing alright. Brimstone snorted, charging forward and jumping, all four hooves off the ground, one swinging for Trot's head. Clearly surprised that such a big pony could move as quickly, Trot had to frantically dive away from Brim's crushing slam and pace a hasty retreat to avoid a huge buck that followed it. Landing on his back hooves, Trot ran up and leapt forward, making me scream when I saw that knife connect to the recovering Brimstone, drawing a gash along his side. The pony moved fast, darting in and out with the ease of somepony used to making those cheap dirty shots count.

The big raider roared in anger, drawing a cheer at the sight of blood from the crowd. Aiming another slash, Trot had to drop and roll away before it landed, seeing Brimstone's hoof swing around. For a second, I saw Trot's shocked face at the nearby mines when his evasive dives carried him a little too close for comfort!

My friend charged, hoof after hoof swinging and sending Long Trot into a very suddenly panicked retreat! This was more the Brim I knew! Rushing, whirling, and unstoppably piling into Long Trot, one strike drew a bloody spray from Trot's mouth and sent the knife spiralling through the air. Long Trot thudded to the ground, dizzied. Above him, Brim reared up, one hoof readying to slam down and end it!

Then I saw it; he was trying to end this as painlessly as possible. He wasn't allowing the savage rage to take over.

Unfortunately, this holding back was slowing him, losing the aggressive violence that gave him that frenzied speed and inner rage to become a god of battle on those who stood in his way. Even as the hoof took careful aim for the neck, Long Trot threw one hoof to the side and slapped it near an anti-personnel mine! The beeping sped up even as Trot rolled out of the way of the descending hoof and sprinted. Brimstone was trying to not be a raider down there, and it was costing him.

"Have some of the wonders of high explosive, raider!" Trot's voice shouted even as he moved.

Brim saw the mine, but with two hooves off the ground, he didn't have time to land and move before it blew. I yelped and covered my ears from the sharp crack even as Brimstone stumbled back and roared in both pain and fury. Shrapnel dug into his side, legs, and neck. It wasn't anywhere near enough to bring him down, but I could see that slight limp on him turning back to find his opponent.

I knew he wouldn't lose this fight. Long Trot was outclassed in speed and strength, but this was all about how many wounds Brimstone had to take before the *tough* fights with the likes of Wildcard began. What was he *doing*? Were it not my fear of those around me attacking for supporting the 'hated raider' I would have cried out to him, told him to please just live! Do whatever it took!

Shaking his head, clearly thinking the same thing, that this had gone on too long for a fighter of his calibre.

"Right, that's enough..." Only I likely heard him speak lowly, the deep tones passing to my ears even amongst the sounds of the crowd.

Brimstone put his head down and charged. Long Trot was stumbling for the knife again, but in full gallop Brimstone was so much faster on every stride. With a crash, the huge pony slammed into Trot, rolling over and throwing him a few feet away. Landing heavily, Trot barely got up and grabbed the knife before rushing at Brimstone! Dodging around one another, they clashed. Brimstone using his thick hooves to block the edge while Trot ducked and weaved. This should have been over ages ago!

Eventually, he seemed to find what he was looking for. Simply diving onto Trot, he turned it into a grapple, throwing the knife away. In here, Brimstone simply overpowered him. The crowd, sensing the end, cried for blood! They wanted him to throw Trot into the chemicals or drop him on a mine! Instead, he simply began pressing away Trot's waving limbs until he got a grip around his neck.

Then, he *squeezed*. Long Trot fought, kicked and struggled, but in that choke hold there was no escape against somepony so strong. Gradually, Long Trot slowed and ceased to move other than a few spasmodic jerks of his hind legs. Laying his opponent down, Brimstone stood... and stumbled.

The wounds on his side only kept seeping blood that dripped off his belly or down his legs. Ignoring the crowd's boos at the raider winning again with a simple and (comparatively

to the poor ponies forced in before) painful execution, I saw him testing the movement in his body with a grimace. Some shrapnel had clearly gone deep.

Now Long Trot's body formed another pile alongside the other ignored corpses that would lie there until both bouts were done.

"BOO! WE WANT PROPER FIGHTS!" That same buck beside me cried.

"YEAH! THIS SUCKS! MORE LIKE THE FIRST ONE!" screamed another.

The crowd was turning against this, two fights with nothing but 'boring' deaths and little real violence was leading the bloodthirsty audience to protest and scream their displeasure. Up on the balcony, I saw little change in Red Eye's watchful gaze, stroking Winter with one hoof. But I saw him finally turn his head to Stern and mutter but a few words in her ear. She looked to him, then at the Pit, then back again before nodding. Taking up the microphone, she held up a talon for silence.

"You want a proper fight?"

"YEAH!" They chorused.

"Then you shall have a spectacle! The next bout shall be two on one! Numbers four and five from the opposing team will enter the Pit together to bring low this beast who has hurt so many of you!"

The crowd went *mad*, chanting and approving of this idea. This wasn't fair! Something was wrong with Brimstone and they were throwing two ponies at once against him?

I saw Brimstone stand up again from testing his leg and throw his head toward the opening gate. This... *this* is where it would really begin.

"Now there's some history here, workers! These two ponies were once of this beast's very warband! But he betrayed them! Turned away from the group and started killing them when paths crossed in Fillydelphia! Welcome... Scar Tissue and Pitfall!"

Now the crowd got really going. Two ferocious raiders charged into the arena, howling and whooping as they came. Both unicorn stallions, their filthy black coats were twisted and dyed with red and yellow, symbols of atrocity adorning both. One bore a cutie mark of a trident with a waxed-up brown mohawk mane, while the other had a set of upward facing stakes and a similarly coloured mane shorn off one side entirely to only leave one half on his right side left. The latter I guessed was Pitfall from the mark, making the mohawk Scar Tissue. They looked like brothers!

Brimstone clearly recognised them. Pulling his leg off the ground, he snarled and stomped.

"I thought you two had been killed off long ago in here!"

Scar Tissue snapped at the mouth almost like a dog. "We ain't dying till we got a shot at you, betrayer! You any idea how many of our kin you killed in that Mall business?"

Pitfall chimed in, his voice a rasping sound of somepony who smoked far too much. "Clan sticks together, forever and always! You turned your back on it! Now we're gonna put you down, old worn-out stallion taken out in place of the new!"

They both broke off to either side of their half in the Pit, cast a knowing glance to one another, and stamped on pressure plates simultaneously. Holding their hooves up with expectancy, the barrels opened and dropped their contents. To Scar Tissue, a trident with wickedly barbed points that was at least ten feet long. To Pitfall, a net covered in small fish hooks and a set of hoof-blades. Catching them in their hooves or magic, the pair armed up.

This was wrong, they *knew* where their signature weapons were. The fact they even *had* weapons for themselves was ridiculous! Somepony was playing with the rules fast and loose

here behind the scenes. I shivered, praying under my breath.

"Please, Goddesses, forgive him and let him live. Please..."

The pair hoof bumped with a sadistic grin, turning back to Brimstone.

"Ready, chief?"

Brimstone only lowered his front half down, scuffing at the dirt and growling.

"Come on then, upstarts."

They didn't need any further incentive. Screaming their own battle cry, the pair surged forward, crossing over each other's path with fluid grace and flanking around Brimstone in the centre of the Pit. My friend surged forward against Scar Tissue, aiming to divide and conquer. But even as he ran, the net whirled out, projected over a long distance by Pitfall's magic, and slashed at his back leg. With a great cry at the hooks tearing skin and dragging his leg out, Brimstone stumbled and twisted, trying to free himself. One hoof sliced backward and using the hard edge against the hooks, simply tore it off. Face twisting in anger, he stamped it down and away from Pitfall's magic, only for that huge trident to come piercing in from the side. Dropping and rolling to avoid it, Brim grunted at the pain before coming back to his feet a good bit slower than I'd known him normally to.

Even by the time he was there, Pitfall had darted away, the net taken with him. Covering his retreat with that trident, floating and watching Brim should he try to launch at Pitfall recovering his weapon.

These two fought as one. Twins. Circling Brimstone, two ponies and two floating weapons, they surrounded him with a precision.

"Time was you two were just runts born into the clan." Brimstone muttered to himself, favouring his injured legs and body.

"Times change, chief! The old get slow, the dynamic young take over! After all, isn't that how you got in charge when your old dad got too slow to stop you?" Scar Tissue spat, before his trident flew in. Spotting it easily, Brimstone backed off to deflect it with his hooves. I tried to scream a warning, but behind him the net floated in and caught his back legs again to prevent his retreat.

Then I *did* scream as the trident's points dug into his shoulder.

Bellowing at the stab, much to the enjoyment of the crowd, Brimstone thrashed and whirled, sending the trident flying across the arena while stamping the net into the ground. He bled from dozens of small cuts now of shrapnel and stabs. Every time he went for one, the other would surge in!

Brimstone wasn't going to give up that easily. Even as the pair moved to recover their weapons, he took the chance to run to another pressure plate. Almost breaking it with his hoof, he had to swear colourfully and loudly (Luna's almighty *what?*) when the sight forced him to leap aside again. A strange long and thick bar shape dropped heavily before slapping onto the ground hard.

"Brimstone Blitz just has no luck today! For those who don't know, that is a bar mine! An anti-machine and wagon mine that only goes off when something of enough weight presses down on it, shooting upwards on its detonation with enough explosives to take out a sentinel robot!"

This was *ridiculous*! Now a mine that would only be set off by somepony as big as Brim was in the arena!? Why wasn't Red Eye stopping this? Looking up, I saw him only watching my friend with careful eyes, that cybernetic one blinking occasionally. Surely somepony as intelligent as him saw what was going on?

Scar and Pitfall had gotten their weapons back, advancing upon Brimstone again. They were much faster than him, wiry and lithe with a thin and tense strength. Wildcard was keeping his remnant portion of the warband well exercised even in Fillydelphia, that was for sure. Once again making a flanking move, they rushed for Brimstone. Between them Scar Tissue was clearly the faster, making a sprint to reach behind Brimstone. To my surprise, Brim simply turned and ran.

They didn't seem to expect it either, but they bounded forward. The crowd jeered at the warlord's 'craven cowardice' but after a second it all became clear. Leaping clean over the chemical spill with a grunt on landing upon wounded legs, Brimstone made his way to the far side of the Pit and backed himself against the corner. I was no fighter, I couldn't grasp why. But soon enough, it became clear.

As they caught up, they couldn't surround him in the same way. It was risky though, Brimstone had nowhere to run now as he gambled that against making sure he could see them both at all times.

"Trapped now, chief." Scar Tissue licked his lips.

"Trapped in the *pit*." Pitfall chimed in, making at least a few ponies in the crowd groan.

"Then come get me." Brimstone settled, ready.

Scar obliged first, that huge trident using its ten foot range to let him thrust from well outwith his own magic's range if he only used his telekinesis on the end of it for quick thrusts. Blocking and using his hooves as shields, Brimstone smacked it aside time and again. What was he trying? They could just keep stabbing until they got him! Pitfall sent his net surging in to wrap around Brim's front hooves, trapping them together! I saw the pain on his face as those fish hooks dug under his skin and his front body collapsed down.

"Bad plan, big guy. Goodbye!" Scar laughed and lunged with the trident.

Brim's plan came into play. Launching up with his hind legs, he twisted and grabbed the trident's shaft in his mouth tightly. I saw the telekinesis fight against it, Scar Tissue moving in closer to try and pull harder! Brimstone had both their main weapons locked on him now!

Even when Scar Tissue fought magic against mouth, Brimstone let go. The trident *flew* out of his mouth from the straining telekinesis and slapped right into Scar's face. Taking the opportunity, Brimstone launched off his hind legs toward the unsuspecting Pitfall. Landing awkwardly, he still managed to lift his tied front hooves and deliver a double hoofed hammerblow across his face.

The raider fell back, face gushing from fish hook lacerations. I thought Brim was going in for the kill, but instead I saw him use the dazed and helpless raider's hoof claws to cut the net off his own! He could end it now, the pony was out cold!

He didn't. I saw the look, the mindset saying 'kill,' but looking at a helpless pony before him, Brimstone backed off.

Behind him, the trident speared into his flesh once again. The raiders had no such qualms about attacking somepony like that. Tearing out with those barbs, I saw a nasty wound opened. Brimstone stumbled, staggered, and leaned against the thick concrete wall just below where the cage started.

"What's this? The big nasty warlord's lost his edge? Lost that raider feel? Well that's just gonna treat you rough then, isn't it?"

Scar looked at his brother upon the floor, now unconscious and clearly out of the game here. Grimacing, Scar Tissue shook his mohawk-bearing head.

"Seems he's out of it anyway, oh well!"

He bore a sick grin, before the trident flashed and went spearing into his own brother's neck! He didn't even look bothered! Drawing it and leaving yet another body to the mercy of the Pit's cold and increasingly stained floor, he turned back to Brimstone.

"That's how raiders act, chief! Do what it takes. They were going to make us fight after we killed you anyway! But you'll never not be one! No, now you're just a *bad* one! I guess I get *all* the glory then to bring you down! Always did want to challenge you when you got old and *slow*. Here's my chance!"

His magic lit up, drawing his brother's hoof claws to himself and wearing them, the long trident flicking back to keep Brim at a distance. I could see my friend stumbling. The wounds were beginning to tell. He still had two to beat and this one was already looking dodgy. Scar was unhurt!

"You want a shot at your old warlord?" Brimstone snorted, hardening his face. "Perhaps he's still got a couple fights left in him!"

It began. Brimstone charged, hooves sparking on the concrete floor, he tore toward Scar. The smaller raider crouched, narrowed his eyes and flung the trident forward. Lancing ahead, it jerked to the side when Brimstone deflected it with a hoof and leapt to swing a mighty hoof for Scar's head. Dropping and rolling to the side, Scar Tissue leapt to his hooves again and threw a slash with those hoofblades, missing Brimstone as he hopped backward and reared up to deliver a double-hoofed slam that only barely missed his elusive opponent.

Every impact brought a scream of delight from somepony around us, Scar's frantic running to retrieve his trident prompting many to urge him on! Internally, feeling nervous about supporting these pit fights, I still cheered for Brimstone. But I just couldn't help shake the sense that something was terribly wrong. He couldn't face being a raider, so he was turning away from it to his own suffering by not getting into that properly rage-filled mindset to unleash his real physical power.

Was I any different? Why didn't anypony understand I just wanted to leave as painlessly as possible? I was just running away all the same.

The trident spun wildly in the air, landing to point at Scar's opponent while they circled. Grimacing, both leapt forward. A clashing meet of trident, blades, and thick hooves mixed with narrow dodges and small clips that sent either fighter back a foot to regain their stance. I saw Brimstone's hoof catch Scar's shoulder and throw him almost right over. A hoofblade opened a thin slit along Brim's left foreleg. A dent in the trident from a particularly harsh block.

The two whirled away, breathing deeply. The crowd *ecstatic* at the tough fought battle.

Scar Tissue was good. Very good. Even without his brother, he had a lot of speed and a reaction time I hadn't seen since Barb. He maintained a youthful grin and bouncy stance upon his hooves while Brimstone was slowing, breathing hard, and dripping blood everywhere he went. One serious injury more could be enough to tip that into a truly wounded position, the mine and bladed attacks had really taken their toll.

Frankly, I had a whole new respect for Brimstone's constitution, to take as many slices and tears and still be capable.

"Giving up, old chief?"

"Not while I'm alive!" Brimstone spun, bucking full force toward his opponent. Scar, however, grinned and dove forward to roll beneath it, slicing upward. Noticing him almost

too late to avoid being gutted, Brimstone threw himself to the side and swung to deliver a punishing blow I'd seen catch many an opponent out with its speed.

Scar simply ducked it.

"Is that it? I've seen you do that a thousand times in my life, chief! You know what they say about old dogs..."

The trident came flying down vertically from above. Catching Brim's knife wound from Long Trot, it dragged at the slit and reopened what had been slowly beginning to thicken. Brim looked more surprised than pained, having to quickly shift and move awkwardly to the side when the trident kept stabbing down again and again. I saw what Scar was doing, a pony couldn't properly defend *upwards* like a griffon or hellhound could!

"How'd you like some new tricks? Picked up from the griffons in here that Wildcard brought into the clan!"

Brimstone strained to keep an eye on the trident, dodging frantically, I heard him cry out in shock as he had to leap over that damn bar mine. Backing off, seeing it coming, he hopped up and over onto his back, catching the trident head between his hooves. Without any fancy thought, he simply drew it in close and smashed the offending weapon into splinters, bending the tips.

"All flair and no reliability." Brimstone muttered while he turned back and slammed his hooves together. In a moment of horror, I saw even the strong gesture make him wince and stumble on his front legs. All his limbs had taken horrific punishment, one back leg was bent and clearly not taking any weight.

"Hah, you think that's all I got?" Scar grinned back, his horn still glowing. Slowly, it built up and began to crackle.

My ears popped, a flash of light and an after-image of a stream of light, like lightning! All the way from his horn to Brimstone, where I cried out loud to see him half collapsed and clutching his chest. Only after a few seconds did I realise I'd lost my hearing completely. All around, ponies rubbed their ears while the slow rumble of the crowd began to grow again. A splitting headache began to form while my hearing returned. Curse my tainted birth...

"—new tricks, huh?" Scar's voice cut back in. "Little thing Wildcard taught me! See, we the young don't like to just do what *you* taught us. All brawn and never looking at what we can *really* do with magic!"

Brimstone pushed one hoof to the ground, trying to close the distance. But Scar Tissue only trotted backward.

"Ah. Ah. Aaaah! Face it, chief. You're *obsolete* to the new clan! Where magic and strength goes together! You—HAH!"

My ears erupted in pain again, Brimstone had tried to leap suddenly forward, but the same spell sent him collapsing to his side. Eyes watering from my own pain, I watched him breathing heavily.

"Interrupting me, I said you're past your time! A good magical shock does wonders against those getting a bit on in life... what are you, sixty-something now? How's that heart doing after all this time in Filly?"

Tapping his hoofblades together, he began to wander across, waving one in the air to announce the upcoming kill to the crowd.

"Just lie there, chief. I'll make it a raider's death. Nice and bloody, going down in a blaze of violence. Isn't that how you always said we should go? Pity you didn't move with the times, just sticking with that tired old *raaaaah-raaaaah I'm a big raider shtick*."

He began to charge, the hoofblades tip-tapping as they went. I saw Brimstone roll onto his front, facing away from Scar, gritted teeth in great pain.

"Well it's over now! Some way to go, being the old arrogant big guy! Have you even learned *one thing* from the ponies around you? No? Now you'll pay for that!"

Scar rushed forward, leapt into the air, raising his claws high, and screamed a guttural howl of death! I squeezed Coral's foreleg so hard I feared I'd break it.

His eyes opened.

"You could say I've learned *one* little fighting trick from a good friend..."

His whole body surged. From his shoulders to his rear hooves I saw muscles ripple and power that colossal body up to lean on his front hooves. As Brimstone Blitz unleashed the sharpest and biggest, most powerful straight-up *buck* I'd ever seen toward Scar Tissue even as he descended. A surprise attack with his *full strength* that collided with earth shattering force... into Scar Tissue's groin.

There was a crunch.

Simultaneously, myself and every single buck (along with a good portion of the mares) in the stadium made an '*Ooooooh!*' sound and clutched themselves, rear legs crossing over protectively.

I even saw *Red Eye* wince and scrunch up half of his face, that cyber-eye blinking at a rapid pace while one hind leg pulled just a little closer.

Beside him I saw his dog, Winter, whine and cover his face with a paw while lying down.

The entire fight had seemed to stop dead. Frozen in time at that moment of impact before Scar slowly fell to the ground. Eyes so wide they almost seemed to pop out of his skull, he just lay quivering with an open mouth making little squeaky noises the likes of which even my filly-like voice couldn't match.

Brimstone grunted, limped, and stood above him.

"A raider's death? Bloody and violent? Consider that the violence. But you will have no blood, the Goddesses watch for those unwilling to follow that path any more... even if it renders them unable."

A hoof raised, I saw Scar Tissue's eyes follow it as he was unable to move his body.

His neck snapped like dry bark under the stamp. The life in his eyes disappearing seconds later.

Regardless of the lack of blood, the crowd shouted their approval once many of them had been done recovering and making sure certain things were still there. (Alright, alright, maybe I had, too... just to be sure.) I still heard boos, but that fight had pleased them.

"The Dragon wins once again! We are only one fight away from equalling the Pit all-time record after proving his worth against two at once!"

Finally, I allowed myself to breathe. Or at least, begin desperately sucking warm air through a cramped throat. My hoof toyed with the collar, feeling it chafing my burns and rad-sores developing all around my neck.

My body couldn't take this pressure. Already my chest was thumping hard and I could taste the rancid bile and tinge of metal in my throat. I needed RadAway the moment this was done. Maybe I could go to the hospital and trade with the caps from my bet? I didn't want to go to Sooty... no... no no no *no*.

Brimstone knelt down in the centre, taking his breath. Coral narrowed her eyes.

"I can't say I feel sorry for him. But if the next fight is anything like that then I can't see him getting by."

Horried, I turned to her for saying such a thing! But those bitter eyes only narrowed and turned away from me. I couldn't say anything, the history between them was just too dire.

"Well, workers... we come to it at last! The final bout of this first set of six! The Great Warlord is hurting, clearly not as fit as he once was—"

No! He was fit! He just... just wasn't fighting right!

Biting my lip, I saw Brim glancing around the crowd. He was looking for us! Without thinking, I simply stood up on the bench. Around me, some ponies hissed and swore at the sight of my wings. But stern glances from Coral kept them back. She had sat quietly and sometimes I swore almost *enjoyed* seeing what she would see as justice done to Brimstone, but she wouldn't let them hurt me.

More visible, his eyes found me. We couldn't say anything, but I knew that look in his eye. Somewhere between apology and gratitude.

Now I realised fully what it was. Earlier today when he had sworn not to let the frenzy take over. It wasn't that he couldn't fight without it, it was that he couldn't risk a fight getting so intense that it would draw it out of him by his very habit.

Please, Brim... just come out.

"So now we move to our final challenger! So without further talk... let us allow the final to begin! Bring them in!"

The gate slid up. Within the dark void I saw a shape and two eyes marching forward. Here they were...

But then my heart skipped a beat.

History was repeating itself.

Before me in that pit was not a pony.

Thick and stomping, strong and bestial. Barely fitting out the gate, he came. Larger even than Brimstone and not at all what I had expected to see.

He was a raider, yes.

But he was a buffalo.

My heart sank.

Huge in body, possessing massive horns and cloven hooves, the buffalo stomped forward under the screams of the crowd. Dyed hair on either side depicting the same raider symbols as Brimstone himself alongside foul abstract pieces of art I wish my mind could already forget. A thick spur of bone between his nostrils, while his horns were carved, painted and tipped with bronze.

"A brand new addition to our rosters! The final opponent is for a grudge match! Yet another of Brimstone's own warband come back to seek revenge! Stronger than any pony and so crazed we've had to keep him locked in magic enchanted chains as a secret weapon of war since he was brought here! But now he wants a piece of his old Warlord! For his feats, he was named 'Breaks Many Foes' but in the Pit, we simply call him... BOOOONECRUUUUSHER!"

The colossal figure reared up, so huge in size that he almost came to the height of the minotaur I'd seen! But *far* heavier. Opening his mouth, Bonecrusher emitted a throaty whooping cry before slamming his hooves down so hard I felt it even up here.

"This old leader shall fall before me for his betrayal of us all! Raiders do not forgive! For

blood! For revenge of our fallen in the Mall! His broken body shall be cast **down!**”

The crowd were up on their hooves, stomping and yelling, their hooves pounding on the ground or the cage around the arena. I saw so many of them fighting with the guards to get back to the betting stands. Many were swapping out tickets up here in the stands!

Below, Brimstone Blitz lethargically pushed himself up and flicked blood from his limbs and body with a shake.

“I expected Wildcard... not you.” He growled at Bonecrusher, keeping himself held ready for anything.

“Wildcard gave me this chance!” Bonecrusher snorted in response and scrapped ready to charge. “We drew for it and I got number six! One of your own Big Four will destroy you in turn!”

One of the Big Four? But Brimstone hadn’t mentioned him...

“You are not one of them.” Brimstone’s words set a furious look on the buffalo. “Rough Diamond died, you didn’t get to the initiation before we were brought here.”

“You know I’d have passed!” Bonecrusher shouted in a voice like stones crumbling together. “I was always just waiting for the chance! You know I’d have made it to be one! I was the replacement! It’s always the way when one dies! Ever since Wildcard killed that wimp Diamond you know it was my place to step in for him!”

Wildcard killed... *huh?* I perked up, seeing the look of surprise on Brimstone’s face as well. That threw everything I knew for a loop. Internal raider grudges? Fighting over loot? But Brim clearly didn’t have time for over thinking right now, steeling his face.

“Keep dreaming. You’re a mindless idiot, Foes! You could never lead.”

There was a brief silence.

“Fighting is all that matters to a raider and I could **FIGHT!**” The roar came just short of the almost overdue charge. Lowering his head and shaking the very foundations, Bonecrusher rushed forward faster than I’d ever have wanted to see. Those horns gleamed and pointed right for Brimstone’s breast.

My friend dove to one side, scrambling madly as he landed near the hissing chemical pile that was starting to eat into the surface of the Pit. Seeping near to Top Quartz’s corpse I could see it eating and melting away one of her hooves. The Pit was cramped now with dangers and bodies! Stumbling over the obstacles, Brimstone got back to his feet even as Bonecrusher skidded to a halt and turned to snarl back.

Brimstone didn’t let him charge again. Screaming his own cry, he pushed the pain away and ran directly for the lumbering beast before another charge could be built up. Surging in with one, two, and then *three* solid slams to the face, Brimstone unleashed what he had upon the buffalo. I heard every mighty *thump* of hoof on forehead, before Bonecrusher twisted and threw Brimstone a good ten feet away. Landing, a sudden beeping gave rise to a quick slap of Brim’s hoof throwing a mine in between the two. The resulting detonation so close to the edge caught three slaves in the crowd with shrapnel and threw up a smokescreen to dodge the follow-up goring from the buffalo. The tempo was on, neither was messing around here!

Scraping his horn along the edge of the Pit from being blinded, Bonecrusher left a long scar in the wall before sliding to a halt and spinning to find Brimstone launching back onto him. They tussled for a few seconds, but to my horror I saw the reality. For once, Brimstone was well and truly outmatched in terms of sheer strength.

Bonecrusher threw down Brim’s attacks, raising his hooves up to grab and slam my friend

into the arena wall. Braying loudly, he lowered his head and charged, butting Brim in the stomach and crushing him a second time before throwing him away. Arcing over, Brimstone landed in a heap, just pushing himself up to deflect a horn. The resulting charge still flung him another ten feet away to land near Long Trot's body.

Slamming the ground with his hoof, I saw the restrained fury in his eyes. He *wanted* to unleash the beast inside, the Dragon. But he was holding it back, shaking his head.

"You've lost the raider in you, Brimstone Blitz!" Bonecrusher stalked near him. "Time was you could stop a charge of mine. Now look at you!"

He surged forwards, drawing a cry of pain when one of those horns pierced Brim's thick skin and carried him across the arena to spin and slam down. I could see Brimstone holding a hoof to the wound.

No... no! Brimstone couldn't defeat him like this! He just couldn't! I remembered all too clearly what he said, that no matter what he wouldn't give in to the raider inside! It... it was his way to go out if he had to but show everypony he was different! The only way out! *His* only choice.

Just like mine. Why couldn't he have understood that?

"Murky?"

Why not?

"*Murky!*"

I blinked, realising I'd been crying, sitting hunched back in the seat amongst a sea of crying spectators. Coral Eve was looking me in the eye, shaking me a little.

I didn't say anything, but she saw the horrified look in my eye. She felt nothing for Brimstone, I could see that. She was almost calm, maybe even feeling he deserved this. I felt her shake me again, but I just trembled. What could I say? This was exactly the same thing, only now I was seeing it happen to somepony else!

Another horrid gore before he even got up. The concrete floor was leaving a trail wherever Brimstone was thrown and tossed. Rolling beneath Bonecrusher, barely avoiding the stamps, Brimstone limped and almost fell upon a pressure plate, seeking *something* he could use.

The barrel almost jammed, something *huge* inside it jerking and then falling with a heavy clang.

A helmet made of bronze and steel in the crude shape of a dragon bearing two great horns.

Brimstone's helmet.

Wildcard or Shackles, whoever it was behind the scenes doing this was taunting him now. Teasing him with the temptation.

I saw him stare sideways at it, frozen in place. To one side, Bonecrusher noticed it and laughed.

"You've lost who you are, Brimstone! No longer the raider, but you're nothing without that rage burning to drive you! A spent flame in the night. You know what you need to do to ever hope to fight me... but you won't."

He was right, kicking it to the side, Brimstone slid around and charged directly into the side of Bonecrusher. Roaring aloud, hoof after hoof fell into the buffalo, throwing everything he had to throw. The buffalo staggered back under the witheringly harsh hail. Almost to the wall, before the old clan member struck back. Launching forward, he simply headbutted Brimstone, stunning my friend before picking him up and body-slamming him into the floor. Raising him again, rising to two hooves, the buffalo presented my friend in

his dazed state to the crowd, screaming his victory!

Spinning and swinging, Bonecrusher hurled him with terrible force into the wall right below us. Even on our side, the concrete bulged in and cracked enough to send fragments all over us in the crowd. Behind him, Bonecrusher turned to the crowd and raised his hooves, chanting old raider verses and oaths.

Quaking, crying and terrified, I saw Brimstone slump down... still breathing, but terribly injured.

"Murky, snap out of it!"

Coral's hooves shook me, I realised I was hyperventilating badly, my illness kicking up and making my vision go hazy. This was all it came down to. Death or pain! For all of us born with something we hated!

She shook me so hard my neck almost got whiplash.

"Don't get to thinking what I know you're thinking! That isn't the way! Not for you..."

Frozen with fear for my friend and feeling like I just wanted to slink off and do *something*, I simply turned and stared wide-eyed and blank to the older mare. Her eyes narrowed while looking at me.

"Not for him either. Everypony, *get out of my way!*"

She stood in the seats, forcing the jubilant slaves around us to the sides. Coral strode down the benches, over slaves even, until she was ringside.

"*Get up, you beast!*" She screamed at Brimstone from right beside him. Shaking, he looked up, as though surprised to see her. "*You get up and do your job!*"

His face was swollen, in visible agony and close to some horrible mortal failure.

"I am." He rumbled, speaking from half of his split mouth. "I will not live a raider any more. Breaks Many Foes, he was one of the most brutal fighters lacking only in leadership. If I must fall to him to prove that I will *not* turn to the raider to have forgiveness... then I will. I'm not like you or Murk or Glimmerlight who finds their strength from the goodness in your hearts. I will not turn back to the Dragon before all these ponies just to win."

I could see Coral's ire rising as he spoke, her horn sparked and grew in flashing light every time he spoke a word. Eventually, she screamed aloud and emitted a sharp pressure blast into the arena. It slapped right across Brimstone's face and staggered him to the side.

"Now you listen to me, *brute!*" She snapped, scowling at him. "You want to be forgiven by everypony for the things you did? You keep wondering about what it'll take? Well I'm going to tell you right now what you can do to fix it!"

Coral leaned close to the cage.

"*Nothing!*"

Shaking and feeling my chest tight and my head weary from lack of air on my rapid breathing, I widened my eyes at the look Brimstone gave her. Somewhere between crushing emotion and anger.

"You can do *nothing*, because no matter what you do, no matter what you live like or who you help and save, there is one pony who will never *ever* forgive you. Me! Consider me bitter and angry against somepony like you who assisted in saving my life from Barb, but you know what? I don't care! Oooh, consider that bad if you want and I'll probably *agree* that it's not my best trait, that I hold grudges and never forgive easily, but at least I *accept* it!"

Slaves around us seemed to back away from her and Brimstone.

"You're a raider. You were born one, and from that raider earlier I heard how you killed

your own father to be the best one! Now you want to turn around and pretend you aren't one, to the point that you die to that beast over there?"

She pointed a hoof through the cage, Bonecrusher was raising cheers from the crowd on the far side, teasing them with what to use for 'the kill' from all the lethal areas of the arena. Brimstone turned and looked, oddly silent before returning to her eyes.

"You want to die? Fine, I'll probably smile rather than mourn for *you*. But I'm not letting you die like *this*. Not running away from who you are. For me? Oooh, hell no. For *him!*"

She reached through, grabbing his head and pointing it up at me. I locked eyes with him, seeing the look of shock. Likely seeing me so small, so afraid and vulnerable. It was taking all I had to stay there and not shrink away.

"That little buck tried to throw himself off a roof because he couldn't see any way to escape being what he was born as! So if you think I'm going to let you, somepony he for *some reason* truly cares for, throw your life away trying to run from the very same thing and prove his hurt little mind right, then you are *seriously wrong*, Brimstone Blitz!"

Pulling his face back around, she stood up on her hind legs to get to his height, staring her family's killer right in the eye from inches away through the bars without fear.

"I care for him. So even if it hurts me to ever *help* you I'm going to tell you right now. You will not die like this. If you can't beat him... then fine. But do *not* go out being a weak coward, only running away from what he is. You're a *raider*, Brimstone Blitz. You'll may or may not ever make the world think of you well again, and you better get used to remembering that. So *get over yourself*, turn around and be the pony you *are*. Prove to that little pegasus behind us that you don't just give up because you can't handle what you were born as!"

Her eyes narrowed.

"You go out there and you show him what learning to try again no matter what *anypony* thinks of you really means. You'll never earn my forgiveness through killing yourself, Brimstone. You'll never not be that Dragon inside. But you are not going to die and prove everything that is wrong with this right to the one innocent slave I've met in this damn city!"

Behind them, Bonecrusher roared, turning. Brimstone didn't even pay him heed. He looked up to me and, I thought, seemed to have something change in his look. He looked around at the ponies chanting for his death, chanting for revenge for all he'd done. Eventually, looking to Coral.

"I do not know that I can beat him... not now." He spoke slowly as he stepped back. "But if I must die proving a point then that must be all that I can do. Murky?"

I gasped, surprised to hear him shout to me. He looked down and picked up the Dragon helmet.

"Coral is right. We can't change what you or I were born as. But we *can* always push for more, no matter what they say. Not any crowd and not any sick bastard with a collar."

He looked to the helmet, hooves trembling at the baleful carved eyes and blood painted markings.

"If Glimmerlight was the point I turned... let this be the moment I never looked back."

The helmet was thrown on, standing tall and swinging to face his opponent, I saw him clip it around his neck and wring out his neck. His wounds poured still, but yet I saw Brimstone allow himself to push past it with a growl.

Bonecrusher grinned at the sight, clearly relishing more fight. Coral Eve stood watching

sternly. I simply sat in amazement.

"Come back for more, huh?" Bonecrusher chuckled.

"You going to talk like Scar over there or fight?" Brimstone snarled, lowering his own horned helmet.

Seeing the sign, so did Bonecrusher. The way between them was clear of all obstacle.

"**Let the Dragon die!**" To a great cheer of the crowd, Bonecrusher shifted that massive frame and charged.

"**Then come try it!**" Brimstone roared in return, charging forward with a renewed strength. The two thundered toward each other, pounding the ground and building speed at a frightening pace.

I'd seen him fight a Steel Ranger and considered it the most brutal conflict in my life to witness.

I'd seen *nothing*.

The two leapt from the ground and simply *collided*, head to head with their horns interlocking in a crash that made the corpses and mines *jump* on the floor, some of the smaller ones exploding as they fell. Ramming, snarling and twisting the pair fell, got up, rammed again and flung hooves and horns at one another. Every strike a colossal *thump* that reverberated in my breast. There was no blocking, no dodging. They simply laid into one another like possessed demons of battle. Blood flew, sparks of metal on bone lit their faces, and each gave ground only to push back. Bonecrusher reeled, surprised. But I saw that grin as he flung his massive size around and collided with Brimstone to fling him away. Tumbling head over hoof, he slammed into the ground and rolled to his hooves.

Pausing, I saw the blood leak from his helmet. There was a shake of his body, before he raised both hooves to the sky and *screamed* an unearthly war cry carrying the rage of sixty years under the brutality of a raider clan. The hooves slammed down and drew into a charge back to his opponent and meeting the approaching buffalo halfway. Throwing himself up, Brim got him around his neck and dragged the huge beast to the ground. Wrestling and slamming Bonecrusher's head into the floor, he was smashed aside by his opponent like a rag doll. Time after time he flung back on and stopped the larger opponent from getting up until eventually their horns locked again.

Ponies screamed themselves hoarse around me. Many were on their hooves still, waving and leaping at the *brutal* conflict before them. Two immense creatures leathering each other for all their worth. I saw horns stab on both sides, until Brimstone gored the buffalo upon the chest. Driving him back for the first time, Bonecrusher hit the wall and bellowed in pain when Brim's helmet pierced deep. Raising both hooves, he crashed them down upon Brimstone's back twice to stun him. Catching the buffalo's stamp, Brimstone swept around and forced his opponent into the wall, slamming their head over and over, only harder each time until the concrete began to splinter.

Faltering and stumbling, Bonecrusher tripped and almost fell, stunned. But with a surge of his body, swung Brimstone right off the ground and horizontally swung him into the wall. Leaning down, he tossed and tried to gore my friend all over again, throwing him *over* the personnel mines. Landing, Brimstone kicked two of them with great speed toward Bonecrusher's face, exploding right on top of him and following it up with a charging hoof strike that sent both of them to the ground again.

This was simply a blur of motion. Hits arriving and being countered before either could register the pain. Berserk meeting frenzy. Bonecrusher's constitution was *immense*. Even

streaming blood from his face, he was still up even before Brimstone! The shrapnel had chipped his horns and tore one brass tip free but even with a face full of metal, he moved to stamp again and again on his downed opponent. Crying with tears of stress and fear I watched my friend beaten into the ground with impacts that would have killed me from barely *one* strike. Then a rise of the head and Bonecrusher found a hoof impaled upon one of Brimstone's horns. The bestial scream sent shivers through me.

Brim struggled to his hooves, he was weak, but in those eyes I saw little but sheer rage and unleashed anger that had been held down all competition.

Was... was this really the way? To have to go through with it and always just strive on, no matter how you feel inside or how it makes you feel?

Brimstone leapt forward, a hoof surging out to stagger his opponent.

I'd been trying *so hard* so many times but I only kept failing by stint of what I was, a slave!

Bonecrusher caught the next attack, dishing out a vicious headbutt in return.

But Brim had been dying before me and still fought.

Spinning, he bucked the buffalo hard in the side to the crack of ribs, Bonecrusher didn't care, rushing forward and tackling Brimstone down to crush Brim with his weight!

Was it right to avoid the pain and hatred around you to just let it all end? To keep going?

Even before me, Brimstone struggled and lifted the colossal beast from him, grimacing and throwing himself out from under.

I saw Coral looking to me. She saw my wider eyes and seemed to almost smile.

"The road's tough. We've all suffered from where we began. Even with hope you might not make it in the end, we might not get out." Her eyes turned back to the Pit. "But it's always worth trying, Murky. That's what he's showing to you."

A great cry drew my attention back to the Pit. Both of them, reared up, were throwing huge strikes at the other. A devastating right hook from Brimstone that *broke* one of Bonecrusher's horns, a hideously powerful slam of a hoof from the buffalo that tore the right side of Brimstone's helmet clean away along with a good portion of the skin that tore below it. One after another, throwing their whole exhausted bodies into it. They just kept hitting, the crowd chanting numbers to the strikes. But gradually, I saw Brimstone's attacks lessen as he took more damage.

"**The Dragon is over!**" Bonecrusher screamed, raising both hooves.

"Maybe it is!" Brimstone roared back, striking Bonecrusher in the gut and leaping up to grab him around the neck. "But if he's going..."

Ever so suddenly, I saw one eye match mine.

"...then he's going out trying for the *impossible!*"

Pulling his opponent down, I saw Brimstone glance to me just for one half second, before beginning to fight the strength of the struggling buffalo. Slowly, he began to pull. Tugging, swinging, fighting, and bellowing every oath he knew he began to overcome the buffalo's strength with what he had left. His injuries bled more as muscles worked and moved, His eyes turned red from bloodshot. Veins stood out. Then he began to roar with one last almighty effort against something almost twice the size of himself.

Slowly, I heard the entire crowd go quiet, other than an open mouthed gasp, as Brimstone spun and spun until the momentum built and through his scream of unthinkable effort *lifted the entire buffalo*. He spun around without letting go as for one unbelievable moment, I saw a pony propel a whole larger beast above himself by the neck and body slam

him right over the top to land—

I saw the bar mine.

No! NO! I ran forward! Like a pane of glass shattering my head cleared and realised the danger! Galloping to the cage side past Coral even as the buffalo descended, followed by the howling rage of Brimstone Blitz drowning out a shriek from the untouched freedom of my mind that cared for somepony else who had helped me come as far as I had!

“*BRIIIIM!*”

Bonecrusher landed with a slam that lifted everything in the pit a full foot from the ground... right on the bar mine.

My vision went white and I felt my body along with everypony else in the front row *blown* away from the cage as the full construct *shattered* and leapt free of its housings. Dust and smoke whirled free and coated everypony as they covered themselves. Bits of concrete and earth rained from above and pattered from the decimated cage that was dangerously leaning, ready to fall. Griffons caught themselves in the air from the disturbances and landed quickly to point rifles at the cage itself.

My vision only saw that much, bleary with shock and blinking from the flare that had gone off right before me. Ears ringing, I pulled myself out from below Coral Eve and struggled to the edge of the cage. Pulling myself up to look in, barely able to keep myself upright in grief, I squinted through the smoke.

Nothing... just nothing.

The crowd began to get up behind me.

Then they began to cheer.

“*What a match!*” Stern’s announcing rung across the area from mostly broken speakers. “*A true epic!*”

No... no this wasn’t right! How could they *cheer!*?

Through the smoke, I saw the huge pile in the middle. A buffalo-sized one, with no sign of Brimstone at all. They screamed with cries of ‘Did you see that?’ and ‘That was awesome!’ But I only fell to the lip of the wall surrounding the cage, crying and feeling part of me torn *clean* out.

“*A second double kill in the ring with the almighty bar mine! What an... wait!*”

I gasped, but as I watched... I saw movement.

Bonecrusher began to stand up.

My heart felt hollow. No, that wasn’t *fair!* Please, *Goddesses in your mercy don’t do this! NO!*

The crowd had gone *wild* in their rush to get to the betting stands and scream their delight at the turn of events for their favourite! They started to chant for him...

...before it fell aside to reveal Brimstone Blitz beneath it, having shoved the heavy corpse up and off of himself.

The smoke clearing around us at last through the open roof above now thick with curious griffons, my friend, Brimstone Blitz, unsteadily pulled himself up.

I could not possibly describe for the rest of my life the feeling inside me.

He looked like he should have been dead. One full half of his body was burned and scarred. The eye on that side was missing entirely along with his ear. His jawline didn’t look quite affixed right either, being slumped to one side in a way jaws shouldn’t be. Meanwhile, I was sure I could see *bone* under the blasted side of his torso. Never had I seen him look so weak to take even one horribly limping step and drop the mangled helmet from his head... before crushing it with one last gasp of strength.

You could have heard a parasprite's wing flutter.

I simply almost collapsed, breathing hard when I saw him turn his one remaining eye and mangled face toward me. I couldn't help but smile and feel ready to cheer, before the silence was broken by one lonely sound of hooves tapping together in applause.

One pair, high up.

"Congratulations, Brimstone Blitz."

Red Eye. He lounged back in his chair upon the balcony as though nothing had happened. His voice carried easily and smoothly across the devastated arena below him.

"Congratulations on your victory against all the odds. Indeed, *against* the odds, if my observations and judgements are not mistaken. I may have to have words with some of the Pit organisers after this is done. But even with this, I was curious to see how you would do. It seems my investment in you was not without true purpose."

He got up, trotting to the edge of the balcony and staring down toward Brimstone. My friend stood shaking on his hooves, not having said a word yet, and stared back.

"It cost me many lives to bring you in, but when I heard of your renewed purpose below that Ranger Initiate's protection I remember feeling only justified in the decision. You have changed, Warlord. Now before me in this Pit and before the eyes of Fillydelphia's loyal workers... you have shown me at least that there is another pony standing before me today after that little 'moment' with a couple ponies at ringside. One who might finally perhaps see a way to offer more to Equestria than as a beast of burden in mines and factories."

W-what? I sat cowed beneath my master's voice, looking from him to Brimstone in equal measure.

Red Eye smiled, reaching down to take up a small trinket and throwing it down into the cage. Glinting in the light, it landed amongst the broken rubble with pinpoint accuracy before Brimstone. Squinting my eyes, I could see it was his symbol.

"I offer you more, Brimstone Blitz. Normally six victories are required, but under such circumstances as that you have proven with a clearly tampered event I feel it only right to offer you this. To leave your slavery behind. To become a better pony as part of my forces. But not as some lowly grunt... no. You are a Warlord in spirit, Brimstone. I offer you *command* of a section of my army. These wastes are tainted by raiders the likes of which you know more than I ever will. Not all can be brought to the workforce."

Brimstone looked down to the symbol, a rank offered. Above him, Red Eye smiled.

"After healing, I can have you in the Cathedral within days, ready to make your ongoing crusade to purge this world. You have done such evil, let us not mess words here. But I offer you a chance to lead an army again, to rid Equestria of those who would do nothing but harm and misery unto others. A true course of redemption under my flag, that ponies all around Equestria would come to see you in name as a saviour!"

Red Eye seemed to expect Brimstone to say something. But my friend looked only from the badge to me... then back to Red Eye.

"Great Warlord, you need not toil in penance any more. You have done your time in hell."

My master smiled, genuine and knowingly.

Brimstone trotted forward, toward the badge. Wincing and grunting at his failing body, he leaned down to pick it up. Almost falling, he brought it to his eye to look at. His eye looked to myself and Coral Eve, the mare's expression unidentifiable as she stared back. But he held my gaze for a long time. Then one bloodshot eye turned back to Red Eye.

Before he grimaced and spat a wad of blood upon it. Casting the badge down, I saw Red Eye's hoof have to reach out and stop Stern's huge rifle coming to bear.

"Very well, Warlord." Red Eye uttered, his voice calm but for a slight disappointment even as Brimstone turned back to his waiting gate where I already saw healers waiting with potions. "Very well."

With a flick of his Stable cloak, Red Eye turned, passing from the event along with many of his congregation.

Left in the devastation of the Pit, I saw workers rushing out to repair it in time for the next bout, leaving the corpses and hazards behind. Around us a great commotion kicked up of slaves talking and slavers shouting. I felt ready to sleep for days.

"All slaves with betting tickets have five minutes to collect their winnings! Only the slave with a ticket may go! They must go alone!"

The call went out, starting a mass exodus of slaves rushing to collect their earnings from the winners. Watching Brimstone disappear, I let my thoughts drift. All the odds had been against him. He couldn't turn from what he was yet still he powered through and even in the end stood tall to stick with those he wanted to for a better life. Even as I turned back to Coral Eve, she softened and placed a hoof on my shoulder.

"If he ever does one thing I'll be glad he did, it's this, Murk."

"Y-yes... I've got, um, winnings?" I held up the ticket, possibly the highest earning one in the entire stadium. "But, um..."

"But you need to go alone."

I nodded. "D-do you trust me to go off alone even for a bit?"

Coral smiled and kissed my forehead. "After today, after you seeing that, let's see how you do just this once, Murk. I trust you."

I managed a little smile back. I knew it would be a long time before I felt the temptations leave. The moment this break day was over I would be back in the grind. But for now, after all that, I could let it go for an hour or so and not see every ledge as an opportunity in the recesses of my mind.

Yes... just forget about it for now. I was about to be richer than I'd ever been in my little life, after all.

However I didn't thank him for that. If anything, I thanked him for maybe putting me on the road to saving my own life a second time.

"While the betters for the last bout collect their earnings, let us continue for those of you waiting for the second bout! We shall see if such a sight can be beaten!"

I ducked and weaved my way through the thick crowds, hopping away from stamping hooves and even scurrying below various ponies between their legs to make my way unseen through them. Ahead lay the betting stand, being flooded by a great many ponies. Taking a second to allow the crush to pass by, I sat on the stairs that would normally lead me out of the ice rink's main entranceway. The guards cast me a glance at my proximity, but I just offered a nervous smile and patted the seat. I was just sitting here waiting! Honest!

Grunting, they turned away.

"Let us bring in the first contestant, our Number Seven for the first team of this event! Growing up way in the north's frozen tundras where your very blood turns to ice... this

is Windchill! Let's hope she's stronger than that nervous face looks folks, for she is against one of our most popular fighters. Here is Number Seven for the other team as well! He's unpredictable, he is bloody in his execution and he has given us all such entertainment! It's Wildcard!"

The crowd cheered above, the noise filtering and echoing down into these tunnels I waited within. Well, they had said they drew straws for who fought Brim, didn't they? Wildcard must have lost out. What a ridiculous and terrifying pony... his surprise 'wildcard' entry being a *buffalo*...

I spotted a gap at the betting stand. Time to go claim my prize and then run as fast as I could back to Coral to wait it out and close my eyes to any further horror. No pony could see how much I was about to earn for my friends to use even if I—

I had to try and chide myself. I couldn't think that now.

Trotting over, I heard a sudden shriek above from the Pit and an approving stomp of hooves from the crowd. Stern made the announcement. Wildcard had made his kill brutally and quickly. That poor mare...

Squeezing through, I tried to hold up my ticket. Wouldn't everypony please let the little skinny pegasus through please? One snorted at me and pushed me behind him. Come on! Just because I had wings...

"Well that was fast, workers! Let's move right along! Our next match will be team one's Wildcard against team two's Number Seven!"

I paused for a second, then laughed and shook my head. Oh come on, Stern. *Everypony* knew that Number *Eight* came after Number Seven, right? Windchill had been number seven! Even I could count to seven. It was in my...

I froze rock solid.

...name.

"Come on, Number Seven! Get in here!"

No... no there was no way. She was just making a mistake.

A hoof lay on my shoulder. From out of the shadows and gaps between ponies, three lithe and dark coloured raiders emerged and grabbed me even when I tried to run. Shades! Barb's Shades!

"Oh you're not going anywhere, little pony!" One of them sneered at me even when I cried out and struggled, but no pony paid any heed. "Wildcard told you, didn't he? You'd *never* guess his surprise entry from behind the scenes..."

I screamed. I screamed for Coral, for Brimstone. For *Red Eye* even, to hear me and stop them. But telekinesis and ropes grabbed me, dragging and pulling me through the crowds toward the stairs leading down, the ones I'd been meekly guided through what felt like so long ago. No! Please *no*!

My hooves beat at them, but their indistinct forms twisted and scuffled back until I felt a hoof crash into my face. My nose, still fragile and hurt after My Master's beating, sent a wash of pain through my head and dizzied my vision. Cowed, I slumped and held it while they pulled me down into the fighting pits, whimpering helplessly.

"Wildcard was kind enough to give us a home, you really think some of us wouldn't just slip out of that Mall? That's what we *do*. When we heard he wanted somepony to fetch you for this place, we were all too happy to oblige. The Clan avenges its own!"

"Please... not the Pit, I... I can't fight..." They hurled me upon a dark stone floor around various other fearful-looking ponies.

They just scoffed, grins showing through the darkness. I knew this place, it was the waiting rooms before a match! Rotten benches and small cells to hold troublesome slaves lined the walls while the bloodily stained ramp that led to the main Pit gate was at the far side. I heard trotting coming down it.

"Isn't that the point? We're raiders, kiddo. Don't expect mercy or any sort of begging to work. You killed our Clan leader, this is revenge. Nothing heroic, just a simple reworking of the roster behind the scenes and then throwing you in with the boss..."

"Please..." They were fading away even while a gruff slaver came looking around the slaves, trying to find me and presuming I'd just hid away.

"Bye bye, feathers!" Their laughter only echoed lightly and faded away when they melted into the shadows. Even from beyond the grave, Barb's influence was against me.

"There you are!"

A hoof fell on my shoulder. I pleaded, begged him to check with Red Eye, even! But a crop raised and fell before I was dragged between his assistants. Every terror, mind numbing horror from before was coming back. There was no Littlepip to interrupt this time! Coral was stuck in the stands! Brimstone could barely even move after his runs! There was *no pony* to help me this time! Struggling, I beat at them, fighting... but again and again they fought me off and carted me up, before throwing me into the light.

I heard a gate slam, and a crowd roar so loud I almost screamed at the thudding headache.

Behind me, a maniacal giggle when I dared open my eyes.

I was in the Pit... and Wildcard was my opponent.

It felt like my life had come full circle.

She hadn't saved me. She had become something false to what I had believed.

Of course it would be the Pit to have it happen. That was why I'd not succeeded. My destiny would not let me die in a false belief. I could almost feel my cutie mark jangling and laughing through those gnashing shackles.

"Ooooh! Look who thinks he can take me on, huh? You a big tough stallion now? Are ya?"

Wildcard pranced and trotted in equal measure around the corpses and chemical spills that now crowded the floor of the Pit toward me. Down here in the middle of it, I had to fight to not breathe through my nose, it was a *carnal pit* now. My hooves felt damp from stepping in blood, the flies had descended, and even at a distance I could feel my chest thumping hard and driving my windpipe shut from that radioactive green sludge.

"No! No, I don't! I'm not meant to be in here! I... I give up! You win!" I backed away into the gate. Ahead of me, Wildcard laughed and leapt atop the huge corpse of Bonecrusher, his two machetes (from a barrel, presumably) held in his telekinesis either side casting thin shadows from the massive floodlights centred on him right in the middle.

"Aw, you want out, poor little pony! HAHAAA! NO CHANCE!" His face twisted from mock care to fury so quickly, before seething and stalking toward me. "You come into *my* ring, insult *my* skill by declaring you can beat me by coming here and then you have the balls to say you were just *wasting my time*?" One eye twitched. "*You little shithead!* C'mere, c'mere-c'mere-c'mere!"

He started galloping forward. Shrieking, I ran around the edge. Sprinting and crying all at once, I put my head down and tried to stay away from him as best I could. The crowd laughed and stomped their pleasure, but I was more concerned with the tap-tap-tapping of machete blades on the ground as he taunted me while chasing.

"Come here little Murky! Wildy's comin' to geeet yaaaa!"

I looked back to see him leisurely playing up his chase, acting to the crowd and with his tongue hanging out in delight. I screamed when I felt myself trip, then again as I saw it had been over Roaring Tiger's broken neck. The corpse fell to the side and swung lifeless eyes toward me. Scrambling back, I tried to climb the cage, but a slaver's baton only knocked me back in. No! No, let me out! Not like this! It would hurt! *I didn't want to die like this!*

Then the pain began, I felt a horrid tear upon my flank. Falling backwards, squealing aloud, I tried to clutch myself and only sat still with wide shocked eyes at the immense rip in my skin that bled upon the floor. I... I couldn't scream more, I just stared in disbelief when the pain crawled and spread. Instead, a low and fearful moan escaped my mouth toward Wildcard. The maniacal raider stood back, licking my blood from his giant blade and shivering in delight.

"P-please... don't do this!" I begged him, gritting my teeth. It hurt *so much!*

"Not when you taste like this! Oh it's good! Want some?"

The machete extended, while I crawled and pulled myself away. Ahead of me, through the cage I could see slavers throwing themselves upon a commotion. Coral blasted at least two away, running and trying to tear open a section of the damaged cage. I heard her screaming my name, but they just kept coming. A baton swung. She fell.

"You turning down my offers again? It's cool, man, it's cool... acquired taste and all. Coulda said 'No, thanks' though..." Wildcard wandered off to the side, giggling and keeping an eye on me even while I pulled myself past Top Quartz and Shovels. My leg leaked a trail behind me, every movement sending flares of sharp pain across my body. Yelping and crying aloud, the crowd seemed to enjoy the sight.

I desperately wanted someone to come and help me. Glimmer! Glimmerlight to... to cut the power and make it dark! Or... or Protégé come back and stop the event! Mister Peace! He could destroy the entire Pit!

But there was no sign of any of them. I was alone. Truly alone.

My leg was going numb from blood loss. Worse, I could feel myself breathing in less each time. Coughing and spluttering, I tried to suck in more oxygen to keep myself going. In the middle of the arena, they were treated to a little pegasus struggling to even breathe properly.

"I thought you'd like my surprise, I did *tell* you I had a wildcard entry, kid!" He grinned, looking around at the crowd. "They like it... *everypony* likes seeing pegasi get cut up. Something about the way you flop... oooh, it's *artistic!*"

The machete dropped in front of where I'd tried to limp to. Squeaking, I turned the other way only for the second to block me off again. Oh Goddesses, please lift me free of this! Not like this! I turned and galloped, crying out at the pain of even moving my cut leg, and falling across myself. That cry turned to a higher pitch when something dug into my flesh and pulled *hard*. Twisting, I saw a large slender hook dug through my other flank, sunk in and pulling so hard my body's flesh was shifting *off* my figure! The feeling as my flesh *lifted* and pulled the rest of me back, the hook tearing at it inside! I wanted to flail, but the movements hurt so much! My hooves struggled, trying to pull at it while the string attached tugged me slowly across the floor, screaming as I went. It hurt so bad... why... why in here?

"No trying to run! I got a lot more for you!" Wildcard's magic drew the hook out of me, squirting blood as its barb on the tip ripped my flesh.

A horrible sensation took over, my back legs... I... I couldn't feel them! I'd lost so much blood from my little body that I couldn't properly feel them I... I... I...

I coughed, it grew into a hacking convulsion. The stress and lack of air from proper measured breathing was getting too much. In front of everypony I flopped and vomited blood, clutching my chest, my pupils shrinking. A feeling like thick liquid in my throat as it started all over again... my illness had gone unnoticed for far too long and now it was doing its job. Seething through my scabbed neck, it was killing me as much as Wildcard.

"Oooh... radiation is it? Well now, that gives me an idea! The crowd'll like this one! HAH!"

I was being dragged across the pit, trailing blood and unable to even properly breathe. Juddering and coughing up wads to try and get my windpipe clear, I felt my vision go hazy. M-maybe if I could d-drown in it it'd be less p-painful...

I was so scared, in so much pain...

I wished Brimstone had never saved me. It hurt so much now in front of the hundreds who cheered for my death like they would have weeks ago.

He dumped me beside the chemical pile, within feet of the hissing liquid. I squirmed, seeing the steaming liquid pop and fly nearby. Thoughts of seeing a pony flayed to the bone by it came to mind, and in a moment of desperation I lashed out.

One of my hooves struck his jawline before he began talking. His eyes went wide as the movement made him bite his tongue *hard*. Wandering back, clutching his mouth, I saw his eyes fill with *rage*, of that unleashed insanity lurking inside him.

"Ooh... y-you little brat! My tongue! I *taste* with that tongue! I don't have a *spare*! You're going in that fucking goo! Right in! Hooves first so you *feel it the entire way*! *Fuck you!*"

He charged forward, both machetes lifting from the ground! I felt the chemical pile right behind me. I'd... I'd only get one chance at this! He was running so fast, heedless and right at me! My lungs contracting, jawline covered in red from leakage out of my mouth, I swung up to get my hooves facing him, if I timed this wrong...

He stopped.

Then he laughed. Stomping his hooves and even dropping his weapons, he laughed as much as the crowd and rolled onto his back, howling with mirth.

"You... you actually thought I'd fall for that? HAHAHA! That's brilliant! Oh you *actually* thought you could survive this!"

Rolling back up, wiping his eyes, Wildcard sauntered nearby, before dragging me away from the chemicals with his magic.

"You never even think about that after me there's *five* others? You wanna know why you wouldn't beat me? Because *fuck you*, that's why!"

His hoof struck my face, dizzying me. I felt myself lifted up, before the whole crowd. Telekinesis caught my upper body and lifted my beaten, bleeding and dying sick body before them. I felt ready to pass out, my mind reeling.

"You insulted me by thinking you could win! But hey? It's cool man, I'm cool with it! It's like... philosophy of entertainment, right? You make the crowd think I was gonna fail! Cool man! I like it! Really!"

There was a pain. A pain like no other. I'd been stabbed before, but this was so much more. A piercing feeling, a push and bulging like I'd eaten too much before it emerged.

Under the approving crowd, I looked down from hanging in his magic to see his machete blade protruding from my stomach.

He'd... he'd impaled me.

I couldn't even scream through my throat, just a low and painful moan at the three feet of cold metal right through me. I felt him close to my ear, whispering.

"You probably thought this little part of your adventure was over, right? That you'd hear the moral of the story and that'd be it for another while?"

"P-p-plea..."

"Well, I don't play by the rules of drama, kid. There's no hero to save you. You likely had it in your head, 'Oh, I almost died last time from falling, there won't be any big scare again for a while, right?' Cos' stories work like that... preservation of impact, right?"

I felt a cold touch on my neck, the second one. The crowd was chanting, but everything had fallen away. There was just me and him... and I was fading quickly, mortally wounded. I felt the pain begin to kick in, spreading and clenching over my whole torso as everything inside me rebelled at the blade pushing through them.

"But you see, I never did like that. Gotta *innovate*, y'know? So here's a curveball for you. What if you died *now*? How would the little story in your head like that?"

"N-no..."

"Yeeees... they're all watching you. Some might want this, sick bastards they are like me. But most might be screaming at me right now to let you go. Only no matter how loud they swear and scream, I'll never hear them. Why don't you scream for them all right now? One last scream before I pull?"

Before me, through the cloudy eyesight, past the dulled sounds of everyone watching me in this Pit, I saw Coral slamming on the cage, pulled down by slavers as she tried her all to no avail.

Brimstone's words were the ones in my head though. His first ever words to me.

"Put on a braver face there, don't let them have the pleasure."

My mouth stammered, wanting to scream for help. But I knew I was alone.

"Come on... do it!"

I could feel my body failing, everything going numb.

"DO IT!"

I couldn't hold it back... so much pain! I couldn't even breathe.

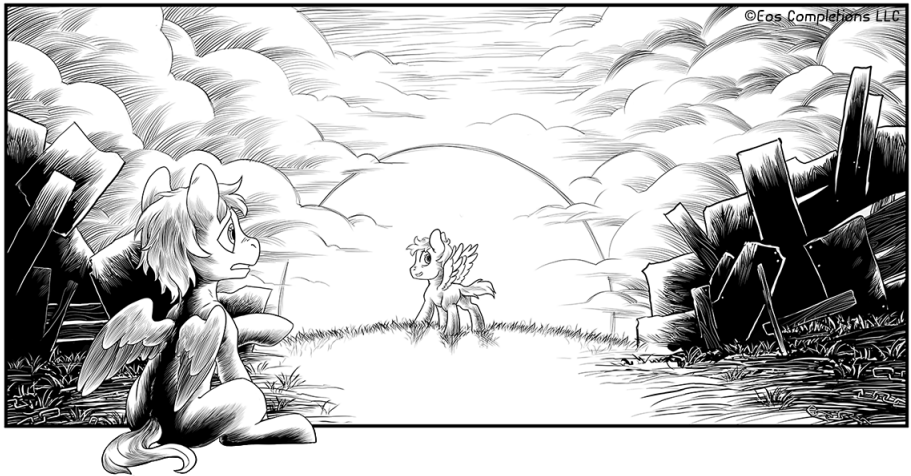
"Oops!"

The machete blade drew, I felt my neck open and something leak over my chest. A horrible gurgling, a numb feeling of falling to the ground. Quivering, in enough pain that my mind simply reeled and looked to the sky with strange clarity to where a hole in the cage had once been. I couldn't even raise a hoof to try and wish for her to please... please just save me.

She didn't save you.

Footnote: All perks lost...

Killing the Slave



"Game's over, my little pony! You didn't find your precious freedom."

"If you don't mind, what was it like?"

Y-you mean?

"To die."

I did not fall.

That caught me by surprise. I simply... was. Hanging, drifting without moving anywhere. What had happened? I remembered pain, blood, lying on a hard floor amongst bodies of ponies and trying to move my hooves. I... I'd wanted to catch the blood, try to put it back in!

What had happened since then? I couldn't see anything! It felt like there were two unexplainable forces in my head, tugging me one way or the other. But I didn't move. Was there anything to move? I couldn't see or hear myself. No weight.

Something tugged one way, then the other. I saw patterns without eyes, inconceivable and impossible shapes that bore my journey to everywhere. But still those forces. Was it my soul? Every inch of my non-existent body was shivering. How did that make sense? My mind reeled, my perceptions experiencing claustrophobia, vertigo, and loss of balance all at once while I was hurled and thrown by forces I would never understand or truly be able to describe in words that did any justice.

A painful light. The one thing I could see. Burning hard and bright like metal being welded, radiating waves of aching reality above an encompassing dark void of calm. Both sucked at me, tearing me across distances until I was nothing but a thinly-spread and ruined shell, unable to truly grasp the events affecting him.

Slowly, the pain grew all too much. It hurt me. It hurt so bad.

I hadn't even realised I'd been hanging onto any sort of ledge when I let go and whirled my way into the void below.

I fell. No, I didn't fall. I travelled. No up or down or point of reference. I simply moved. Something taking me somewhere, a force I couldn't fight.

Time passed. Minutes, hours... days. I had nothing to think about, simply so long within this place that would occasionally shift me into another plane of the same darkness. I learned the colours of nothing and I saw the unthinkable distances of shadows. Where had I come from? A city. A painful city of chains. I was not chained any longer, that I knew. But why was I here?

A whipping sense of turbulent nature grasped me. A leering face and a thick blood-stained blade. He'd killed me! That was right! Was this what happened?

Was I to meet with the Goddesses? I could not comprehend the form of their afterlife!

Time passed. Nothing changed. Nothing other than the one sense I had left of a distance so unimaginably large from the world I'd known only growing bigger and bigger, until I could no longer even remember how far I had travelled away from the harsh light.

A solidity was approaching. Something *else*. My mind focused on it, having spent the last vast stretches of eternity simply praying and hoping it was over. It grew bigger, more forceful. A thicker harshness in the void.

Even while I was sped toward it. I looked back to see the harsh light.

It was impossible to see, the eons of life so distant to me.

Washing over me, I realised I no longer remembered why I was here all over again.

My ears pricked and twitched. I heard a light whisper of wind and the hiss of drifting ash. Almost to my own shock, I heard myself groan. A smell entered my nostrils, dry and sandy. An aching glare began to show through the cracks of... my eyes?

Slowly, gasping and twisting, I found myself lying on my side and rolled onto my back. A sensation of movement! Of presence! I was somewhere!

Through my ears, I heard a whispering. On the wind, a voice carried.

"...ttle ponies..."

Was somepony there? I sat up and groaned when my eyes shot open to meet the sun's radiance. Down from above, even sheltered by the clouded sky, it hurt and stung so much that I squinted and brought a hoof up to cover them while sitting up. Below me my hooves staggered and reacted sluggishly like a drunkard. I expected to be in pain, but there was nothing.

Just a numbness.

Then even before I was able to see where I was, I realised the truth.

I couldn't feel *anything*.

No, that wasn't right. I felt pain in my eyes from the light and a dull sensation of touch, but my nerves were numbed and without proper textile feel. When I rubbed my own face I couldn't feel it! Staggering, yelping out loud, I fell even while trying to stand up quickly in shock. I didn't even fully feel anything but the light pain of falling upon my chest. I tried to gasp, but no air entered my lungs. *I wasn't breathing!* I *could* breathe by habit, yet there was no air to take in... but I was still alive!

Twisting, shivering, and scared, I finally got my eyes open to look around me. Please, somepony tell me where I was! Why was I even here? What brought me here?

The sight would have stolen any breath I had away. Around me, expanding and disappearing to the horizon, I saw freedom itself.

The Equestrian Wasteland.

Rolling dusty hills of drifting sand and dead vegetation, over rotten expanses of fields and plains. High cliffs far in the distance rose high and bore the scars of balefire. Down from above, a brighter sun than I ever remembered cast jagged shadows from every outcrop, ditch, and dry riverbed in a world with all colours stolen from it, left with but an earthy dry tone from ground to cloud.

Wisps of wind carried little cyclones of dust across the wastes, raking dead leaves or setting dry twigs rocking in the breeze. Around me it was the only true motion other than the lethargic clouds above. No matter where I looked, I saw nothing but everlasting wastes from the hillside I had woken up on.

Hesitantly and shakily, I began to stand up. Having to visually watch my hooves and ensure they were as they should be, I got to my hooves and cast my head around. I could see for at least a few miles in every direction, to each cliff, hill, field, and forest. There were no settlements or indications of life. Not even a brahmin.

"...fallen, no news, wastelan..."

Was that my imagination? The wind? What I'd thought were words disappeared on the light wind, barely audible.

"Hello?"

The words were spoken loudly, having to push my nerves to shout against the quiet expanse. But the world ate them, allowing only an almost silent echo.

"Hello? *Is anypony there?*"

Louder. I shouted, turning this way and that.

Absolutely nothing. My words were lost to the wind.

A strange sense filled me. This was *freedom*. I wasn't in Fillydelphia anymore! I was in the wastes! *I was free!* Free to go anywhere! Do anything! There were no chains, my body felt fine, and nopony nearby to take me in! My chest no longer felt tight, the swelling in my breast having subsided in this cleaner air while every injury seemed to have gone. My nose felt straight again! My radsores were gone!

A quick glance over showed me my wildest dreams. My fleece was repaired! The whip marks and scars were all gone! My wings still didn't move, but the pain had stopped. I just felt normal. Free of pain.

Free!

Wasn't this what I had always wanted?

If so, why did I just feel lonely?

Staggering to start with, I began to trot. I didn't choose a direction. I just went forward. Maybe once I got over the next hill and stood atop those far off cliffs, I might be able to see some sort of settlement.

My hooves sunk slightly in the dust as I moved downhill. My ears remained perked up and listening for anything in the distance. But nothing other than the thin blows of wind and my own light trotting met them. Moving from dust to rock, I stopped only briefly to check the position of the sun. I needed shelter before dark!

Thankfully, it was just before midday. I had plenty of time yet.

I climbed another hill, descending it quickly before tackling the next one. Every so often I trotted over to some rock formations or a lonely dead tree. Trotting around them, seeing the crispy blackened tree bark or hunting for any signs of somepony's old camp, I always found nothing. I climbed a rock once, struggling against my numbed sense of touch until I stood atop it. Even looking around, I saw little other than distant peaks of some huge mountain range, bereft of the snow I had always imagined. This land was sick, but in the absence of anything else living it simply seemed dead. Like I was wandering over a grave of nature itself. There weren't even any signs of ruined houses or farms.

My journey continued. I didn't feel tired, just scared. Nothing happened, but the lack of event was chilling. A fifth hill passed, then a tenth. Before long, I had counted twenty long ascents and stumbling trips downhill. I kept trotting for hours to reach the higher cliffs and only then began the steep ascent. I thought as I travelled, thought of this new life and what I would make of it. I needed to find somepony and figure out my way to someplace safe! Or the way to Shattered Hoof and see if my mother was still there! Was Shattered Hoof even nearby? What if I was on the other side of the planet?

How had I even got here? The last thing I remembered was pain. So much pain. A desire for peace and then a terror so great as to make me shiver. I had died. Oh Goddesses, he'd killed me!

I froze, fighting between the lack of air assaulting every instinctive habit I had and the subconscious need to hyperventilate! He'd killed me! I died! I'd been sent to the afterlife, hadn't I? It was an eternity!

Tears welled up in my eyes while I stood upon the sharp cliff-side. Pacing in place, I looked back across the ten miles or so I'd trotted and shivered badly. Was this a punishment? But I was free? I didn't understand!

Turning, I galloped up the cliff. I needed to know! It would get dark soon! The sun was just nearing the edge before it would get dark! I had maybe an hour at most! I *had* to find something from here! Skidding and slipping, I rushed to the edge of the cliff, high up enough that my mane blew and my ears had to drop down to protect themselves from the whipping gales.

Panicking, I turned my head in every direction.

Nothing.

I saw a massive cluster of boulders in to one side, about twenty miles away and so thick they looked like a rock forest. A dry seabed lay just beside it before meeting more rolling hills with sharp rocky outlets if I kept my head turning. They gave way to a dead forest of sharp branches and a drop below sea level beyond that. To the other side lay nothing but plains expanding until the hazy heat of the wasteland warped my vision. The same mountains I'd seen before covered the rest of this massive vista across the wastes. I was surrounded by a varied and incredible terrain scaled in ways I never had dreamed of or noticed during my time as a slave in the wastes, and yet I saw *nothing*.

Not a single smokestack or empty house. No wildlife, horrid beasts, or any ponies of any sort.

"Hello! Please, if anypony's there, help me!" I screamed from the cliff until I choked and gasped, drawing air that wasn't there. The feeling was becoming increasingly unsettling the longer it went on. I could feel *wind* but there was no air. Why wasn't I choking?

My worries, however, lay with the prospect of being left alone in a pitch dark wasteland all night. Who knew what came out of its lurking holes then? Thoughts of being chased by

feral zombie ghouls when I couldn't see were mixed with lurking eyes watching from the distance in my imagination. The sun was descending!

I had to make a choice. I chose the forest. Coral and Glimmer's village had been hidden in one, maybe I'd find one too!

Turning, I cantered downhill. I wanted to gallop, but I couldn't exhaust myself. I'd cover more ground at a canter.

I just couldn't stop shivering! A desperation was overtaking me. A lonely ache in my heart filled with the paranoia that I was simply all alone forever! I didn't even know this place! Why was I even here? What happened? The last thing I remembered was just a lot of pain and fear! Sweating, I thought hard. I'd tried to kill myself, but Brimstone had saved me! What had happened after that? I felt like I'd known a few minutes ago, but it had drifted from my memory almost immediately.

I just didn't know. It all turned blurry and then I was here. I just couldn't remember. Had I died in my sleep? Just passed away like many slaves did?

The thought terrified me in its sheer simple logic.

Reaching the bottom of the slope, I set out across the bumpy fields, weaving between wild clumps of hedge and bracken. My mind twisted, hurting inside. Wait, there was terror! Had somepony kill—

He'd killed me!

How could I forget that? He'd killed me and now I was gone!

Sweating, I kept my head looking around. Passing across a dry riverbed, I clawed and struggled at the crumbling sides until the harder rock let me pull myself out and continue my journey toward that silent forest. I wasn't going to make it, the sun was—

Looking up and blinking, I saw the sun was resting just before midday.

Hadn't it just been about to set? What was going on? I turned my head, looked to the place I had just seen it. But every time I blinked it seemed unmoving, as though it were resetting forever. An eternal daytime.

Staggering, trotting away from it like I could somehow escape the sun itself, I just shook my head. I had to look back at the ground and try to ignore it. Stumbling over every rock I couldn't feel with my dead nerves, it took me guiding every hoof by sight to keep going over this rockier field.

Up ahead, the forest loomed, high trees arching over one another with empty branches rustling lightly. Splintering cracks at the wind bending their decaying trunks gave off unearthly sounds that broke the wind drawn silence of before.

It took me many hours to reach the forest. The distance was deceptive and the way was slow. But I didn't feel tired, just scared. Scared of being alone in a world with nopony else to see.

What was going on?

I couldn't remember why I was even here. What had happened again? I remembered being in Fillydelphia, but then nothing.

What had happened that brought me here, again?

The twig snapped under my hoof. Freezing on the spot out of sheer habit, I glanced around to see if anypony had heard or spotted me.

Nothing. Just empty shells of trees clustering around me thickly over a dark brown earth. The light from above sent spidery webs of light through the thick branches. Even through the clouds it seemed to light up clearings and pathways for me, with the dust spiralling into the dull beams.

I'd wandered the forest for so long now. Three times I'd sworn I saw the sun about to set and pulled myself into the bracken to try and hide before sleep. I hadn't gotten any. Every time my eyes had closed, I'd opened them simply to see the angle of the sun was constant, waiting for me to get back up. No tiredness or drowsy feelings fell across my mind no matter how many cycles I saw.

So I simply trotted onward, my quest to find something to make sense of all this. Many times I had stopped to press my eyes shut and try to remember everything or simply to cry. It was pathetic, but it had been so long without anypony around me. I'd *never* been truly alone in my life! Never been without order or direction. I didn't like this!

Sometimes I would gallop for hours until I fell over my own dulled hooves. Pain penetrated the numbness, I had discovered.

Typical.

My ears perked up. A breeze of wind carrying through the trees. I'd heard words now and again, unnerving me with a single hint of presence in this dead world. I was truly alone, yet something was *out there*.

The thought scared me as much as it reassured me.

"...ssacre... rbu... rry..."

Looking around at this ongoing forest, I tried to make any sense of it or locate some sort of pony-made path. But there were no tracks. Not even any animal routes. Even the trees seemed to lack nests or old holes for birds! Not a single piece of living wildlife had appeared. Not even a skeleton! Just trees. Ever thickening trees. Trees that shifted and brushed, growing closer and closer until I was having to squeeze between them over rotten and muddy swampland to proceed. Soon, I was having to pull myself up and over, or clamber under, huge roots that arced up taller than a pony. They spread from trees thicker than the giant stone pillars in Fillydelphia.

Was this all freedom was?

I wasn't sure that I enjoyed it as much as I'd dreamed. I just felt beyond the reach of anypony. Was I supposed to be enjoying this feeling?

What if it really was like this?

Panicking, pacing on the spot, I made a gallop forward. There had to be something! The forest would end soon! Somepony would be up ahead in a settlement or cave or *something*! Pulling through twigs and bucking dead wood to the ground, I clawed and tugged my way through. All the way my mind fretted. Slavery was so much pain but this was beyond sanity! There had to be somepony! My friends! Glimmer! Brimstone! *Anypony!*

Up ahead, I saw some light through the closing squeeze of trees and swampland. Yes! Light! That meant something causing it!

My back legs kicked, I threw mud up, and tugged long dry vines out of my way. I felt my body crushed between trunks as I slipped and fell between them. Crying out and flipping over, I let my frail body roll out to the dry ground. Gallop, Murky! Gallop! Light! Somepony was out there!

I broke the edge of the woods, landing with a dull thump on the dusty plains of the Wasteland once again. Pushing through the ache, I looked up with a smile!

Before me, the endless plains of the wasteland greeted me, the horizon ringed with high mountains and forested hills. The sun shone just enough through a crack in the cloud cover that it had sent the light I had seen.

"No. No! Please, come on!"

Cantering forward, looking desperately from left to right, I saw the forest I had just left arcing down to the edge of the sea. All the water was gone, replaced by a horribly endless dry flat land.

There was nothing.

I fell to the ground, hopeless as every muscle in my body sank.

"...dead... ope los..."

The words sent shivers across my body. The world itself was taunting me! The Wasteland in its horrid glory torturing the only pony left in it with the sounds of a hopeless dream to meet somepony out here!

My memory reeled, how long had I been here? How far had I trotted? Oh Goddesses, had it been a *week*?

"Somepony!" I cried it, galloping forward. I fell, got back up with great effort through the numbness. *"Anypony! HELP!"*

The wind carried nothing, no voices. I galloped forward into the plains, cresting small hills, a desperate charge in any direction! I travelled still, counting down miles as I screamed and begged somepony to just be there!

"PLEASE!" I looked behind rocks, climbed trees as best I could, hunted in a cave, and even moved into the mountains before the heights forced me to turn back with a storm of wind. I found myself amid the plains, alone and not tired in the slightest. Set to wander eternally through this featureless land of no memories.

"Somepony please help me!" Atop a hill, I spun, shouting in all directions. *"Is anypony out there!? I don't know what's going on!"*

"...pony who... ir drea... fell to wastes..."

My head shot up, screaming after the wind as it whirled away with a voice.

"I don't know! I don't know what happened! Why am I here!? I don't want to be alone!"

Frantic, trying to reach out and grab the wind, as stupid as it was, I fell. Falling, rolling down the low embankment in a spray of dust, I coughed and curled up to wait. To wait for eternity as I saw the sun once again reset and refuse to allow me the sleep that would remove the waiting.

"Lost?"

My eyes shot open. Lifting my head, I looked around rapidly. I couldn't see anypony.

"Wh-who's there?" I felt my words stammer and tumble badly. Every feeling I'd gotten of meeting somepony for the first time and being shy heightened to an unimaginable degree after this isolation. How long had it been? A full day? No, longer. I couldn't remember! It felt so short.

That voice though, wasn't it...

Only when I stopped looking did I hear them again.

"Behind you, Murky Number Seven."

The voice didn't sound strong, but even its presence frightened me. Spinning around, I saw him and almost screamed, falling backward into the wastes and numbly scrambling away! A small pony standing before me, having sneaked up!

He was a wretched shell of a pony. Tiny, frail, and with legs so thin I could see the edges

of bone even while they shivered at the effort of simply keeping his body up. A ruined black fleece was draped across him, stained and doing nothing to hide severe injuries. Whip marks adorned his back. I could see dripping blood from them. His face held huge radsores that seemed to swell out of the skin with soaked up radiation and weeping pus. Behind them I saw sunken bloodshot eyes that had known no sleep.

A horrid ruin of a pony, mistreated and hurt, yet it advanced on me! Rolling over, I tried to run and fell on my own face. Why had I lost feeling? I simply crawled low, scurrying to roll over the lip of the hill.

“Come back!” That rasping voice from a bloody and thickened throat!

“S-stay away!”

Bandaged wings fell limply by his torso, leading to burns and parts of his filthy dark green coat falling out to reveal bruised skin.

Then it hit me, where I knew that voice.

It was me.

It was me right before I’d come here. Broken, battered, and edging so close to death. I could even see a trickle of red from the edge of his mouth.

“*Stay away!*” I simply cried out and backed off, this broken form of me advancing with hazy eyes. Was I really that bad? Had they hurt me so much? It looked like a moving corpse that dripped blood from its very neck and stumbled on stick-like legs.

“I’m you, it’s all right.”

“What’s going on?” I shouted back, holding out a hoof, moving backward every time it came closer. What was this place? Why was I here? I didn’t understand anything! Goddesses save me from this nightmare!

“You came.” This ruin of a pony limped forward, trotting unevenly as he circled my own numbed but otherwise cleaner and uninjured body. I felt unable to move, just following ‘him’ with my head as best I could, realising I could not escape him. Despite that limping, every time I blinked he was closer, always moving just enough to keep up.

“I thought I’d never find you, thought you hadn’t come at all. I was getting worried.”

My own voice from that mouth sounded raspy and thick with gurgling bile. A hoof went to my chest. That disease had hurt so much. I was finally *seeing* it in myself here. Yet ‘he’ sounded uncaring and settled, as though speaking from experience or sudden relief.

“Welcome, though. I’m so glad you followed ‘us’ here, albeit accidentally. I don’t understand that.”

“A-accidentally? I don’t know what you mean!” I shook and took a step back as I saw those lifeless eyes with pinprick pupils.

“By choosing to come here into the peaceful reward for slaves, of course. You act like you’re lost and scared, but isn’t this what you wanted these last days? No pony will ever hurt you again. Never hurt *us*. There’s no orders, no slavery. No cold nights or great hunger. No pony will ever tell us what to do ever again. I... we... you... it’s finally over.”

My eyes went wide, falling to my haunches.

“Y-you mean?” I bit my lip. “No, no this has to be some sort of... fever dream! Like this is what I’m seeing while fighting to survive a horrible injury! I can’t be—”

The slave before me shook his head before nodding at the last words. My hooves went to my face. This couldn’t be true. Not just like that!

“Yes, you are.” He moved a hoof to his chest, sitting down. “You died. Wildcard killed you and now it’s all over at last. It has ended. It hurt, but no pony can hurt you ever again!”

You have peace at last."

I could only feel my eyes tear up again. This wasn't what I imagined.

"But it's what you want." The form before me smiled, knowing what I was thinking. "Look me in the eyes. Isn't this what we always wanted? Who better than yourself to remind you? I'm a part of you. I know it's what you wanted, seeking an end to the pain. They won't take our dignity."

Nodding my head, I sniffed. "Y-yes. W-will there be any more?"

"No!" The ruined pony shook his... my... head and smiled. "It might not be your fantasy, but this is freedom."

"It's not how I wanted it. My fri—"

The Ruin (I couldn't help but give it some title) interrupted me sharply, standing up.

"You don't *know* what freedom is, Murk! You wanted to taste it. That's what your Master told us long ago, remember? After his griffon stopped you? He told you that you needed to taste freedom! Well here it is!"

He swung a hoof around. I could see that passion even without pupils. The same I'd once shown and the delight to have anything for myself. I didn't recognise myself, but I saw it in him.

"This waste, it's one of the ways you can face where we go now. But this is dying a slave, eternally wandering without orders. What kind of pony needs to be shown the truth by himself? You're just confused, a lost part of me and us that doesn't quite know how to properly die. Listen. Right now, this is not on the cusp between life and death. There is no life to go back to. This is simply between peace and pain."

His tone had taken a dark turn, moving closer across the dusty hill to stand before me.

"Have you really locked all those wishes away so much in your terror that you cannot even remember them when they are shown to you? We can take our freedom right *now*, Murk! *He* can't catch us this time! Be lost to the open eternity away from pain and torment. I'm so sorry it wasn't how you wanted, but it's finally here in some way. Peace or pain, Murk. This is it. The time to make the choice."

"T-to live or die?" I stammered back, sweating.

"To die a slave or die peacefully, Murk. It's the only choice left. We can't go back to the light of life any more. It became too much. Our body simply passed on." The Ruin lost its smile, sidling up beside me. "Now, to simply lie down and take the horror of this barren emptiness of purpose... or follow me, the part of you that knows the pain like no other, and that knows you can find peace from this wasteland with a simple jump."

Soundlessly, the dust before me yawned out and parted. Yelping, I fell back as ledges formed and dust swirled into the void opening up. So deep that the edges of stone simply disappeared into a misty nothing below! It wasn't solid black, instead a hazy tone of the horizon reflected closer than the eye should ever be able to comprehend. True eternity below me.

Then I noticed the Ruin hadn't moved. He simply seemed to rest in the air above the hole as though walking on solid ground. That battered head of mine turned back at me.

"Do you want to die a slave? This is the way to escape. Give yourself to the peace and allow yourself to fall as far from the painful light as you can. Take the chance and make that one choice to throw yourself into that place where you want to feel no more pain. Somewhere their chains will never find you and you can finally know rest."

Every joint ached as I shivered and sweated under stress. This was all too much for me to

take in or to understand. What kind of decision was this? For peace? I wanted peace. If I was dead, I didn't want to die in pain and remembering all the hurt...

"You can forget all that." Its eyes narrowed, knowing me. "If you remain here, you will spend eternity a slave. You noticed that in the forest. That panic without anypony around to give you an order? You're *still a slave* here, Murk. But fall, leap to the void, and we will escape those bonds at last. To a place our cutie mark can no longer even tell us our destiny. No matter what it tells us at all."

I moved closer, looking down to the contrasting warp of colour and form that betrayed a fall long beyond measure.

"It's not empty. It is a place of peace. You need only make the journey to the place we *truly* want, further down. Further away. You tried before, remember?"

The colours shifted, becoming that of gravel under fresh rain. My face twisted, tears dripping free into the pit.

"Just lean forward and it all ends forever. The story of the born slave who escaped to a peaceful afterlife, Murk. Tragedy turned to albeit only bittersweet freedom, but it is the best we can have."

I stepped back, trotting away from it to lie on the ground and face away from the gaping hole. Pulling my hooves above my head, I shook it again and again.

"I don't know! I just don't know! I'm sorry, I'm so scared and I— this is all..."

The Ruin of my own body at the will of My Masters trotted over. I felt his wasted hooves beside me before one settled across my back.

"It's alright. It's okay to be scared. I'm scared too, but I'm the part of us that felt so much of it. Please..."

The hoof lifted my head up, trying to smile through cracked and dry lips.

"...an end to a life of abuse and pain. All with but one fall."

I glanced back, before turning to him. This was all so much. I needed to know.

"What will I find down there?"

The Ruin paused, then patted my shoulder.

"The beauty of this being our own spirit and soul around here? I can show you. You can show yourself."

The entire world shifted. Like somepony unravelling paper from a foal's model, the surface of what I saw around me peeled and faded. Staring in wide eyed wonder, I saw mountains lift and silently breeze into the sky while rocks folded and surged. The ground slid from beneath my feet and left me standing over *nothing* without falling. A sense of weightlessness overcame me while reality as I knew it hid and reshaped, sliding silently into a new form in the moments that I blinked. By the time I'd rubbed my eyes to even check if I were seeing this right, I was no longer in the Wastes.

Around me, lush green grass slid against my unfeeling legs. The sky above shone bright through patchy white clouds cleaner than I had ever known! I slid, almost falling before I realised we were on a sharp incline.

This was the world in my dreams. Equestria of old.

From tall mountains, marble white structures hung. Colossal and distant, they gave way to spiralling towers topped with purple and gold. The glint of clean unbroken glass shimmered like the sea's surface across the cities upon mountains like the one I'd seen in the pictures in Stable Ninety Three! Ponds and rivers flowed gently around open forests. Near us, small homes sent thin streaks of smoke into the sky through cream brick chimneys, each

with space of its own upon the high hills that made up the mid ground between wondrous snowy peaks and deep valleys of a colourful world. Rainbows shimmered above waterfalls while I saw natural built fences leading the way along gravel paths to every incredible corner or home below the mountain cities!

A world of unparalleled artistic beauty and peace. The sound of wind, water, and brushing vegetation crafting a deliciously calming melody into the air.

The Ruin stood beside me just behind a rock, smiling thinly through that battered face. A broken nose reacted oddly to the movement, before casting a hoof outward.

"The peace we can take, Murk. That you can live in forever. Safe and secure to do as you will."

"This is incredible..."

"This is the reward, for when a slave has finished his or her toil, their death is but their contract finally breaking and permitting them their freedom. Most find it naturally and happily. You... I... we're not like that. Born slaves who sometimes need a little push more. That feeling holding you from falling, that is the slave in your mind, Murk. But from what we saw, dreams can show us the way to here."

I almost didn't listen. My eyes simply travelled around at this world of colour and beauty.

"All this?"

"All this. That could be your home there if you wanted. Go! Take a look, see for yourself what awaits."

That was an offer I couldn't turn down. My numb body shifted and staggered but I found my way to the indicated living area. Just a little cottage surrounded by a low river built of light-coloured wood. Nervous, I passed through the open door to find my dream home.

One whole room, a thick bed near a small fireplace right next to soft cushions upon the floor to relax upon. Woodwork furniture surrounding the carpeted floor in patterns that astounded every artistic part of my mind! Frames set upon the walls bore my most treasured drawings, and a cabinet housed all of my belongings to tell my tale. Warm food sat ready on a table by the window, while large windows let light stream upon my home. What took my attention more than anything was the back that opened onto a fantastic view of the valleys. An open balcony sat waiting for me to spend my days sitting in peace, drawing this beauty for eternity! There was even my journal waiting.

"All it takes is one word, one agreement, and it's all yours for real, Murk."

The Ruin trotted in behind me, every step breaking the illusion to a dark rot beneath his hooves. The hideous brutality done to my body that he now displayed clearly overruled even this illusionary visit to paradise.

"Forever," I muttered to myself, moving onto the balcony. Pausing, I closed my eyes and simply took in the serenity and relief. My body felt at peace. There was nothing to worry about in this world. Absolutely nothing. I could just sit here and draw my thoughts and feelings forever, with nopony ever wanting to hurt me ever again.

The thought was *so* tempting.

Allowing myself to smile toward my ruined body staring back at me, I leaned down to pick up my journal. Maybe just one drawing...

I squeaked out loud, almost crying out in terror as it simply broke apart in my hooves.

Hopping back, I put a hoof to the wall to steady myself, finding it tearing apart and bending like a fragile and damp piece of paper!

"What's going on!?" Staggering back again, I placed my hooves to the chair, the fence. All

were broken under the lightest of touches!

"Nothing is wrong, Murk!" The Ruin trotted up quickly, his *deathly* cold touch pushing me back from the walls. "You don't need to notice this. This is peaceful, right? Fragile or not, this is *peace* for you where you might do as you will!"

"B-but I c-can't. This isn't right! It's just pretend, like a model!"

"Peace or pain! What is an illusion to an eternity of enslavement in your own death, Murk? It's better than nothing!"

I crossed my hooves, biting my lip and looking around. A tightness in my chest born of stress grew and grew. How could I trust him? But he was me! Was this right? I didn't know! I just didn't understand any of this!

"You cannot be free *and* live with your mind seeing all, Murk!" The Ruin insisted, his hooves on my shoulders and that stinking mangy blood-coated body of mine closer than I found comfortable. "This is all we have! The peace of eternity in our own make-believe dreams or the pain of always feeling alone and without direction without your master to guide you! We have to choose how our soul dies. Surely you can see this is the better option! Please! For *our* sake! Make it end!"

He was pleading me! I was pleading me! Was this really all I had? I... I...

Something was missing. Something huge.

Sniffing, wiping an eye I sat back and covered my face. An ebbing feeling in the back of my head, like I was on the cusp of remembering something important kept slipping just away from my tongue. I could be here! Safe! Blissful peace to draw and rest forever without *anypony* around.

Without *anypony*...

That was it.

"I can't." I saw the Ruin's eyes widen as I looked up. "I want my friends."

Something caught my eye. Without even waiting for a reply, I glanced around him to see a trickle of liquid on the wall from behind one picture. Accelerating as it descended, more followed with drips and slick oil coating the wall, like paint thinner drooling and sapping the colour into a hazed light grey.

Only now did I see truly how this world lacked true colour. Spread outward, the liquid bubbled and dropped the picture from the wall. One that held me standing alone in the bottom left with my wings outstretched, looking blank. Behind it I saw a shining surface, like a mirror forming from liquid metal that was spreading the colour, sapping wetness all over the wall onto the ceiling and floor.

The Ruin grabbed my head, turning it away from the sight that transfixed and confused me in equal measure.

"Don't look! Don't look at it!"

A scream echoed across the valleys. The oozing liquid that consumed the entire wall and sought to sap all vibrancy from an already distorted world pulsed and shook with a low aching groan. But I knew the scream. That long drawn out howl of a whole life's agony! Trying to force my head past, I almost fought with the Ruin. Let me see!

"*Don't look, Murk!*" He screamed to me. "It will only hurt you! You don't need to see it! That is your memory trying to infect and hurt you by showing you the pain surrounding them in Fillydelphia! You can escape it! Please, come with *me*! Don't give it the chance to enslave you!"

"*I want my friends!*"

"They're *lost* to you, Murk! Let go! Life is *over*!"

There was a wet crunch. I heard blood dribble. Unable to pull my eyes away, I forced past the skeletal form of the Ruin to look into the strange shimmering apparition that had spread from where an entire home wall once was.

Now there was but a framework, a dripping wasteland style ruin, coated in writhing, colourless liquid filled with a malign life! Within it though, I saw something. Me.

Lying cast upon gravel under a storm of rain, I saw the picture of myself, broken and lifeless. My limbs hung like a castaway rag doll. Yes, I had known that scream! The one that had burst from my lungs against all the pain and abuse of my life when I had fallen! Now I looked upon the result. I saw my death. My self inflicted escape from the pain. If I could feel my own body, I might have felt sick at the very sight of terrified eyes wide open even in death, showing the very last frightened stare that had led me to jump. Wildcard had been the one to kill me in the end, but that didn't hide that I had chosen to *fall* by my own admission.

"See, Murk? It is only the painful memories! Even if that wasn't how it happened, it was in your mind still! Such thoughts don't disappear just because you failed once and everypony was sad! They linger. They hurt you forever. It's what has brought us to this choice. I beg you, Murk, turn and come with me now before it hurts you with what is to come! Do what you wanted. Run away and we can rest as one forever unto eternity alone and safe."

"I... I can't. This is me and..."

"*We* are you, Murk!" The Ruin pulled at me. "We can still stop this. Leave before the pain comes, your memory trying to reach you and find you no matter how deep I take you! Only by jumping once more can it truly be escaped! This world could be beautiful and yours again, for all its fragility, but you have to go *now*! Just one word, Murk. One agreement and it's all over."

I saw large bubbles surge across the surface of the liquid images. It began to spread, seeking me. My hooves remained still. I couldn't take my eyes from my own crushed body.

"Come on! Before—"

Another scream burst from the images. Somepony else. Who was that? I knew it! It was female! Locking my eyes on as I saw motion come across my own corpse in the rain, I found myself ignoring the frantic pleas of the Ruin even while the void emanating from the wall sucked around us. The air chilled, the harmonic hums deadened.

The scream came again as somepony galloped and almost fell when she skidded to a halt beside me. A mournful howl of loss bursting from her mouth. Gentle white and two tone pink, who was she?

A sharp pain burst in my mind. Something tore free as I felt my peripheral vision go black. All I could see was this mare. No, not just some mare! *Glimmerlight*!

She picked me up, holding my small body that limply drooped by its neck and limbs in her own front hooves. Her mouth seemed to simply stay open in shock and motion to cry and scream over and over as though in denial and horror. An outpouring of emotion the likes I'd never seen from her as though everything had just fallen and destroyed something she held so dear. Pressing her muzzle to my neck, she rocked my broken body as though by some miracle of wishful thinking I might return to life.

"There's nothing but pain in watching this, Murk! Don't do this to yourself! Your memories are trying to make you feel guilt and keep you where you were, remembering

what you were in Fillydelphia!”

I heard the Ruin, he was right beside me, but his voice was far off. Nothing made sense! I couldn't feel anything amidst the horror overtaking me and showing the result of my mindset as it brought me to this choice. Beside Glimmerlight, others emerged.

A huge figure, rippling until he was visible. Brimstone! He simply stood watching Glimmer's anguish, unknowing of how to react to this. His head bowed low, his shoulders slumped. I saw Coral Eve knelt beside Glimmerlight. She reached over to draw my eyes closed even as her other hoof wiped the tears from her own eyes. Three ghouls, two little fillies who stared in confused worry nearby to a shivering bearded figure of Weathervane, gritting his teeth and shaking horribly as though some inner rage was ready to snap.

Then off to one side, just scarcely visible, I saw the blinking red light of an eyepiece removed and dropped to the floor, before a young black and red unicorn dropped onto his knees in despair at the sight before his eyes.

Hooves grasped at my neck, pulling and struggling. My eyes felt locked. I couldn't move at the sight! Was this what I'd done to them? But why? I was... I wasn't anypony! Just a little slave who didn't do anything! I wasn't important! Don't mourn over me! Slaves just go, it's how it works!

A grasping, invasive, and unpleasant feeling washed over me. The growing sickness sinking through my skin out of the visions and images that became more real as though I could reach out and touch them the more I watched. I tried to lay a hoof on Glimmer's shoulder but no matter how far I stretched my hoof, they always seemed so far away.

They all bore that same look, like they'd lost something important. What? It couldn't be me! What had they lost?

It took seeing them turn and leave one by one in differing directions for me to truly realise.

They'd lost hope.

Only then did I see one more figure starting to appear who stood over my body and cried their heart out. One who had been missing, who was—

“Murk!”

My head was turned. The entire world of Equestria I had seen, this paradise was a chaotic mess of wet glistening madness, enveloping it and crushing the paper mountains from their fragile state. The Ruin held my face. I wanted to turn! Who was it back there! Who? I knew them, but I'd forgotten!

“*MURK!*” The Ruin screamed in my face. “You have to make a choice now! The pain is pulling you back into a personal hell of slavery! It will hurt forever! Don't you want us to have peace? We wanted away from the pain! That's why you jumped! If you keep trying to remember, even the empty wasteland before will give way to something much, *much* worse and there won't be any turning it back!”

My mouth hung open, looking everywhere. Reality was bending, chains forming around the world, and a searing pain on my cutie mark beginning to tell. Wincing, I tried to turn back but everypony was gone from the window into unreality.

“I don't know! M-my friends! Where are my friends!?” I screamed out, begging him to tell me!

“They're gone, Murk. I'm so sorry! I know you wanted to be free with them, but it's impossible now!”

He paused, coughing harshly. I realised this horror was catching up to him as well. Of

course, he was me.

"It's impossible. There's only one choice left to us, Murk. Fall into peace! Make the choice! For your own sake please do it, Murk! Just tell me you will and this will all stop. You are the only thing keeping us here, the only part of your mind that sticks and stays when it should move on! One word..."

Everything tore at me. Even while every thought made me want to cry, I strove to just *understand*. All of this was sanity crushing, impossible choices that determined my *afterlife* and what it would be! Choosing to forget everypony forever to make the pain stop and just say goodbye or to face being a slave forever with an incomplete memory of tragedy and heartbreak? I felt too small to decide! I wanted somepony to decide for me! A friend to talk to and get advice! Just run away and—

"No!" I screamed it to be heard, stomping a hoof. "I don't want to forget them! They made me who I was for the first time, taught me how to laugh!"

Somehow, without turning I knew. Their faces fading on by around me. Those smiles, those harsh times when we had saved one another or been there when another needed us. I hadn't realised how much my death would hurt them.

I'd undervalued myself.

Slowly, I closed my eyes and shook my head.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I don't know if I can... if I can just figure all this out then..."

He shoved me away. The Ruin snarled and knocked me clean onto my back, his wiry form showing a brief surge of strength before staggering and coughing badly. If this were not the warped world it was, he looked like he should be dead. Did I *really* look like that?

"If you won't choose because I'm showing you what you can *have*, Murk..."

The world began peeling again, a sensation of falling further! Screaming, I dropped over the edge of a hole in the ground into pitch darkness. A burning sensation tore at my body even as I reached out to grab the ledge before I fell, like a fire was sucking me in! My hind section was tugged, pulled, and yanked at harshly like some supernatural force had grabbed me! Crying out in shock, I gripped as hard as I could!

"...then I'll show you what you'll get if you *don't*!"

The Ruin's face distorted into a mix of rage and terror, rearing up to stamp both hooves upon one of mine. Crying out, I let go with one, my mind struggling to comprehend all this! Pain soared through me, a void below and a twisting darkness over an idyllic world all around me! Sensory overload made me wince and close my eyes, pleading with him.

"I just need time! Don't let me fall! *Don't!*"

"Your whole life is down there, Murk! Every painful memory and horror inflicted upon you! If you fall to there, you will *never* get back out again unless you choose to let everything go for the one refuge a slave ever gets! It's our reward for service, don't throw it away! If I must force you, the *one* part of us, of *me*, that doesn't want to rest and let it end, then I will! Maybe then, you'll finally see why it's our time to let go!"

I shook my head, trying not to look down.

"DON'T!"

"Every one of those ponies you called friends were going to die! That's what slaves do! Holding onto them now is just hurting you more! It's pointless and painful! Don't you remember how every one of them was falling? To rage? To regret? To a feral state? They were all falling the same as you! You can forget them and clear it all from your mind! You'll be happy!"

His face *pleaded*, begging me as he leaned over. Holding onto the one hoof that was keeping me from above this new pit, I felt his hoof begin to let go! I saw no eternity below, only raging fire and the sound of clanking chains. My face screwed up. He was asking me to forget my friends! To go to this eternal peace meant losing everything I'd found from them!

"*No!* I won't!" I screamed up at him. "I want peace, I *really* do! But not now! Not until I know they're safe! Not till I somehow help them from how I hurt them! Please, give me a chance to somehow *reach* them just long enough to help them!"

Behind the Ruin, I saw the colossal city on the mountain falling, shaking the very land as it crashed through the thin earth and plummeted into a void. Everything was coming apart from that shimmering liquid that flowed and closed in on us as much as it did upon every aspect of Equestria. The paradise was falling from the painful memories tearing at this pretend world.

"*You can't! You're dead!* Please, decide so I can pull you back up and we can go together into one peaceful state at last! It doesn't have to hurt any more! Why let the tragic tale of Murky Number Seven go on? Why more pain? Why more slavery and illness after beating and loss? Fighting it will only show you horrors that will torment you forever onward! Let them go!"

"I can do something! Somehow I believed once, I want to believe again! *Let me try!*"

Thrusting my own hoof to him, asking him to take it, I saw the Ruin glance at it. Yes! *See* the little bravery in my eyes! I'm thinking the same! I can face a bit more pain, just till I see that my friends were safe and got out! Maybe not with me, but I couldn't go not knowing! I could endure until I saw them escape!

He saw my thoughts. I saw that hesitation, that moment that another part of what clearly was my unconscious mind think about it. In the whirling decimation of reality, he closed his eyes.

"They were good friends..." He muttered quietly.

"The first we had. We can't let them go."

His eyes squinted, before hardening. I saw fear in his eyes, a terror that I felt all too often that had scared me into running away. That had scared me into trying to take my own life. He wasn't malicious, he was just simply afraid. My fear.

"No."

What? *What?* No, please!

"No? Why! I just... but I just told you! We can do this! *Why!?*"

My brutalised self took hold of my one hoof. The pain increased, tugging me. I felt chains creeping over my back legs. My throat tightened from the feeling of a collar.

"Why!?"

He shook his head.

"Because I have to prove to you why we can't ever win against them! Why we need to fall away now! I know you Murk. I know more about you than you yourself know. I am you. I am the you that forever remembers, that cannot forget. Unlike you, I know the full truth. The things you have forgotten in your efforts to make it easier."

I jerked, falling backward. He made no effort to hang on very hard at all. He was going to let me go!

"You've done this before, forgotten all just to relieve you of the hardship. I will remind you if I have to, why you have always chosen to forget and let memories blur to nothing. I'll show you why need to let go and fade away."

He let go.

Falling. Truly falling at last. I reached for him, but I saw only his sad face watching me go. Witnessing my fall into the chains of my mind that coiled and bound around my life and memories. Screaming, howling for it not to happen I was pulled and dragged into the very darkest recesses of my life and the agony filled oblivion that awaited me.

"Remember the life that you hate, the life that you led, and the place in life you were given. It even started this way! You've forgotten those who mattered before!"

The wagon bumped and rattled, jolting us all inside it about hard. We might have been hurt from it all, had we not been as tightly packed as we were within the damp passenger hold.

Scared and whimpering at the flares of lightning through the small holes that dropped freezing rain through them, I felt her hold me tighter. I didn't like this. It scared me. It scared me a lot! So she just held me close.

My mother.

"Ssh, dear. It's all right. The storm can't get you in here."

Her voice, rhythmic and calm, was all that stopped me from crying aloud. Hugging close to her chest, I buried my head in her shoulder. I didn't like travelling. It took ages and was scary when it wasn't boring or smelly. But her hooves wrapped around me and hummed gently in my ears to calm me. I liked it when she made music like that, just for me when nopony else could hear it.

"Where are we going, mom?"

The wagon lurched again. It was a flying wagon, pulled by *huge* griffons that looked really nasty. All the slaves had been pushed into it for us to be taken somewhere. I didn't know where. The masters never told us.

"They're taking us to another place for work. There were too many of us back at Shattered Hoof."

"Will it be a nicer place?"

She was silent, instead just smiling down to me and stroking my mane carefully around a big bump on my head. I felt her pull my little jerkin down, hiding my wings.

"Why do I have to hide them?"

"Because other ponies get jealous of your wonderful little gift, my dear." I felt a kiss on my nose. "Someday you're going to fly away from all of this to somewhere better, my dear Murky."

"I don't understand."

A squeeze. I liked squeezes! They were soft and warm! Nuzzling in, I forgot all about what she'd even been saying just to rest here snuggled up to my mom. Life wasn't good and sometimes she cried for reasons I didn't know. My mom confused me though sometimes. She'd look really really hungry even though she always had food to give to me.

"Just remember that you're different and special. You're not like them and they will hate you for it, because you've got something they all want."

I nodded a little, before yelping and grasping around her tightly when the wagon

slammed and almost rolled. Ponies swore and the rumbling of us back on solid ground rattled beneath us. Slowly, the wagon rolled to a halt and hoofsteps above us dropped wood splinters atop our cramped heads.

"Everypony out! Come on, move it! Time's wasting, we're paying for the wagon by the day!"

A door on the side of the wagon was torn open after the unlocking of a thick set of bars. Dull brown light drafted in alongside a surge of icy wind and rain. Slaves around my mother and I groaned and shifted, pushing against one another to stand. Why did they put so many ponies in one wagon? It wasn't nice.

We were told to go outside. Trotting beside my mom, I obeyed quickly and quietly even when the *really, really* cold outside evening met me. Slaves were being told to stand in a line across a muddy field in the lashing rain, the little foals like me hiding beside the ponies that took care of them. Our master had an umbrella magically held above his head while the slavers wore thick leather covers or goggles. I wanted a pair of them. They looked cool!

I didn't know this place, so I just pulled myself against my mom's leg and shivered. I could see dark shapes of big steep hills surrounding this place, a wall surrounded it made of black wood and there were rocks. Lots and lots of rocks! If I squinted real hard against all the water dripping in my eyes, I could see a large barn and a small wooden house; the glow of a fire within it.

Looking that way let me see the pony striding toward us, the one whom my master was meeting.

"Got the lineup all as you wanted, my good sir!"

"Good nuthin', you're late!" The new pony, an older stallion with a long grey beard spat and didn't seem to care about the rain. "Expected you here three days ago."

"Now now, sir. You know the wastes and what they're like. Bloodwings en-route!"

No there hadn't been.

"Whatever. They're here so what you chargin'?"

Our master strode back, leading this new pony toward us and trying to avoid the muddy puddles from his white suit. The scruffy looking stallion just snorted and almost seemed to purposefully stomp in them as he went, he cast his eyes over us with distaste.

I pulled myself closer to my mom, feeling her hoof wrap around me.

"I'm scared, mom."

"It'll be alright, dear. Just stay quiet."

Now closer, our master swung his hoof over the line.

"Well, five hundred for the stallions and mares. Three hundred if they're older than forty. Pretty good prices, I hear that Appleloosa's selling them for over seven—"

"How much for the kids? Rock farmin' don't take much strength bar the few and I gots them already covered."

Blinking and casting an eye back to us, the suited stallion cleared his throat and motioned hastily to his slaver crew to back off a little.

"Well, a parent and foal discount I could surely—"

"Don't want the parents, don't need 'em. Just the little ones for the little rocks."

My mother's hoof pulled me right under her, clutching tightly as I saw most of the foals look a little unsure to their unsettled parents or guardians. Some tried to protest, before the sharp crack of a whip sounded out.

"Havin' trouble keepin' em in line? Thought you was 'fessional."

"You mean professional?"

"Yup, 'fessional. How much?"

"Well..." This wasn't how deals had gone before, I could see him look unsure. Please don't pick me, please don't pick me! "I'd say perhaps two hundred seventy-five. You're investing after all, right?"

"Two hundred."

"They've been kept with their parents, grown better cos of it, so there *has* to be a premium, I can go to two sixty?"

"Two hundred."

"Well, how many do you intend to buy?"

"All of em."

A ripple of panic spread across the entire line. Slavers moved in, whips flying, and mouths cursing when hooves beat us into submission. I felt my mother jerk, even though she'd been silent.

"Don't worry, Murky... don't worry, it'll be okay. I'll sort this."

"I don't wanna go. He's nasty!"

"Well, sir..." Our master coughed into a hoof, before noting just how mucky it was and grimacing. "Given you are purchasing so many, I can afford to lower my prices. Two twenty-five, no lower."

"Done."

The suited stallion held out a hoof to the farmer, receiving only a little harsh look before retracting it. Money began to change hooves. Then it started.

Slavers moved forward, prying foals from parents' grasps and throwing guardians aside. The sound of children wailing mixed with grown ponies begging and screaming that it would be okay filled the air. Even the rampant shouts could not silence it. A shadow fell over us. I heard my mother plea before magic grasped me and whisked me from under her. Immediately, my mother grabbed me, holding onto me even as they struck her and tried to pull her away. Crying, wailing, and keeping a hold of her, I tried not to go! I didn't want to go! Why wouldn't they let me stay? *I didn't understand!*

Two others joined the slaver, my hooves slipping and lashing out with my little strength. One hit a mare's eye and sent her staggering back cursing words I had never heard before! Galloping forward, I leapt into my mother's hooves once more.

"What's all the fuss?" The farmer wandered toward us all slipping in the mud and trying to stay together. "This what you call a foal?"

"Well, Murk has yet to have his growth spurt and—"

"Not payin' two twenty-five for him. Hundred, max."

"NO!"

Even when the slavers closed in to push us apart, my mother surged past them, holding me to her side and falling before the farmer.

"Please, sir! He's too young for this! You can clearly see how weak he is! Buy me too!"

"Don't need a mare. Get off him, belongs to me now."

"*I beg of you!* He's my son! I... I'll be whatever you want! You can have me for *any* kind of slave that you require, no matter how bad the job! Y-you don't need to feed me! If there's anything—"

"ENOUGH!"

A magical telekinetic slap threw my mother down. Screaming, I tried to run to her side

until a rough-coated leg caught me around the waist. The farmer lifted me up even while our master strode to my mother after striking her.

"You don't get to make demands here! You're nothing but a slave! Just like he is! You're *merchandise*. You don't get a say. If I say he goes without you, he goes! You don't get to offer yourself, not your services and not your body. If we wanted that from you, we'd *take* it. A slave has no bargaining chips in this world. Take her into the wagon. The good sir has made his purchases. One hundred shall do to just be rid of that runt."

Even while the slavers grabbed her, dragging my thrashing mother away, I fought myself against the heavy weathered muscles holding me off the ground. I begged him, hit his face with my little hooves and tried to squeeze free. They were taking her away! I wanted her! I wanted my mom! *Let go!*

"*MOM!*" I simply screamed, pushing out my hooves toward her.

"You're different, my little Murky! *You're different!* Mommy loves you! It'll be alright!"

I couldn't do anything but cry and repeatedly shout for her, even as she was carried inside the wagon. The sight was replaced by that of our master, bringing the change for me to the farmer. Finally shaking hooves, he leaned down to me.

"Don't you worry, little foal. It's just business, nothing personal. She's right though. A born slave? I'm sure you'll get along just fine here. Juuust fine. Let's go lads!"

Sweeping up and away, he climbed atop the wagon. Surging their huge wings out, the griffons began to trot. I couldn't see inside the wagon, but I could *feel* her in there. Whining, struggling, I kept screaming to the sky even as the wagon lifted up into the low clouds of the thunderstorm and carried her away from me. Further and further away.

"Pipe down, you. Now let's get you to work."

"I want my *mom!*"

"You'll get your *job!* You're a slave, nothing else!"

He simply threw me, threw me toward the ground. Curling up in fear I simply saw the rocks I'd spend my childhood days pushing from now on.

I tried to stand, I really did! Tried to stand and will my wings to flap! I'd chase after her! Find her! Getting up, I tried to climb up a rock to get a better start!

His hoof simply threw me down. I landed...

...on a wooden floor.

Scorching heat flowed over me, like the furnaces of Slit's factory. I had to blink and choke on toxic fumes before opening my stinging eyes to see the dark red wood rotted below me. Something was tight around my chest. What was?

I looked up, finding myself amidst a thick hewn cave of dull metal seams and dark timber blocks holding it all up. The walls were filthy with blood and sticky moisture. Warped torches flicked in unreal ways at the edges around a huge opening that looked out into an immense quarry. What was that around my chest?

A harness. I was harnessed to something!

A sudden weight began to pull, a massive draw on my harness that tugged me downhill. Scrambling, I felt my entire torso *stretch* from this impossible weight tugging me inch by inch. I looked behind me, panting hard as I saw a colossal iron cast cart filled to the brim with gem-encrusted rocks. It must have weighed ten tons!

What scared me more was what was behind it. This shallow incline it was pulling me down led to a sharp drop into the quarry! I could hear echoing sounds of mining and slavery all the way down! I'd fall!

"Scary, isn't it?"

He stood before me, the Ruin. Trotting slowly alongside me as I was slowly pulled downward and gasping in pain when the harness bit into my flesh and torso.

"Get me out of this! Please! It's going to pull me over!"

"Down there's eternal slavery, Murk. It won't kill you, but it'll ruin you forever! That word is literal, now! Remember what even your mother told you, you're *different*. Other slaves might escape to a peaceful afterlife but you won't, you don't know any different!"

Straining, clenching my teeth and squeezing my eyes shut, I grabbed a rock and *pulled*. The cart slowed, the strain on my frail body pulling like a torture rack if I left it any longer!

"I... want... out!"

"What you *want* isn't right! How can you die in your own mind and let your soul go to the Goddesses to create your paradise without knowing what freedom is, Murk!? Look at what you were just shown! All the times you've forgotten all but the vague details of! You are different, even our mother told you that!"

"ARGH!" I simply screamed as I slipped, the cart dragging me metres at a time until I dug my hooves in and fought back. I could smell the fire from the quarry, like My Master's metro hell below ground made into an unreal unending nightmare! "But my friends—"

"Your friends matter nothing! They didn't save you, just like *she* didn't! Has that not taught you anything? What if Brimstone got so angry he hurt one of you? What if Weathervane turned feral and killed Coral? What if Glimmerlight chose to *forget* you? Littlepip only showed you the truth! Nothing changes! You were only *different* in that you saw it all happen from a false hope by a grieving mother!"

"Just let me try. I want to remember them! Live with my dreams!"

He leaned down, that broken nose leaking blood before me. My hooves slipped and ground across the floor as the weight only seemed to increase. It was going to pull me in!

"Dreams? Dreams of what? Some freedom from a destiny to escape? You *know* what your destiny is!"

He turned. I saw my own flank and the shackles set there.

"Don't you even remember *why* you got it? The same pattern you've been repeating day after day your whole life? The first time you first had your hope *broken* to remind you that these things seal the deal. Slave for life. Remember?"

"Hey, get out of the way, squirt!"

I staggered from the sudden shove upon my flank, squeaking and yelping when I clattered and fell. The bowl I carried dropped and clattered loudly on the ceramic tiled floor of the farmhouse, rolling away on its side beneath the tables.

Rubbing my tiny hind sections and wincing in pain, I stood up quickly from the damp floor and swung back at the queue. I'd been first here! I felt my tiny wings flare out in anger and frustration quite without my decision.

Looking back at me and lowering their eyebrows, the bigger slave foals just grinned. Threatening me to dare making a scene out of this. Seeing them backing one another up, I

let them win. The bigger slaves always won. They'd been bigger when we were brought here, and in the years since they had grown much faster than I did. But they had taken my spot and skipped ahead to get food first! I'd finished my work earlier to get here on time!

"You gonna try something, Murk? Gonna cry or fight? We all saw we were here first!" Rock Hard, the colt who'd found his cutie mark actually doing rock farming here as a slave, sneered at me.

"You weren't," I pleaded while picking up the bowl and shaking the dog hairs from it. The master's hounds had more freedom than we did and left their hairs everywhere! Sometimes they stole the small bed of hay I had in the barn.

"Master doesn't believe you. He says pegasi lie! So pegasi get to go last all the time. That's the rules now!"

"He never said that!"

"Nuh uh. He said it once before!"

"When?"

"When you weren't there!"

They were making it up, I *knew*. But they were right that he disliked pegasi. Everypony seemed to. Dejected and under their triumphant laughter, I wandered to the back of the queue to wait.

By the time it was my turn, I got some thin watery soup with a couple of bits (I had never dared ask what those bits exactly were) in it left over with no heat in it at all. Sighing as I found a corner to hunch down on, I saw the two seats taken by Rock Hard and his friend, the other slaves milling around on the floor like me.

Not that I really got a chance to eat.

"Where is 'e?"

Every slave jumped up when our master, ageing and grim from his mane turning grey, surged into the room from the back door, letting the cold wind in as he came. His twisted face glared around at us all.

"Where's that useless little runt?"

They would have pointed me out anyway. Setting my bowl down with a sigh, I trotted out with my head lowered. I could hear the other slaves 'Ooooooh'ing under their breath. They knew I'd hear the humiliation.

"Here Mas—yargh!"

Barely able to finish my sentence, a hoof struck me across my big ear. Stinging pain sent me to the ground; whimpering and holding myself away from him.

"What kind of pegasus doesn't even know his damned compass points? I told you t'move them there rocks to the *south* field! You've moved 'em to the ruddy *west*."

"B-but Master, no one's ever taught me what's south or west and y-you p-pointed and—"

"Just shut up! Get out there an' fix it! I don' care if it takes you till mornin'!"

I saw Rock Hard taking my meagre meal right before my master dropped me upon the hard earth outside and slammed the door shut.

Bemoaning the loss of my daily meal, I let my head droop. Now I wouldn't get anything till tomorrow unless I tried to steal anything again. Maybe I could get some of the dog's when it was sleeping. That hadn't been so bad last time.

With a sigh, I took a breath and turned. I'd done wrong and my master wanted it corrected. Nothing for it but to simply obey. Making off at the trot toward the west field, I simply tried to ignore my protesting stomach.

Evening was setting down, an orange glow coming over the big wall that surrounded the rock farm that cast long shadows behind each of the bigger boulders. Up high in the hills near Whitetail Woods, the wind came all the time, over the wall and right over all of us. Sometimes so strong it blew me over. Really it had nowhere to go. The farm was set back against tall hills with sheer edges with only one pathway really leading away from it down the valley, so it just got trapped and sucked everypony all around. It made rock farming hard, as it would tonight. Strong winds hardly helped when you had to push a rock *into* the wind after all.

Aside from the farmhouse and the barn, there were only a few huts for tools or the dogs. An old collapsed windmill lay nearby as a source of firewood or repairs to the master's wall. That defence was too tall for us. Glancing at it while weaving around the rocks and deciding where to start, it was nothing but a perpetual reminder of how I couldn't leave.

Looking down, I came to the first rock I'd moved earlier. Best get started.

My hooves already hurt from doing it earlier. My back ached and really I knew this was going to take even longer. The south field was uphill (Was it south? He hadn't told me again.) from here, so rolling was going to take *forever*. But I put my head down and got going.

Slowly, I began to stop thinking. Just head down and get by the shift, that's what mom had told me. Let it blur or you'll go mad waiting for every shift to end. But I couldn't exactly *not* worry. It was getting dark now as the sun went down! Darkness in the wasteland was scary! Last time I'd been out here a really scary bat thing had chased me all across the fields until the master had shot it! Then he'd made me stay out to finish the job even longer!

This just wasn't fair! I wanted to be inside! I wanted food! I wanted my mom...

But slaves didn't get to have anything.

The rock shifted, rolled, and began its journey before my pushing hooves. Slipping on the cracked ground occasionally, I made the slow way across the farm to the south field. It took a good ten minutes to get it there, ten minutes of sweat and grunting behind the smaller rock, even with trying to buzz my wings for extra push behind me! Finally setting it down, I fell back and sat for a few seconds to get my breath back.

Ahead of me lay another eighty or so rocks to do.

Simply groaning, I let my head fall into my hooves. This was so unfair! Why did it have to be me?

For the next half hour I shifted rocks, managing two larger ones in the time period to get them out of the way first before I was too tired. The smaller ones would come later; I could fetch a saddlebag from a hut and simply carry those. Nosing myself in behind probably the largest of the ones I'd have to move, I strained. Every muscle pushed, my rumbling tummy protesting the extra work on no food. Feeling it move, I let it fall before pushing back in again, seeking to flip it once again. Turn by turn, I began to get it up the slope. I could hear the slaves chattering in the barn while the master spoke with his wife inside, surrounded by those mad dogs he kept. I was just all alone out here with this huge boulder.

It fell again, I moved to shift it again.

It fell again, I moved to shift it... and felt something else shift the other way.

The entire rock had hit another one I couldn't see! The entire weight fell back toward me, almost crushing my hooves before I jerked away and flung myself to the side! The rock cracked down on the pebbles below, sending them shooting off to ping from other rocks. Then it began to tumble.

Sparked, I rushed to catch it! It'd take forever to get it back up if it fell all the way down! I mentally pleaded with it, 'Please don't, rock! Please! Please! Pretty please! I'll stroke you nice as I push you please don't—'

It did.

Rocking over, it fell downhill. Bouncing and spinning wildly, it struck other rocks and flew into the air before landing hard to kick up the dirt. I chased it, galloping downhill as though I could actually do anything. To my relief I saw it strike one of the biggest rocks in the entire farm with a sound almost akin to a gunshot, stopping on the spot as it fell, breaking in half.

Breathing out slowly, trying to get my heart to stop beating madly, I almost smiled. Halves were easier to push.

Then the bigger rock started to shift, dislodged from its odd position, and I felt my heart instead sink entirely.

"No! Don't!"

As though it would actually listen. The rock fell, rocking and finally beginning its thunderous journey downhill! I felt the ground actually shake as it clattered and picked up speed with unstoppable force! Outpacing my attempts to chase it, the boulder rumbled, bounced, and finally slammed against the master's wall, tearing the wooden construction apart and sending splinters flying high into the air. Undeterred, the boulder made good on its quick getaway over the ledge of the valley, disappearing into the huge depths below. I heard it crash again and again on the cliff-side, echoing all over the hills.

A warmth washed over me, stunning me on the spot to forget about the rock. Standing still in the rock farm's field, I simply gazed forward.

Before me, through the gap in the wall meant to keep me in, was a way out.

Through that hole I saw the setting sun, escaping itself across the horizon while casting that heat across the land. It may have been dulled by clouds to a vague shape, but I could see it clearly enough! It lit the path, the remnants of light in the dull daytime of the wasteland, caught in the long valley that led away into the distance.

I was alone, with one way out before me.

My mom was out there somewhere. *Freedom* was out there! No more rocks. No more beatings and nasty dogs. Food of all types! The kinds I dreamed about eating someday! It couldn't be that simple could it? Didn't I need to ask permission first? Could I really just trot forward and that would be it?

The setting sun hung there, slowly sending its light to disappear, as though Goddess Celestia herself was calling to me, drawing me forward. I could go unseen, slip away before they came to check! I could hide in the valley and then keep galloping!

I could...

I *could*.

One leg began to step forward. Then another. Then a trot began. It grew to a canter. Drawn toward this new feeling, toward something I could feel I *wanted* more than anything else in the world. The warmth of the remaining sunlight spreading over my tired body seeming to ease my muscles into a *gallop* for the way out!

Behind me, I heard the farmhouse door burst open. I had to scream inside my mind to not look back! To tell myself, 'You can go for the sunset!' Jumping rocks, I sprinted for the hole in the wall even while cursing and shouting followed me. I heard somepony chase me, but I had to keep going! This new feeling drew me in irresistibly! Even past the tiredness

mixed with panic and hope, I felt a strange tingling, like a sparkling somewhere somewhere behind me.

There was a *huge* world out there! Crossing to the wall, I clambered and pulled myself through the wreckage before setting hoof outside it for the first time in years! Behind me the thumping of a galloping pony grew nearer, I had to get away! How?

The thought of the boulder going over the edge came to me. The winds were strong, maybe if... if I could...

I galloped with my head down, letting my wings spread. Then with all the might I could gather I started to flap them, swishing up and down as fast as I could make them go! The feeling was all too natural, I knew what I was doing with them! I could leap off and nopony would catch me! I just had to fly! FLY!

I hopped, bounced, and tried to launch myself a few times. Lifting a foot from the ground, I dropped again and stumbled. The chasing pony, my master, got nearer! I could hear him shout, but I kept going, rising a little higher each time before falling back. Just one good gust of wind, please! I could—

Every hoof seemed to jam together, something catching them and tying them up on the spot. The crash of thick spheres into my forelegs made me squeal while I fell and slammed into the hard gravel road. Looking down, I saw a set of bolas my master had thrown wrapped around my legs. Please! Please, Goddesses help me lift up! I tried to rise again, my wings fluttering with all the strength I could, gritting my teeth as I began to move up... up...

Down. He caught me, dragging me to the floor harshly and knocking me on my back.

"Get off! I want to be free! I want out of—"

"*SHUT UP! JUS' SHUT UP!* Get back inside you lil' useless runt! Never 'oughta bought you! Nothin' but useless!"

Dragged by the bolas around my legs, I squirmed and fought, but a few clips around the ear calmed me. Looking back, I saw the sunset disappear over the horizon, feeling every *inch* of disappointment while I was dragged away from it. Dragged back inside. My wings kept trying to fly, buzzing and flapping to struggle against being pulled back. I couldn't help them!

Growing tired of the resistance, my master turned back, using the bolas cord to throw me to the ground again.

"You ain't never getting out! Think I'm gonna let you just leave now? You're stayin' here whether you like it or not till I either sell you to somepony else or let you just die! You're a slave! Get it now? Slaves don't escape! Slaves stay here!"

"I... I want to be free."

He slapped me across the mouth. Other slaves were gathering around me, his wife with the hounds made herself known too. They all watched as he struck again and again.

"You are not free! Say it! You are not free!"

"I... I'm not..." I faltered

"And the last word!"

"...free."

He leaned back, shoving my head to the ground and casting his head down my body to my wings with disdain.

"Fuggin' things. Ought to—hm?"

His eyes shifted with surprise, further down my body. Shaking and allowing my eyes to

come out from behind my sheltering hooves, I looked back myself as everyone else wandered to look too.

Upon my flank, still shining a little, my cutie mark had appeared at last.

The disappointment that surged through me was unbearable.

A set of shackles, gnashing and laughing at my pitiful attempt.

“Hah! Now there, don’ you see? A set of manacles for you. You get caught, you get brought ’ere and reminded. Now yer own body’s tellin’ you that too! Cos’ you were caught, see? Because you’re realisin’ it! You’re a slave forever.”

I felt tears draw down, I rubbed at it, pleaded in my mind with it. Please go away! I didn’t want it!

Was I really meant to be one forever?

I’d been caught and gained my cutie mark the moment I’d realised I was going to be in chains till I died. Oh no... oh no, it wasn’t fair...

Snorting above me, my master turned to the slaves.

“Right, enough bandin’ about. Them wing things are gonna be a problem someday or ’nuther. Rock Hard, you an’ yer frien’ drag the runt to the barn. I’m going to go get my tools. Not having a hundred caps just fly away, useless or not. Rest of you fix that damn fence, watch em with the dogs while they work, love.”

The last words were clipped off to his wife. Ponies moved into action, but only when the two slaves grabbed me did I really wake and realise what was happening. What did he mean my wings were a problem! What was he doing? I fought back, but they handled me roughly and dragged me up the hill toward the barn. My master was waiting in there with a bag of tools, no emotion on his face, just a blank look of doing the job.

I pleaded, struggled as I saw an anvil waiting there and heard the command to grab a wing. I saw a hammer! Screaming and wildly thrashing, it took them some time to push me down. High-pitched and terrified, I simply kept begging. Rock Hard hit my head but I didn’t stop. I tried to pull my wing away as I felt it rest on cold metal from one pony holding it over with his weight. Exposed and vulnerable, I saw my master come closer. Every prayer I knew screamed from my mouth, but Rock Hard dropped his weight and held me there. Alone in a dark barn with three ponies seeking to break my wings! Tears fell and my head writhed, but my body was held still.

I felt a hoof press down on my wing, holding one portion of the thin hollow bones still. “Get off! GET OFF! DON’T DO THIS!”

The hammer raised. I realised that I couldn’t escape. *This was happening.*

“DON’T! PLEASE DON’T!”

“Shut up, slave.”

He grunted and swung, I—

—launched to the side with a scream so shrill and pained that I hurt my *own* ears. Rolling and yelling again, I threw my hooves to my sides to find my larger body and its ruined wings already there, albeit unfeeling all over again.

Then the weight of the cart caught me and sent me scraping further down the mineshaft. The cave was widening as I neared the quarry edge, the rock taking on the shape of chains and manacles carved into the very walls and roof around me. The sound of clanking

manacles and surging fires of industrial slavery met my ears louder than ever.

Fighting for purchase, numb after the memory and crying out as the weighty cart tore at my back muscles from the unmanageable weight, I managed to stop it for just a few seconds at a time, straining with all my worth. My flanks felt heavy, until I realised it was my cutie marks seeming to pull with a weight of their own!

“You’ve *always* simply been a slave, Murk!”

The Ruin trotted back and forth in front of me, grabbing my numbed and aching head to look at my own cutie mark upon his devastated and bleeding body.

“This told you so long ago! Think about it! You’ve only repeated this pattern every time!”

Images flared along the walls of the cave, forming in fire and washing into the next ones like moving rock. I saw myself pausing as Brimstone ran off under gunfire. Ragini taking aim at a fleeing slave. Protégé tearfully having to pull a trigger. Myself and Unity surrounded by slavers in an alicorn shield. Wildcard pouncing Sunny and I. Me running right into My Master’s embrace.

“So many times, Murk. So! Many! Times! Hope has risen and fallen time and again all the way from the beginning!”

“I... wanted *out*!” I strained and tugged, feeling the minecart lean out over the edge of the hellish quarry.

“You can’t have freedom! The moment you went through those gates you entered the climax of your life! Your choice, Murk! *Your choice*! Now you won’t make the one choice to save yourself! Master Protégé had to make one for you to try and give you freedom! Every time he asked, you jumped! Succeeding in surviving the parasprites to get back to him because *he asked you to*. Infiltrating a full Ministry slave house to get a sanitiser because *he asked you to*. Taking on a full gang of raiders and fighting at his side because *he expected it of you*! You’ve *always* followed your master, no matter what you think!”

“B-but that’s not true... no! H-he was a way to maybe get out! To learn from!”

“You’re deluding yourself! You are the *only* part of the being that is Murky Number Seven that doesn’t want to simply rest into the peace we seek! The *only* bit that hangs on! Say the one word, agree, and we can die peacefully and end this! You were always the little voice inside me, Murk. The one little hope that refused to be snuffed out. But look at me. Look at the wounds and the sickness! *I’m* the pony that saw Fillydelphia! I’m the one who threw himself from that roof! I’m the one who is glad we’re finally dying into peace! Let hope die.”

The Ruin staggered forward.

“Those gates marked the end. There never was any hope after them.”

Tall, ringed with razor wire, and guarded by magically charged fences, I saw the gates unto the last place of my life.

Amongst a lacklustre haul inside the caged wagon, I curled up behind the rotten hay and tried to keep the jerkin I’d acquired pulled over my wings. They did *not* have to know here!

“Shipment incoming!”

“Pass on by! Shit lot.”

“Shut your face and just get out the way.”

The wagon began to move again, pulling itself into the heat of Fillydelphia. So Master Red Eye had bought me, finally brought me to the huge slave city I had heard about it many

times in hushed whispers between slaves. Some said it was a paradise where you could earn your freedom and got to participate in sports and see events while drinking alcohol!

Others said it was a living hell come to Equestria.

Now that I saw what lay before me past those gates and the *gigantic* wall, I truly realised which was true.

Columns of slaves with numbers greater than that of the largest slave camps I'd been to moved around as *small* teams amongst the industrial nightmare. Massive factories or wire pits in the ground spilled heavy smoke that clogged the streets. Masked ponies with long rifles stalked overhead gantries between the ruined shells of homes while the noise of machines and forges rung or roared in the thick, hot air. Streets fell away into long hills within the wall that went to lower concourses or rose up to old parks. A full city of rises and falls on varied levels of urban building inside one almighty prison of slavery!

Pressing myself as far into the hay as I could, I fearfully witnessed the boils and welts of long-term slaves here. They coughed and staggered on wasted limbs, looking all ready to collapse and spasm until death. I realised this was bad. *Very* bad.

"Come on! Get them out! Stern will be here soon to give them the talk!"

Doors clanged open. Stun rods threatened those who were slow and I had no wish for them to uncover my wings by accident, so I rushed out first to stand where we were told. Upon a long, bloodstained clearing of concrete we were lined up, sweating and nervous. Everypony among our group looked around with worry.

"Stand upright, big ears!"

A baton smacked into my rump, sending me bolt upright in an instant. I withheld my words. They hadn't asked me to speak! A good slave didn't talk.

Then we waited. Minutes passed. I could see the slavers getting impatient.

"Where the fuck's the griffon?"

A sudden trotting perked my ears, leading me to cast my eyes to the side where a frantically galloping pony moved up to the slavers. Unable to avoid it, I may have eavesdropped.

"Stern won't be here for awhile. Them bloody Rangers are at it again. Old Grizzly just says put them to work someplace for now and bring them back out later."

"Son of a... right, fine. Master Grindstone's lot are shifting stuff in that factory over there. Send them in and I'll come pick them up when the big bird's back."

They agreed, before turning to us. Hastily we were coerced, pushed, and struck until we got properly moving. My first experience of true slavery. Of being made to break your body to the limit under a hateful glare of Master Grindstone. Of feeling the burns as forges spewed molten metal out. Within ten minutes, I was crying and hurt, unused to the conditions and unable to have acquired any protective gear yet.

We were taken back and forth around the factory to jobs as needed. Pushing massive molten crucibles or sorting the cast nuts and bolts for manufacturing. Slaves shoved me around, nothing unusual at all but altogether unhelpful in this. A true trial by fire into life in Fillydelphia when I felt my head spin at the fumes.

I fell back, overwhelmed. They could whip me. I just couldn't take it. This was too much!

Hooves wrapped around me. I expected pain, but instead I felt somepony lifting me back up gently, albeit urgently. Eyes closed, I sought to open them, but everything seemed to warp and slow down. I still felt somepony shifting me, but it all began to blur into itself until I was standing back outside in a line. The feeling of somepony lifting me lingered, but

quickly faded.

I must have fallen unconscious and been dragged out. My body certainly hurt enough for it.

"My name is Stern!" Before us, a tall griffon strode. She carried a massive rifle that swung on a strap every time she spun to us. "And this is *my* town. You are workers. You work toward the building of a brighter tomorrow for all ponies in Equestria. A *New* Equestria to be populated by Unity. Your gift to the world shall be the sacrifice that gives it that chance. You can choose to, or Red Eye can give it for you."

This sounded rehearsed, at least partially. But I kept my eyes low, avoiding Stern's, well, stern eyes.

"But most of you don't really care about the future, do you? I see it in your eyes. You don't give a crap. You just want your 'freedom' don't you?"

I remembered a sunset, but nothing else. Maybe once I had.

"Listen closely, then, because I'm going to tell you how to free yourself. You earn it! It's your choice. You can toil in our mills and factories or remain in the workhouses until you die a slave's death! Or... you can volunteer for more dangerous jobs. There are rewards for such things. Red Eye is nothing but generous! As such, you have three options!"

Three talons were raised, one dropped. "Stable Recovery. Many Stables remain around here and we require ponies to seek their resources and riches. They have security teams or dangers of their own, often unique and unpredictable. Not to mention those Steel Rangers who seek them too. Don't get ideas of asking them for help. They would slaughter you just as easily as they would a Stable Dweller."

She looked along our line, seeking to meet eyes. A few granted it, but I whined and hid away.

"Two years. Two years of work with that and Red Eye promises your freedom along with a tag to know you will never be brought back in." The second claw dipped. "Or you can work in our crater! Radioactive metals and materials are always in demand. Six months of full days and we shall provide radiation treatment before allowing you, once again, your freedom."

The third claw dropped. "The last option, fight in our Pit. The arena of combat where if you survive six events, usually about six weeks in total, you shall be granted a place of honour within our growing army! Such choices I am honour-bound to give. These are your only choices! They are lethal, dangerous, and often painful, but such is sacrifice for Equestria! You may of course join *Unity* at any time, to lay your hooves at the feet of the Goddess upon Equestria, not to a false deity I know *some* might believe in."

Celestia and Luna strike her feathers *down* for such heresy! But every one of those choices sounded nothing but terrifying. I'd never manage it, they all needed strong ponies! What to do...

"Aside from that, there is no way out. Get used to it. Aside from death, of course. But there are few methods of death in here that do not involve a horrible end. Don't try to rebel. Don't try to run. Workers remain here to pay their due to Equestria. That is *all* you have now."

She snapped around, as though to attention. I noticed her armour was covered in muck and blood, fresh from battle. Stern must have come here right from the fight earlier. Standing in the line, I shivered, but I knew this was all I could expect. Ponies like me were never granted anything easily.

Slavers began to move along the line. Stern meanwhile watched them progressing with distaste. Some ponies were taking *forever* to choose. Most chose Stable Recovery. A few cringed and tearfully agreed to the shorter crater work. One stamped and demanded they show him to the Pit.

“What about you, little one?”

Squeaking, I looked up. Stern herself had advanced forward to speed the process. She glared down at me, easily many times my size.

“What is your choice?”

“I... I...” Stammering, tears coming to my eyes at her intimidating presence and the stink of blood from her body. “I’m t-too weak for all of them! I’ll... I’ll just work in the city, mills, or factories o-or workhouses. I’m used to it.”

Stern angled her head, as though not expecting me to answer as such. Griffons had such a strange method of looking at you sideways. Struggling to get breath, I found I was the last to pick. Even other slaves seemed a little surprised. They all looked like weathered wastelanders though. I wasn’t like that.

“I was b-born a slave, Ma’am! My cutie mark tells me I’m to d-die one too as my destiny. But I don’t want to die in pain! I want my freedom, but I’m too scared. Too weak. I just want to stay safe. I... I’ll take the normal work, p-please...”

“You choose to be a slave forever in Fillydelphia? To give your life to Red Eye’s work for a New Equestria and Unity?” Stern’s voice was curt and simple.

“I will work with Unity, yes.” I said. I didn’t need to lie to her. It was just the truth. I was Red Eye’s now. “For now, I am nothing but a slave to Fillydelphia.”

There was a brief silence of speech as the ambience of the city hammered on around us. Eventually, the big griffon nodded.

“Send him back to Grindstone. They need the extra workers anyway.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

That was that. A simple tug on my neck to lead the way back to that factory.

That one pull to begin the end of my slave life in Fillydelphia forever.

There was a flicker, as though the entire world had just blinked. Even while the slaver pulled me, the feeling vanished and all the aches and pains faded away to numbness. I was still in Fillydelphia, but everything had just... stopped. Ahead of me, the masked slaver hung on two legs, mid pull. I saw Stern with her arm cast in an order, the slaves moping toward their destinations and still clouds of smoke in the air.

An eerie silence came over it all. The world had frozen, all but for me.

“This is it.”

The Ruin’s voice echoed around me, before I saw him trot over the concrete ground. Moving between slavers, he came to me and kept trotting around me.

“You made the choice. ‘For now I am nothing but a slave to Fillydelphia.’ You accepted it, Murk.”

I had...

I *had*.

I couldn’t stand. I simply fell down as the numbness crept more and more over me. To every side, the world shifted and tore. Factories became taller, the slavers turned to darkness and glowing eyes of malice. The great Wall of Fillydelphia shot up into the clouds, higher than any perception could imagine. Fires grew and expanded to spill across the streets and turn Fillydelphia to an inferno.

"This is the hell you chose, Murk. That I, in my terror, chose for myself!"

Everything began moving again, but abstract and demonic. Screams warped and curved like the wind around buildings while factories moved in circles, creating materials only to melt them down and create them all over again.

"You left your mother, you gained your cutie mark of slavery, and then you found your destiny here. What kind of life is this? Now it's over! I am sorry I had to show you these, but now you have the one choice Murk. It must be now! You teeter on the edge of eternity to a soul that believes only in Master and Slave! Say it... please..."

Shivering, hearing slavery become an undying cycle around me that would continue for eternity, I fought between two terrors. My friends or my own life for slavery. How could I choose?

"I can't just forget them all!"

"But you can!"

"It's all my life..."

"Yes, all your life. Just a slave. All you've ever been and all it seems you ever will be! *Why will you not choose, Murk?* Why can't you see! You're nothing but a servant to everypony else!"

To my eyes, I saw every slave shift and change. They were me! All of them me! A host of Murky Number Sevens being whipped, pulled, and abused by these brutal taskmasters. All my life summed up into one hell.

"Now given the one last choice and you still don't know how to choose for yourself. You've condemned us all, Murk. You've condemned *yourself*! There is no life to go back to, I've told you this! Now you are going to *fall*!"

A sudden weight clasped around me. I sought to move, but with my body numb I couldn't do anything! The ground yawning open below me, I fell farther below the surface of the hellish Fillydelphia! Down into the pits, past caves, and huge machines carving into the earth! I saw thousands of ponies, all looking like me in some state of horror that I had once endured every day! They toiled endlessly at walls that regenerated when not being hewn at! I fell away from the Ruin who had given me the last choice I could never make. I never *had* made choices! Not about my cutie mark, not about my road to freedom in Fillydelphia...

...not to let it end and drift away from it all with him.

Faster and faster I tumbled, drawn by the weight of the mine cart. I hadn't even seen myself reattached! Farther down than Fillydelphia had ever gone, it dragged me into the black.

The impact splintered my senses beyond reality. To the bottom of the quarry as that immense mine cart bearing the weight of my own world crashed to the floor and left me alone at the bottom of eternity. Lying there, looking up I could see nothing. No light, no life and no hope. This was my reward.

Alone and scared, I lay there.

Curling up, I heard the slavery continue... and continue... and continue. I shouted, I cried, and I wished I could find the choice to dream. This was the end, the *true* end for me, and I could do nothing to change it.

I did not know how long I stayed still before I realised it wasn't going to change or end. The fear truly began to see in. This was the end of the line.

No power to change. Nothing alone anyway. I had *nothing*! If only I'd had something,

anything to help me like I had when in the end portions of my life!

I j-just needed s-something, anything. Couldn't there be *one thing*? Had I really found nothing in my life to hold onto? If only there'd been just... one... thing...

Please... one thing, hasn't there been anything?

Without a warning, the first thing to remove me from my nightmares, I felt my eyes begin to squint, as though a bright light were trying to break through their tightly closed eyelids. Gasping, choking on having no air, I opened them to see myself still in the pit of slavery, but ahead of me there was something amiss.

One pillar of bright whiteness, beaming across the floor to me as something shifted in it that tore through the darkness around it. A form, slowly trotting toward me filled with a radiance I hadn't seen since coming here.

Then a voice, familiar and daring.

"How about a glimmer of hope?"

She was there. Stepping forward slowly, drowning out the chains and pickaxes to a dull noise behind the angelic calm injected into my afterlife. Slender legs to a figured body bearing a long two-tone pink mane. Perfectly white and clean with bright azure eyes and a comforting smile upon her face.

My mouth gaped, shivering in disbelief, I watched as my *friend* came toward me. Seeming to almost glow where she was, looking like she had before Fillydelphia had hurt her too, Glimmerlight offered a smile and extended a hoof. This was how she saw *herself* from the form she had once had.

As though in awe of one of the Goddesses themselves, I lay and stared upward without a word while she came closer. Was it taunting me? Teasing me with what I had lost forever? Shivering and scared, I curled up even when I felt her kneel down beside me. Her horn glowed before the absolute proof of her existence beside me was given.

Her hoof reached out and ruffled my mane.

"You've held on, Murky. You did it."

"I... I fell! Everything! I couldn't choose. So I'm d-damned and—"

"Sssh..." She leaned forward, kissing my forehead and gently leaning against me. The shock of *feeling* somepony else touch me penetrated the numbness around me. A warmth spread, vanquishing some of the ruin from my body.

"You're the one part of yourself that refused to give in and accept that you couldn't be free, Murky. I know your memory. I've read it. You amongst all these forms of yourself, you are the *one* part of your soul that always came back to the surface time and again to try and make a bid for true freedom."

"But I'm *not*!"

I writhed away, almost startling her. Hopping up and staggering to my hooves, I waved one around me.

"Every time! Every single time I thought I had something I was only deluding myself! My own mother being taken! Choosing to slave forever in Filly! *My cutie mark*! I've seen the truth, Glimmer! This was a contract to my life the moment it appeared on my flank! This is just the end of it! I always *hated* it! Hated what it represented. I almost hated *you* when you said it looked beautiful..."

I slumped down, facing away from her. To my surprise, I heard a short laugh and a sound of her mane whipping back and forth as she trotted forward. Glimmerlight was shaking her head.

"You've never seen?"

"Seen *what?*"

She lay a hoof on my shoulder, pushing me to my hooves.

Then she pushed my own head to look at my flank, pointing with a hoof.

"This *is* a beautiful cutie mark."

"It's shackles of my *life!*" I turned back to her. Please, Glimmer, stop making me look at it!

Glimmerlight only pressed my head right back and pointed again.

"Have you never noticed the one detail that matters? The one thing that changes everything about your life? That those shackles... are open?"

Simply staring toward my own mark, that hated symbol of slavery, there were a few moments of silence. Everything dulled. Nothing but me and that icon before me.

The shackles... were *open*.

Open.

Twinkling, like the light of a small star, something stirred within me. Sparks flew, a light that had long gone out relit, and a pushing realisation grew and grew as I looked at it properly for the *very first time*. Like a foal the moment they get one and feeling everything just click into place with wondrous joy and a *purpose fulfilled*.

The revelation hit me like a tidal wave, sucking me up and hurling me into my own life and every single moment. Glimmerlight's voice rung in my ears, her horn searing its light to throw me into my own memories.

"Remember everything, Murky. See your life the way you've never seen it before!"

A thunderstorm! A muddy farm and being torn from the grasp of my mother. *Every other* foal had gone along with it but for one that needed to be grabbed and pulled away many times. He had defied the instruction his masters had given to seek the pony he wanted to be with!

"You've been resisting ever since you were a foal."

A little hoof struck an eye, the foal galloping away from what was wished for him back into her embrace. Even with failing, his mother's words made so much more sense. That he *was* different!

"She told you that you were different, special! That you were going to do something they were all jealous of! She knew that someday you would grow to fly away from all this! To fly after that wagon taking her away!"

A rock crashed down the valley, striking a wall and smashing it to tinder. Behind it, a young slave stood and stared toward the world suddenly open before him. Lit from the sunset, the warmth and hazy orange carried him forward without permission to seek that which he wanted.

"You didn't get your cutie mark because you were caught, Murky..."

The sight of a young foal galloping with a *smile* I never even knew I'd been wearing that day! Galloping and hopping, little wings buzzing and trying to lift him higher! Every effort thrown toward an escape that he was throwing everything into!

"You got it because it was the very first time you had tried to escape! Your mark is not for slavery, Murky. It's for freedom! To break the chains!"

Fillydelphia loomed, the sunset's orange become a thick red. Slaves were lined up before a bloodstained griffon. Each slave, in fear, sought the methods of freedom through service and slavery to a grim contract. But as that griffon approached the smallest, he looked up and he

spoke to her.

"Stern was surprised at you, remember? Thousands had chosen that out of fear, but despite the shaky voice, she saw the look in your eyes!"

He spoke up, scared and whimpering. But in his eyes I could see a glint, something unknown to me from inside! His mouth moved, but it spoke a different tone than what the Ruin had repeated back to me.

"Just listen, Murky..."

My own voice.

"For now, I am nothing but a slave to Fillydelphia."

Then I heard it, what was different.

"For now."

I'd always known.

"You always had that will to escape, Murky! You did it before you even had us around! Before I even set eyes on you, you proved to yourself that you're ready."

I saw myself atop a helter-skelter gazing toward the wall, standing before a mirror decked out in my escape gear! Then I saw that sight it had shown me long ago!

A little foal pegasus, me as a colt, standing with innocent little wide eyes filled with tears, my two stubby little wings flapping. It had been that very first escape from the rock farm!

"Ready? Ready for what?"

Glimmerlight was still there, right beside me and guiding me through more recent times, the flow of memory and dreamlike stars carrying those images around me. Her voice flowed toward my ears, gentle and like music...

"You've come such a long, long way..."

A little slave who meekly obeyed everything even a normal slaver ordered him to do, who ran away from mere gang members. When faced with merely having to steal his own journal back, he simply lay down and cried.

"And I've watched you from our very first day..."

That same little slave, battered but standing sat before a sick unicorn upon a couch. She had heard them, what he intended to do to help her. Then, inside a bunker, he fought off ghouls to rescue a small filly from imprisonment, to *free* her! A daring escape into the crater to carry home the items he needed to save the mare's life.

"To see how you might grow. To see what you might do..."

He sat between a giant stallion and the rescued mare. They teased him as he drew, making him blush and yet laugh. Then the dark of a Stable. Even under the waves of battle and danger, the moment his eyes saw the light pouring in the doorway from up ahead he zoned out, trotting forward toward it with dreams and aspirations overcoming the terror inside him from that horrid place!

"To see what you've been through..."

Atop a rooftop, a black and red unicorn and the little slave faced each other, an aimed gun and a pleading to not move or the gun would fire. Heedless, he charged forward for that zipline with no hope at all! Galloping directly into a bullet just to try and get there! Crashing into his small body and sending him reeling to the floor, I saw the unicorn rush to catch him and try to save his life.

"...and all the ways you've made me proud of you!"

It began to speed up. Image after image. From the pits of slavery amongst parasprites where he volunteered himself to save a young couple. From where he took upon a mission

to acquire a sanitiser for better aiding those who needed it. Right into trying to help free those trapped by raiders amongst a brutal firefight inside a mall, taking on their leader himself!

"It's time now for a new change to come. You've grown up to see a new life has begun."

From escaping his Master time and again to freeing that one mysterious mare from incoming danger! Escape after escape while on the run, constant efforts to get away from his Master even under the darkest days of his life. A mindset that never gave up and always found *some* little hope to hold onto!

"To go where you will go. To see what you will see..."

Against whizzing images, so fast I could not see them but every single one of them a whirling mass of escape, chase, and a decision to defy! Every theft, solution, or evasion he'd made by himself slowly fading to show me that one moment of him looking up at *his master* and telling him **no**! Of my tirade against him after saving Lilac, the words that had rung true to my mind whether I had an icon or not!

"To know you will be free!"

One blurring surge of memories, escape attempt after escape attempt. Every time coming closer and closer from a desperate charge out of a rock farm, to a prepared plan away from the FunFarm, right to a war-torn rush away from a Stable! Always toward the sunset! Always toward that one symbol of freedom that I saw in every image of running, evading, and smiling as I was surrounded by those I would make my new life with! More and more flying by of each moment that *mattered* fading toward that one symbol before my eyes that defined my life!

"For it's time for you to fulfil your destiny!"

A pair of shackles, *broken open*.

A symbol I'd always carried and never realised, shining with purpose and potential right before my eyes! I was back in the pit, but standing taller. My body was somewhat numb, but I could feel the ground below me. My eyes firmly centred on that mark that now meant something entirely different amid the light of Glimmer's magic and fading memory spells. She stood there, smiling at the shocked look upon my face.

"I... I never knew..."

Glimmerlight trotted forward, resting a hoof over my shoulders. Glancing to myself, I saw the blackened ruin that had spread over my body throughout the bad memories gone. I was just the normal pony as I always was, cleaner and healed in his own stitched woollen fleece.

"You gave us hope as much as we gave you help, Murky. Don't ever think that you were just a burden or a tag-along. A little symbol of innocence and purpose toward freedom like you was just what Brim and I needed to get going. I'd never have tried to reconcile with Coral without you around to help me. Did you really think we would leave you alone to this?"

"But I... I'm dead. All this time I never realised what it meant and only *now* see but I'm already... g-gone..."

Glimmerlight shook me a little, leaning closer.

"Listen, Murky. It doesn't matter when you realised this. It *always* matters, even if it's to go into the great beyond. Where you've come from doesn't change anything. It's where you want to go that matters. What you do now is the deciding factor. Will you use what you know to save yourself? To escape these chains on your soul from a mistaken destiny forever?"

Looking up, past the whirling circles of slavery to the red glow of Fillydelphia far above us, I bit my lip and shivered.

"I... I d-don't know if I can. This is all so—oh my. I mean, my cutie mark means freedom! It's so much to take in, and I don't know if I can do it or-or feel it as I should now and... I'm so weak."

"You don't have to do this alone, Murky." She rocked me with that hoof and squeezed her cheek against mine. "You've got me with you. *Always*. When I said best friend *forever*, you better bet your skinny little cute rump I *meant* it. The others all feel the same. Nopony wants to see you die."

My eyes bolted open, a surge of will to seek freedom anew picking up by that last word.

"Y-you mean?"

"Yes, Murky." She grinned and looked skyward, up the immense trial before us. "Up there is the light beyond the slavery, beyond the darkness of all your memories and hardships. Past all that which pulled you down you can find the way to your own choice. A way out of this nightmare. We're all doing what we can. It won't be easy, but you can bet the others will help."

She took my hoof.

"So let's get you out. Let's escape the wilful death that so much of you wants and bring the *real* Murky to life once and for all. Let's escape the slavery that's bound you so long inside!"

A resurgence of courage, yes *courage*, spiked up in me. There *was* a way. A journey to the freedom of my soul, to life or salvation I did not care! But I had my best friend with me. I would make it!

"Yes. *Let's!*"

Cast into the pit of despair, farther than ever before from what I craved, I now knew that it was not the end. Glimmerlight and I. Me and my chosen sister. Two simple ponies with nowhere to go but *up*. Around us, every single form of myself that worked the walls turned and squinted through sunken hopeless eyes to the *one* part of me that hadn't yet given up. Cast in Glimmerlight's glow, we were one small aura of light in the darkness.

This was the moment I took back my life and became the pony I was meant to be. The moment I would throw off the chains for *good* inside myself.

"No matter what happens, sis? Thanks... for everything."

"Pfft, you sound like I'm not going to drag you out if I have to. I haven't finished hooking you up with a buck yet."

She winked at me. Despite a blush, I smiled.

Then we took off. A gallop toward one of the cave entrances surrounding us. All around us, the staring slaves looked shocked. A sight they had never expected to see. Something that scared them, terrified them into dropping all their tools.

As we ran across the long flat quarry bottom, I saw that fear turn to shock as they realised what we planned to do. Within seconds, it became an anger, a desperate fury as every other part of me wished to remain in death. A clatter of chains and tiny hooves, they leapt forward and charged for us from all sides!

Glimmer's horn flared, casting light further out. The wrecks and failed hopes of me winced and stumbled, crying out as they covered their eyes or shrank back as though burned.

"This won't hold them too long! The parts of you that still believe you want to die are

strong, Murky! It's deep rooted, not something that just disappears. You have to make it happen and get out of here!"

The cave was just up ahead. I ducked around blindly, flailing limbs that rose from the darkness alongside radsore bearing faces of torment. They clawed into Glimmer's aura, looking to grab a hoof or a tail.

"Get out *where*? Where do we go?"

"Towards the light! Always towards the light, you'll know where!"

Passing by the entrance, the crowd of slaves poured in after us. The cave circled around the edges of the quarry, rising with every metre. It was time to begin the ascent out of this nightmare once and for all. Struggling to keep up with Glimmer's longer strides, I felt one bite at my tail. Squeaking, I pulled it away just before the jaws snapped shut. Were they *me*? A savage and dark part of my mind that sought to pull me into this sort of thing?

Toward the light. Where was the light? *What* was the light?

From everything I'd seen the answer wasn't long in coming. Diving through the cave and beginning to climb upwards in a ring, I shouted to Glimmer.

"The sun! The source of all light! The thing I first chased! That's what I need to go to! To see!"

"Sounds like—argh!" Glimmer cut her words, diving forward when a tiny crevice unleashed a tide of slaves. Pouring forth like black liquid, they slipped through the dark shadows of the slick cave and launched at her. Spinning, casting her horn toward them, they fell back with a growl. I pulled at her, helping my sister up to keep moving!

They were coming from *everywhere*. In some unreal way I recognised them all as each day of slavery I had done, each a unique pain or memory of a thousand tasks. A tide came from behind us, clawing over one another in their fear to stop me. Every time I looked away, more appeared.

"They're going to close us in!"

Glimmer threw one off, pulling me now into a side cave with a rising floor. We had to keep going up, the only direction that mattered! Around us, the cave darkened until we could no longer see the walls but merely hear the rush of slaves chasing us.

Then, like running out of a black cloud, we found ourselves in a wide void filled with mesh flooring and cage-like corridors held up by thick clanking chains. Around us, there was naught but a view to eternity surrounding this metal maze, a view that shifted with blurry images of my life, told through hazy colours shifting and turning in the mists.

"Your subconscious is one messed up place, Murky!"

"Tell me about it!"

The entire construction swung as we entered on it. This made no sense. We'd been in a cave, but the moment we'd entered this side passage it had disappeared. We climbed cages like stairs, dove under chains that hung or barred the way, and always kept moving *up*. Slaves clung to the outsides, hooves pushing through toward us. Some battered the metal, trying to break into it. The entire construction swung from the chase across it, arcing back and forward to throw off our balance. Sometimes I could have sworn we were now on what was once the wall.

Eventually we came to a blank area, a crossroads with nowhere to go. Slaves poured through gaps in the corridors surrounding it, trapping us in the junction! I could hear their cries, somewhere between a scream of agony and fear-driven rage. Every so often, a blood chilling plead or beg would come through the sound.

"Um, any ideas, sis? We're trapped!"

"Look up!"

Casting my eyes skywards, I saw the light above, like a small trapdoor!

"I can't fly!"

"No, but this is your mind, Murky! *Your* memories! Isn't there something that would work here you loved very much? Something you yearned for years after?"

Shivering, terrified by the new rush of emotions and the thrill of escape, I looked into her eyes and saw that look that would always reassure me. She *knew* I had a way out of this. I just had to know it.

Something I knew would work.

I closed my eyes, remembering every little delight of acquiring it. Bouncing happily around another room full of cages and locks with a buck so enthusiastic he had seemed to almost *sing* his delight at making it up for me! One I'd gotten rather caught up in myself.

Thank you, Blunderbuck...

Opening my eyes, I reared up, angling my back, and kicked out my front leg. With a whirl and snap, the mouthpiece whipped in front of my face, as though it had always been there! Glimmer grabbed me, holding tightly when I bit down, feeling the satisfying *whoosh* of the air-powered grapple rocket off my side and snake its way into the light. I didn't need to hear a click to know it would find its target. Yanking back on the mouthpiece, I sent Glimmer and I soaring upwards even as the slaves clustered below. I'd have laughed if I could! Now we were moving! Up and into the light faster and faster! Far quicker than my grapple gun had ever moved me! My mane whipped. Glimmer dug her head into my shoulder from the surging wind passing over us while we left the dark quarry behind for good!

The light grew before us, larger... larger... encompassing us until it gave way to a flickering reality! We passed through it, moving to somewhere else...

All upward motion ceased, both of us being dumped down where we were. Falling on top of Glimmerlight, I still made a grunt of surprise and pain from the short fall. We'd landed upon a hard concrete floor in darkness.

"Good job, lil'bro. Knew you had it in you, but where are we?"

Helping her up, I had to squint as her horn lit again. The light didn't go too far, casting only about ten feet either side to no avail. I saw only a chipped and stained concrete floor before the ambience of darkness took over once more. Backing against one another, I gulped as I saw what the stain *was*.

"I th-think I know where we are, Glimmer."

"This will take you past the trials of your life, Murky. You're trying to escape the memories that hurt you and the things you fear. It's that fear that's trying to make you give up. So, where is this?"

I didn't have to answer. He did for me.

"Welcome back, Murk! I didn't expect a rematch so soon!"

The floodlights blasted into life, blinding me on the spot. Crying out loud and covering my eyes, I slowly let them refocus to what I had feared. Around me was a huge concrete arena topped with spiked metal and darkened stands where shadows warped and moved in a

mocking form of an audience. The entire roof was enclosed within the quarry's caves while the stains around me were blood. *My* blood.

He stood before us. My killer. Wildcard stood atop a pile of corpses, all the ponies (and buffalo) I'd seen die in the Pit across both times I had been there. The huge form of Bonecrusher surrounded by Top Quartz, Shovels, and the rest. I even saw Blood and Daff.

"I've never got to kill somepony *twice* before! You know they say the sequels are always worse, right? Wonder if the same is true with murder. What do you think, huh?"

He slid down the corpse pile as though it were a child's slide, skidding at the bottom across the thick blood seeping away from it and rolling to his hooves with a bow. My body began to freeze. He'd killed me! I couldn't fight him!

"You can do this, Murky. It's not about combat! It's about overcoming what scares you!"

"He killed me, Glimmer! H-he made me scream and hurt me before—"

"Listen to me! You *can* do this! You're braver than you—ARGH!"

My mind reeled as I saw the blood leap up, snaking around her legs as though it were *alive* and drag Glimmerlight far from me! Throwing her into the wall, it surged off the ground and formed a sort of blood cage around her. Slowly, it began to steam, growing boiling hot that scalded her everytime she tried to push by.

"Hush hush, girl!" Wildcard skipped through the arena, grinning to her. "Let the little buck talk, it's rude to interrupt! You don't get to play any part in this! Now c'mere little guy!"

I stepped backward, my mind was still reeling at the sight of blood coming to life. Below my hooves I felt its sticky pools squirming like living water.

"I said *come here!*" Fury crossed his face the moment my hoof moved backward. "You're not doing what I'm telling you? I own your life, cos I killed it! Get back here!"

Shaking my head, I turned to run. I could hear Glimmer screaming for me to just see through how he scared me into wanting to fall again, but he just overwhelmed me. Anywhere I galloped to, he was there, defying reality to be just outside my peripheral vision every time!

"Over here!"

I dove away.

"I meant here!"

Rolling away, one machete drove into the concrete.

"Or here!"

A hoof flashed out at me. Scampering away from it, I bit down hard on my grapple gun, trying to smack him in the chest with it, but instead knocking me back onto my rump with the recoil as it only soared past him. Lightning sparked from his horn, striking the ground beside me. Crying out, I froze at the sight of him waving a hoof happily from nearby. His horn was lit, ready to aim properly this time.

"P-please, let me go! I just want to live!"

"Aww, ain't that cute?" Wildcard trotted forward, shaking out that multi-coloured mane. "Usually they tell me they don't want to die rather than they want to live. Somethin' different, huh? Share it with uncle Wildcard, c'mon!"

"I want to *live!* J-just let me go! I don't want to fight."

There was one difference between then and now. I didn't feel tears in my eyes.

"You only kill! Just treat it like a game! Why can't I just have a *life*? Away from ponies like *you!*"

Wildcard stopped trying to work something out of his teeth with the machete and blinked at me. Then he began to advance, his voice low.

"Like me? You thinking I'm something bad? That there's something wrong with me? Fuck this, I'm gonna stick you right now, little pig. *You saying I'm crazy!? Ain't no water below the bridge, that isn't gonna be your fucking blood, kid!*"

He charged, raising the machete before sending it crashing down. I screamed, covering my eyes.

Red clouded my vision. The colour of blood and the sound of something hacking through flesh met my ears. He'd done it again. He'd...

There was no pain. Cautiously, I moved my hooves away.

Before me, having dove in front to take the strike to his own body, Brimstone Blitz stood between Wildcard and I. The machete had sunk into his shoulder, streaming blood terribly. But his cold eyes met Wildcard's from mere inches away. The crazed raider seemed, for once, stunned.

"I was like you once, Wildcard. Not any more. If I need to sacrifice my own body to prove something or to protect somepony, I'll do it."

"You old dog, nothing you do can save him from the place he's in! Best just accept the crazy, embrace it, and *fall!*"

They collided in a sudden and mutual blur of motion. But so close, with his weapon stuck *on* Brimstone, Wildcard had no chance. Hurling the smaller raider away, Brimstone charged and leapt upon him, pinning the raider down. He seemed stronger than ever, his mane greater in colour, and his body more lean and muscular than I'd ever seen it. Like he was somehow younger, less ragged.

"I'm not going to let age take me until I know I've done what I need to, Wildcard!"

"Get off m—"

"Shut up! I let you get to him once before. *Never again!* He doesn't *ever* have to fear you again, know why? Because he has others willing to stand beside him who won't let him pass into the darkness so easily! But there's one much *bigger* reason that matters to you right now."

Brimstone turned back to me.

"It's that he's got *me*, and even way down here I'm not going to let you get *anywhere near him again!*"

One of those colossal hooves rose. Wildcard struggled and squirmed, but beneath the full might of a warlord in his prime he had no chance! With a roar, the final blow descended, shattering Wildcard to splinters of ebbing black that flew in all directions before melting to the floor. Along with the blood, it sunk out of the arena.

The flood lights dimmed, the crowd falling silent and lurking away as the light began to draw down again, only one remaining in the far gate. The one I'd once watched what I thought was a legend from.

Slowly, under the sudden silence, I trotted toward Brimstone Blitz. His wound seemed to have disappeared. Toward the side, Glimmer began to gallop over, the steaming blood cage falling away to the drains like all the rest.

"Brim..." I held a breathless wonder in my voice, speeding up to stand before him with a smile. I was *so glad* he was here. Our guardian, the huge pony I realised for all his fury I did at my core feel safe around. I couldn't help it. I ran up and hugged him.

Or, well, hugged his *leg* anyway.

All the same, I felt the other giant hoof curl around me.

"I promised you long ago that you were one of us, and by my own life I would see you free, Murk. Be it to a new life or as a release from an untimely death, I won't turn back on that. Back in the clan we took oaths like that seriously."

I felt his head look up, to Glimmer.

"If there's anything I've learned lately, it's that we can't change how we began. We can only make what we will of it for our future. I almost threw my soul away in years past to the rage, but you two... you've brought it back. Given me a reason to learn what caring is again. If only by memory here, I will *always* protect you."

"Thank you..." Glimmerlight wiped a little tear from her eye. I felt Brimstone motion me to get off his leg with a rare smirk.

"We should go. There is far yet to travel, more trials await! Wildcard was the fear of your death, Murk. They all will mean something to you. I am with you however, from now on until the end."

How typical of me. I couldn't help the crying from happening. Only this time of joy and absolute delight to know they were with me.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Glimmerlight beamed, pointing toward the gate. "Let's do this!"

"YEAH!" I leapt up and cried out, punching a hoof in the air. Then hesitated, blushing at the 'trying not to laugh' look they both gave me. Glimmer ruffled my mane with at most a snicker.

"That's the spirit, lil'bro. Come on!"

All three of us galloped onward toward the gate. The arena faded around us as we went, the light remaining the only indicator of our path! The ground began to rise, sending us galloping uphill, every inch a satisfying rise from darkness! I could do this! I could escape the slave in my mind! Passing through the gate, the momentum built, my friends at my back and the light before me atop the stairs growing into the black void below us!

We ran into the light.

Then the light went out.

I stumbled and almost fell. Had I gone deaf? I couldn't hear the others! Turning from side to side, I tried to run into them! To find them! But there was nothing!

Had it all been a tease? To think I was succeeding?

"Glimmer!"

I ran another way.

"Brimstone!"

We had just been running up! I couldn't even see my hoof in front of my face now! Terror began to build under such enthusiasm, a low worry of things crashing down all over again like they *always* had.

Then I felt a motion pass right by me. Squeaking, I leapt after it, trying to catch it! But the feeling wormed away, floating into the darkness as though it were always a part of it.

"Scared?"

The voice seemed to come from nowhere. Turning from side to side, I wished my eyes could see properly, but what night vision I usually had was gone!

I felt a brush against my flank. Leaping *away* from it this time in fear, I almost tripped over something I couldn't see!

Right. Two could play at this game. I hunched down low, treading lightly.

"Oh, don't even *try*. You never could beat me at this."

Wait...

Oh *no*.

As though sensing my own realisation, a single eye opened before me, predatory and followed by a mad shining white grin in the darkness.

"Hello again, filly."

I fell, back-peddalling frantically away from the sight. My hoof went to my shoulder, which suddenly ached with the hot pain of a knife blade searing right through it. There was nothing there, but I still felt it as I had before! Twisting the cold metal against my bone and muscle!

Through the darkness, he advanced, warping and twisting through all the shadows I now saw in his wake. Long, straight hair that sent wavy distortions around him and seemed to gel with the magic bleeding from that dark horn made it impossible to really see any outline of the raider that still made me fear the dark!

Barb.

"You don't know how wonderful it is to see you down here. You thought you were such a hotshot pulling one trick and quipping off, huh? Ooh, we don't like that in the Clan. We don't like little pipsqueak fillies thinking that can act bigger than us! Especially me."

I felt something under my hoof, like a rock! I threw it! The object seemed to simply vanish through him. Barb slid past my vision, appearing right beside me as what I *thought* was him simply faded into nothing.

"Not got any fancy tricks left? Fool me once, kid. I hope you know what gutting involves now, because I'll show you *how* for what you did the moment you truly realised how screwed you really are! Don't think the whore or the traitor will come for you. They're wandering themselves miles from here, each thinking they're chasing me."

He winked.

"Unicorn shadow magic. It's a *wonderful* thing; bless Luna, eh? Face it. Your friends are *dead* the moment I decide it down here. I *am* the darkness, filly, and in your mind the darkness is everything! Now gallop. Gallop and scream because I'm going to be coming for you and I want to hear you *beg* as you flee the inevitable!"

A knife pressed against my shoulder! *That* shoulder! I had no choice. I had to go, it was run or be impaled! Taking breaths with no air entering my body, I stood and sprinted away while trying to avoid tripping over every desk and door frame! I fell into the corridor, struggling to see, and wishing I could maybe find Brim or Glim in this maze! Was this Stable Ninety Three? I thought it was!

Laughter sounded behind me. The stalking hunt was on! Trying to control myself from screaming, I crept as best I could down random corridors, trying to always get away from him! I heard things, buckets being knocked over or doors sliding open and closing! I could track him by the doors, right?

Ahead of me, a door opened. He must be up there!

Turning, I ran right into a sweeping wave of darkness that curled along the wall and ceiling, as though he was running *off the ground* within the shadows themselves!

"All the shadows are mine, filly! You can't trust any of your precious sounds now!"

This time, I screamed. The glint of black metal caught my eye while I turned and galloped away. He moved slowly, savouring the hunt. It gave me time to rush up some stairs. Up! Always up! I'd have to find the way out of the Stable, right? Was that the game? I needed to fool him. Get him to move away, use every ounce of hiding I could!

Watching either side of me, I stepped back into the thickest shadow I could and lay down quietly. Nearby, I could hear his laughter down the hallway. Curling up, I hugged myself and tried to staunch the pain of my shoulder. It was *agonising* now!

Then I felt the shadow hug *back*.

"Throwing my voice isn't *that* hard! Two tries down. Next time it's the blade in the back for you!"

He threw me out, surging around me. I never once saw his actual physical form! Just eyes or a wisp of hair trailing in the shadows themselves! Every corridor I looked at seemed to have something! The entire *Stable* was Barb!

"Oh, now you're getting it!"

No matter where I went, he could always see me... always catch me...

I started to fall to the floor, holding my shoulder as it began to bleed all on its own. Some wounds, some fears never died.

"All you can do is wait until I have my fun. It's not nice being *smaller*, is it?"

His voice rang around me, echoing off walls and reverberating from every corridor at different times. I couldn't locate him! I couldn't escape him! He was my absolute peer!

I was just too small, too weak at anything to win.

"No you're not!"

My eyes bolted open. I felt someone else gallop up to me, sliding to catch me before I fell in hopeless loss. A buck's voice. I felt firm but gentle hooves hold me up and cradle my shoulder.

"Even those who didn't know you long were those you made an impact on, Murky."

Through the darkness, I tried to squint until he finally came into view. I felt a cooling water poured over my shoulder and the tingling magic of a healing potion applied. Then I finally saw, the light of the magic working upon me making his glasses sparkle before optimistic and calming eyes.

"Doctor Weathervane bid me to take that oath to help others, Murky," said Caduceus, "I'm not going to go back on it. Especially not for those in dire need."

If I had any air in my lungs I would have been breathless. Sitting right before me was a buck I'd barely known, but had felt such a connection with as a friend before Barb stole him from *all* of us.

"He hurt you, Murky. Some wounds go long after the pain has faded from the body, but we can't let them dominate us! If in life I fixed your body, in memory I shall help fix your fear. The fear of those stronger than you. That's what he represents to you now!"

Behind him, I saw another shadow swish past, laughing while it circled us. A predator waiting to strike. Caduceus held my shoulder strong, the pain dying off, before laying his other hoof to the side of my face.

"You were a wonderful little buck. Somepony I was happy to die fighting alongside for the rescue of those in need. You gave me the courage, because I could look at you and see that even the weakest of us was still standing up to do it. I went for Glimmer, but I stayed because of *your* inspiration to stick by your friends! You *are* a brave pony, Murky!"

We stood together. Then he simply hugged me. Falling into the embrace, I couldn't do

anything but simply say the words I never got the chance to.

"Thank you..."

"You're very welcome. I'm sorry I couldn't say goodbye, but there are more important things than that now. Murky, listen carefully, he—"

"Is more than he'll ever amount to!"

Barb's voice bounced from the walls. I could feel him coming closer, sense his strike was nearing. I began to shiver, but Caduceus shook me gently.

"He is nothing but your fear of those better than you! But what have you to fear from him? *You beat him!* In the end it was *you* who ended his reign of terror in that Mall! You who saved Protégé's life and the lives of many others by throwing yourself against him!"

"Nothing but luck! Now both of you, nothing but *unlucky* bucks! I hope you're ready!"

The darkness swelled, I saw only briefly a glint of a dozen knives in the darkness, all closing upon us. We had to move, but Caduceus only held me still!

"All he has is fear, Murky!"

My eyes closed tightly, but the words reminded me of that horrifying moment as I saw him strike down a pony I sought to protect! Of how I had run forward *without fear* to launch onto him! Of outwitting him in the end! I had *won*.

I had won and he was gone! He was no threat to me anymore!

I was not afraid!

I opened my eyes even as I felt the knives all land and sink into both of us. The darkness penetrating and surging inward for the killing blow in a nightmare of gore and pain.

Nothing landed.

As my eyes opened again, I was standing with Caduceus, holding one another tightly in support of the fear we'd both *had* of this ghostly pony. But now, aching my eyes a little were the panel lights above that had come on. The entire Stable was bathed in light, revealing to me nothing but a pathetic sight.

A tiny form of Barb, skinnier than even me. Without gore, but as though he had been blown into fragments and only the barest form of a pony remained. Unable to move, cast upon the floor, I saw eyes showing fear himself looking up at me, before what shadow remained slipped away beneath the metal plates of the Stable's floor, disappearing forever.

"Thank you, Caduceus. I'm—I'm sorry we couldn't—"

He stepped back from me, breathing out with relief. But he shook his head.

"It's all right, Murky. I knew the dangers when I went in and I don't regret doing it. But right now, it's you that we have to help. I'll follow you along with Brimstone and Glimmer to aid you."

A thick galloping from around the Stable corridor's corner gave way to just those two ponies rushing forward, hearing our voices. There was a silence, Glimmer simply stopping on the spot as her eyes found Caduceus standing beside me, a hoof on my back protectively.

The joy I felt as I saw her rush over and dive onto him so hard he was blown over to the floor was more than I had known in so long. Even Brimstone couldn't help but crack his stern face into a little smile at the sight of those two laughing and holding one another tightly. A miracle to meet just once more.

"Caddy!" Glimmer almost squealed the name, rubbing her cheek against his. I could see little sparkling tears around her eyes whenever that huge mane of hers was out of the way. Giggling from her attentions, Caduceus had to properly fight to keep his glasses on and get to his hooves.

"Oh, Glimmerlight! Your mane!"

"Oh I *know*. Welcome to how I should look, you lucky buck. Thank you for being here, for helping him! Thank you..."

They shared one more tender embrace, one that I felt Glimmer's magic dragging me into. The type of moment we never had been able to have in real life.

Brimstone made a small sound of approval, clearly not willing to join a group hug, before casting his eyes down the corridor. A stream of light began to show.

"The Stable door. Right there with the light. We should get moving; the shadows and nightmares seeking to stop him won't rest long. I can sense it. The surface isn't far away now to get back into Fillydelphia and out of this underground world."

Separating, sticking close, we each nodded and began the journey again. With my friends by my side, I felt spurred on! I could properly do this! Rounding the corner we saw the door, casting white light into the dark Stable that the ageing panels above simply could not give. A natural light, one of *life*.

Our group galloped forward, me in front of them all as we dove through it like we had once before on the hills outside Fillydelphia.

For once, the light did not go out. Instead it shifted and became a harsh orange glow. A wave of heat struck me as we passed through, a familiar one.

Blinking to clear the glare, I almost gagged on a poisonous tang to the... well it wasn't air. I still couldn't feel myself breathing. But a thick, smoggy cloud rolled across the area, blocking all sight and burning my throat and eyes.

It was a feeling all too familiar. I knew exactly where I was.

The smog lifted, revealing the industry of Fillydelphia, a massive below-ground chamber of impossible heights and scale between thick pillars and bearing, unending machinery that whirled and ground all around us. A vast mechanism of unknown purpose and incredible complexity. It rose up the pillars and spread under the metal grating of the floor.

But the *noise*.

My ears flattened. I dropped to cover them, noticing even my three companions wince when the slams, grinds, and screeches of metal washed across us. Beneath the sights, smells, and sounds of Fillydelphia's industry we were stricken, given only to a slow crawl through this mechanical maze of lethal squirting steam and shifting pistons.

"Keep moving!" I heard Brimstone shout above it. I could only nod and try! Pushing ahead, filled with a purpose to overcome all these trials, I cantered forward even while I felt my eyes turn wet from the pain in my head.

Through each corridor we turned, the noise only grew. Small oddities in it perked my interest, however. Every so often there was another tone to it, something else that didn't sound quite mechanical. Turning my head to the side, I looked at the nearest machine, staring deep into its complex workings.

Then I screamed.

Within it, growing from a spinning cog, I saw a pony's face twisted in pain upon the very metal. On each squealing turn, I heard a cry of pain and suffering. Noticing one, I then heard the others, upon so many surfaces they were melded into the very workings of this vast room! Shifting faces and hooves between tearing metals and white hot welds that bore

an unending existence as part of the machine itself!

Around me, my companions saw it too. Glimmerlight looked beyond horrified, stepping back against a furious Brimstone.

“There has to be an end! Push through! Don’t let it distract you!”

Caduceus rested a hoof on the metal, I could see the carer in him aghast.

“But we—”

“Get **moving**!” Brimstone pulled him away, pushed us all on! I galloped myself, only now beginning to realise how familiar that voice was. I knew *who* it was. Veering around whirring spindles I saw a long straight corridor lined with lathe machines that cracked with a sound of bone while they worked. Under this chorus of metal agony I ran, knowing they were right behind me. Find a way up! Always up!

The noise peaked, a grinding howled into the air before I felt a huge slam behind me. The impact threw me from my hooves, dumping me upon the ground before I could look back. A huge slab of metal had crashed down from a lifting arm above us! The centre of it was filled with mesh wire, separating me from my friends! I ran back to it, hopping up to try and press through the mesh, but it was far too small! Brimstone began slamming against it, while Caduceus tried helping me, before opening his eyes wide.

“Behind you!”

Feeling a cold sweat under the blistering heat, I spun.

Before me, forms of ponies were dredging themselves from the floors and machines. Dozens of them, all rising and shaking themselves off. Formed of metal and flesh upon their bodies, they were simply part of the great machine themselves. Necks cracked on spindles and blinking red and yellow eyes turned to look at me before I finally recognised them. Every one of them.

Every slaver I knew.

Wicked Slit gnashed her serrated mouth to lock the jaw in place as she fell from between two cogs with a tinny clatter. Whiplash juddered and let his glinting eyes fall upon me, a length of industrial wire in his mouth’s flesh that had been wrapped over a rounded pipe. The rock farmer, one I’d never even known the name of, slid forward on rusting plated legs. Hive, Wormtail, Mosin, Sooty, Grindstone...

They *all* were there.

Then they spoke, as one. A combined voice echoed and funnelled by the whirling machinery into a voice for the entire *room*.

“Welcome home, slave.”

Glimmerlight pressed her face up against the wire.

“Don’t listen to them! It’s just the next trial, Murky!”

The metal began to move, forcing my friends backwards, further from me! I tried to chase them, but it only moved faster as I ran between the pillars and leapt molten metal to catch them!

“You’re alone! We’re here to bring you back. Welcome you as what you should be all over again, just another little cog in the machine!”

Slit shivered forward, her mouth moving in perfect sync with every other slaver. Spreading out, they began to circle me.

“We’re where you belong, Murk!”

“With us! The ponies who own you!”

Whiplash began to trot forward faster. I leapt back. What was I meant to think? What

did I do to win here? I didn't know! Hooves tried to grab me, rising from the machine! The slavers from the Mill! I felt myself being dragged! Weighed down as they closed in, a mass of master after master who had owned my life seeking to drown me into the very spinning wheels behind me!

"DON'T! I'm free! I should be free!"

"You should be here!"

Wicked Slit grabbed my leg, pulling me! Then I felt Mosin clamp a wrench-ended hoof over my tail. They began tugging me toward an opening in the machine that seemed designed just to perfectly fit me! I struggled, knocking nuts or bolts from their faces, but the pieces flowed and travelled back to where they should. An unending machine I couldn't change!

"Yes, here!"

"We're your real family, Murk."

I screamed, covering my face as they descended. But I felt a pressure build, a feeling like my ears had to pop. Growing and thickening the air with the sound of sparking, a sudden wind blew over me and heralded a fierce shockwave ripping across the machines, tearing parts free and throwing the slavers back. Some shattered into parts or got caught in the cogs and pistons of the machines around us!

Stunned, lying upon the ground, I looked up to see the sparking emerging from a horn glowing brighter than any I'd seen since the Pit.

Coral Eve stood atop one machine, her face bearing a mask of anger and determination. Her mane braided in intricate wooden clasps I'd never seen her own outside Glimmer's memories.

"You all know *nothing* of what the word 'family' truly means!"

A clipped electronic scream belched into the air. Slit, Hive, and a half dozen others got back up as their bodies reknitted and reformed, charging forward. With a toss of her head and a cry of exertion, Coral sent them blasting back across the foundry floor to slam into the wall blocking the others! Suddenly, a crash as Brimstone broke the barrier down and dropped it upon all the slavers! The impact lifted dust from the ground before he, Glimmer, and Caduceus charged toward me as well. Coral landed beside me, helping me up.

"A family isn't what you're told to accept. It's what you choose for yourself. A bond between ponies, no matter their origin or how they met. It's what you mean to one another..."

She looked down to me. Even as the others approached, that fury settling to a smile.

"...to help fill the gaps in each other's lives."

I couldn't help it. Even in danger, I leaned forward to hug her tightly, feeling her return it and wrap her hooves around me tightly.

"I knew you'd be here too, Coral."

"I know, my dear. I know."

Surrounded by my friends, my *family* I'd chosen for myself, the mechanical slavers paused and retreated, even falling apart. Slowly, the noise began to fade, the machines shutting down. Glimmerlight moved closer to me, exchanging a knowing glance with Coral, before stroking my mane and pointing. Up ahead, I could see a great set of stairs leading to the surface! There was maybe just one more room to go through! Fillydelphia's top level was almost near! From the bottom of that dark quarry to here. Such a rushed journey.

We were so close, but we couldn't be stopped! Every task my friends had helped me

overcome, now that they were all here.

My gaze lifted up the stairs as we neared them. I placed one hoof upon the steps and felt a chill run right through me.

"It's all right, Murky. We're here with you." Glimmerlight nudged my side.

"You've stormed past all this! I dare say, this will be easy." Caduceus smiled to me.

Only, I was shivering. I had looked upwards to the great doorway out of the foundry ahead. Tall and made of concrete, they bore a symbol at the top. The one that mattered most, the hardest one to get around.

A single loop. The eternal chain.

"H-he's in there..." My hooves felt frozen to the spot. I'd never truly beaten him! H-how was I... what if he... oh no..."

"Murky, hun." Coral passed a hoof over me, pulling my eyes to hers. "I *saw* you stand up to him. We all did, but I saw you say that one word, just remember it. Remember the one that matters! If you can say that, then you can win. You knew you'd have to come to face him eventually."

"I... I know! But he's... he might be my—"

"No!" Coral's voice snapped out, almost reprimanding me on the spot. I blinked, looking up at her. "Remember what I just said. Family is who you choose. Whether or not he was responsible to begin with, what matters is who *you* choose. We're all here for you now, all your friends. We won't leave you to yourself. But he might separate us. He may force you to do this alone. We'll all be rooting for you, even if you can't hear us."

"Damn fuckin' right," Brimstone muttered, earning him a little glance from Coral.

"Language, big guy."

He smirked, holding up a hoof. "As if Murky would ever be able to repeat it anyway."

A little laugh passed around the group. I allowed myself a chuckle.

They had carried me this far. We couldn't stop now. I had faced the trials of my own fears, of my death, of those stronger than I, of the life that was expected of me, but now I knew it was for the greatest of them all.

To face My Master. The true symbol of everything that had held me down. Master and Slave.

"Thank you, all of you. L-let's go."

We ran up the stairs. They went on for a long time, the huge door only getting bigger as we ascended from the pit of machinery, heading for the surface! Every step forward I felt the fear grow. I knew I would likely be terrified, cry, and struggle, but I had to try! He would always stand in my way before any escape!

We never even stopped for the door, high above the ground. We pushed right through it and into his lair within my mind.

What struck me was the silence.

After the deafening machines, the moment I passed through that door there was nothing but a still silence amongst a dark chamber. Fans above turned lethargically, beaming dull red light into the room that chopped and cut every time a fan blade shifted past. Almost like the ruins of an ancient castle or cathedral, the pillars continued to rise into a dark abyss above us.

Out of that darkness hung chains.

Everywhere, like rainfall held still, they hung filled with hooks or collars from the ceiling to become almost like a forest suspended five feet from the floor. They swayed gently, clinking against one another or upon the ruined marble pillars and (for those that reached further down) floor.

A strange little sound made my ears prick up. I'd heard it long ago. What was it?

"...ews... derly stal... uth..."

I glanced around, looking down and to my right, it seemed loudest there. What was that?

We stood as one group, waiting. Shaking my head to clear these odd distractions, I held close to Glimmerlight, casting my eyes to every shadow that might hold something. Through murky windows I could see the hazed light of Fillydelphia's outside world. We were on the surface! At the far end, I could see a doorway that led out to it. We were so close!

I knew it would be more than simply running over there though.

It wasn't.

"Num... ber... Seven..."

Every few letters were pronounced harshly, mockingly. The voice emanated from all around, rattling the chains as they surged and quivered in response to the sickly voice creeping through them.

"Little... Number... Seven..."

Slowly, the dark ambience began to lift as a cloud above cleared and let more of the washing light pour through the windows. A set of steps to a plinth lit up, shining from polished stone leading all the way to a throne. A shifting mass below it, I gaped in horror as I saw myself. Many forms of myself all broken and laid low below the throne itself! My Master was sitting atop my own suffering! Made of ringed chain cast into the design, the throne curled round, rising to his own symbol above.

Within it he lounged, adorned in dark armour made of Ranger plate fragments and milled steel, a lordship of slavery at the height of power. Chains led from many hooks on it to the slaves bearing my face below his throne, ones he would pull or tug to get to them to move!

"Fillydelphia, the city of slavery. Look to the places you have come from. This is not just your fears, little Number Seven, but the *legend* that is this place! Red Eye was not the first to make something of this place."

Of course, I knew that from what I'd heard, that meant *he* knew it. I heard Brimstone snarl behind me, saw Coral's horn light in sparks. They were ready for a fight, but he only grinned at them, rotten teeth showing around disgustingly wet and cracked lips.

"Slavery is my destiny, you worms. I take what I own, and I **own you!**"

I knew the one word I had to say. The one that everyone has trouble saying, even to their friends. That one illogical word that is so simple, but that we all struggle with.

Here, it meant more than ever.

"N-no!"

I stepped forward. Coral was right. I had to tell him and show myself that I could overcome him! His eyes glared to me, uncannily familiar eyes reflected by every version of myself I saw groaning and crying below him.

"Not any more! I-I'm leaving! Escaping you!" Trotting forward, I stood before his throne, throat tight and shivering, but standing tall! "Just like I told you, but now I realise that my

hope didn't have to come from anyone else but myself and from my friends!"

I'd told him! I'd told him *no*! We would pass this!

He only smiled and gestured. A rattle was our only warning, as every chain in the area writhed like a snake, collars gnashed and hooks scythed. A cry of warning was all I could offer before they hurtled down, surging around my friends! Surging around me! Brimstone fought at them, while I dove over the group, rolling on the ground to escape them! Coral's magic exploded forth as the battle against his chains began.

Caduceus and Glimmerlight were back to back, tossing them down or grabbing them in Glimmer's magic. Nearby, Brimstone tore them from the roof, finding them coiling like living creatures even afterwards! More dropped. Collars grabbed Coral's hooves and she shattered them upon the floor! Ducking, diving, and dodging I felt a hook nearly sink into my leg, deflected painfully from one of my little hooves! Grabbing one, I swung from it a short distance before running around a pillar, I could trap one!

My head turned away, hearing something again.

"...landers! ... he bloody mass... ealed at... st"

Distracted, a collar snapped shut around my back leg. I tried to grasp it and pull it off, but even when Glimmerlight ran to aid me I saw her wrapped around the waist by multiple chains and lifted high. Brimstone was covered in them, tearing and smashing but being slowed and weighed down. One by one we began to get caught and distracted. Caduceus cried out and thrashed ten feet off the ground while Coral's horn made a flare and burned out on the spot!

Finally, My Master moved.

"This is the reality of my legacy, Number Seven! Slavery is not something you *choose* to leave. **You are here forever! You do not leave till I tell you, and I *never* will.**"

"Murky! This is just him trying to tell you who you are, but he doesn't choose!"

"Of course I do, little mare! I am his Master! His *bloodline*. Slavery is in us, Number Seven!"

He advanced, the chains dragging me across. I felt a collar shut around my throat tight enough to hurt! I didn't need to breathe, but my windpipe was still crushed.

"You can delude yourself as much as you want, but I am the Lord and Master of Slavery. Fillydelphia was and is *mine*. You came here to come home, Number Seven! To find me!"

His words seared into my mind, like they were not even simply being heard. Everything left a burning *mark* upon my thoughts! Struggling, I felt every limb clamped down! We were so close, it was just out there! He climbed out of his throne, stomping over to me down the steps.

"I... I want *out*! I don't accept you!"

"Too bad."

I heard a scream of pain behind me. Coral's horn had flared even brighter, trying to attack him. But hooks dug in and the magic imploded upon herself. Brimstone roared even as they cut at him and held him immobile. My friends were going to be torn apart by the chains!

"Face it, Number Seven. The only thing you can do to save them is to accept me. You've never been able to beat me. Every time the circle has simply completed itself and you have been returned worse than ever. Isn't that how it's gone? The Eternal Chain. You've seen the pattern again and again and *again*. It's all one loop and it's gone on since the start."

His hoof lifted my head up. Glimmerlight's cry of pain sent my eyes watering, the chains condensing around her.

"You can—argh! You can fight him, Murky! This is what you came here f-fooor!"

"How can you fight what you cannot take away? You know I'm telling the truth; that in the beginning, I gave you life."

*"Lying or not, it *doesn't* matter!"* Coral screamed from behind me.

I stared forward into my own eyes upon his face, that same scar aching and bleeding as I felt it form upon my previously clear forehead.

"There is nothing better for you out there. Born a slave and meant to be a slave, whether or not you have some little mark that promises you anything more!"

"What you were born as doesn't change what you try to be!" Brimstone roared, striking down a chain even as more grasped hold.

My neck tightened again, stopping me speaking. His hoof stroked my chin.

"You *want* out, but you don't know how to do it! You haven't a clue what freedom is! Now you will be cast down! No pony in this world can understand truly understand where you came from but me!"

I screamed! Every chain digging into me, unable to speak, feeling him stop me doing so by the command of the chains that my own mind conjured! I screamed because he was right! I... I didn't know and there was no pony—

"Wrong, Shackles."

A red glow erupted out and around us. The chains in the air recoiled, hissing as they moved and steamed. Forced back, they let go of me. Around me, I heard the metal shriek and jolt away from the magic surging forth.

With those two words spiking through my brain with enough hope and sudden feeling of safety, the collar snapped right off! I fell, rolling down the stairs away from him in his angered bewilderment at who distracted him! My friends dropped to the floor, each casting off what chains had been seeking to crush them.

Pained, shaking, I looked up. We all did.

Standing before me, I saw one little glint of red in the darkness that trotted forward. Dark coat emerging from within it to stand before me with his horn glowing a bright red that shielded and protected us.

*"He has *me*,"* said Protégé, *"somepony *you* have no power over! You might try to cast your chains around him and his friends, but you cannot cast them around me!"*

Lying upon the floor, looking up at him, I saw the one eye on his right look down to me with a small comforting smile. I wanted to throw myself at him, seeing him alive and well here after so much worry!

"Th-thank you for coming."

Protégé offered only a gentle nod, before his gaze turned to before us, where the black form of The Master stood in a wide stance, his chains surging and twisting around the entire room, just waiting for a chance.

*"Oh. *You*. The upstart himself. The little colt-cuddling wretch who thinks he can do so much 'more' for Fillydelphia. Don't think you being here makes any difference. You can protect him, but you cannot make him free, if you even know how."*

He trailed a hoof over the shield, leaning in close to it, closer to Protégé's face.

*"Don't forget. There was a time when you called me **Master**."*

"A time long past, Shackles!" Protégé bit back. *"If I proved anything it's that a pony can*

escape you! I took two years, but I won't let another pony be drawn into your nightmare ever again! I will have you cast from this city if I can, to forever remove your stain of evil from a place that might be better! A place free of the hell you created before Master Red Eye dethroned you!"

Each of my friends were moving up beside him, I got back to my feet to stand directly beside him, feeling Glimmerlight on my other side.

"A time yet to come *again*, upstart!" He slammed upon the shield, a deep thump surging around it with more power than seemed natural. Protégé winced as The Master leaned in. "You're still within these walls, within Number Seven's slave mind. In here you will be **mine** again. Just as *he* always will be!"

The shield shimmered back, growing and forcing The Master back. As one, my friends stepped forward, all but me. They sheltered me, standing with Protégé as they fully stood up to him.

"If I need to nurture and protect him until another two years pass, I will, Shackles! He is strong, stronger than perhaps I was at his time and definitely more than you will ever believe! In here, in his mind, I believe in his ability to make it happen."

Protégé turned to me.

"He's proven everyone wrong about what his limits were, to come from nothing to do the things he's done. To save my life when he doesn't owe anything to me for what I've put him through. That's the mark of a real pony under all the tears and terror. Something *you* would never understand or be able to spot, Shackles!"

Every day I would never truly understand everything that drove the only friendly 'master' I'd ever had, but right now I was simply glad he was here, no matter what the circumstances between us were.

"Damn right! Now he's not alone either!" Glimmer almost grinned as she said it, seemingly tired of waiting her turn to pipe up! I could see her magic joining Protégé's, expanding the shield and mixing the red with her own azure gem blue!

"We didn't bring him this far just to cast him back down to your sadistic ways!" Coral's horn lit, a thick ocean blue that seemed to gel all too well with Glimmer's and wrapping across the shield.

It wasn't just them. I could see an unearthly glow around Brimstone and Caduceus as well! Adding their own power to the growing area around us, forcing the chains back, making The Master have to retreat closer to his throne!

"By their doing or mine, he shall not be yours!" Protégé stepped forward. "There is nothing you can do that will stop what I believe he will someday do from happening, Shackles! Such a pony deserves to be free! His own destiny tells that and by all the power I hold in this city *I will see it happen!*"

I felt a rumbling, a sudden surge of power from each of them in my breast. They all stood, protecting me from the chains that sought to take me from him! They all *believed* in my destiny, one even I had forgotten!

A destiny that awaited me, but one I had to take for myself!

I ran forward, moving past Glimmerlight and Protégé to be before him! Facing up to him alone wasn't the way. There was no shame in saying what had to be said under the protection of my friends. That was what they were *for*! Travelling up the steps, always upwards! Toward him and rising all the time, I brought myself before him, and took a breath.

"I will be free! You can say what you want, but I've got enough good ponies, good friends who care and help me to be able to say to you what I need to in order to make it happen!"

My body shuddered. I could feel the slaves on his throne shaking their heads, the Ruin somewhere in the shadows begging me not to. But everything I had worked for and strived to reach all my life led me to have to say this to the one pony that it truly mattered!

"I've got my whole life left to live and I won't live it in chains! I guess what I'm trying to say is... is..."

I took one glance, to see Glimmer and Protégé both smile and nod, before taking that one momentous breath.

"You are not my master any more, Chainlink Shackles!"

Even aside from the sudden look of shock for *once* upon his face sending a swirling vortex of joy, hope, and relief through my heart, I felt the floor shake and the glow from each of my friends condense and brighten as it all fell into me! A tingling all over as the shield faded from red to blue to a light green and kept pushing further and further! With a snap, it broke and shattered outwards, severing the chains for all directions and casting Shackles back into his throne as it collapsed and dissolved below him! The windows of his slavery worshipping cathedral blew out and brought the sunlight into it, a strong orange that drove away shadows and brought life to this place of misery!

Under the twinkling of falling stained glass and the rays of sunshine, I stood encircled by the broken chains along the floor. I *stood* while he *fell*. Something had broken inside me, some restriction.

Then, even as this moment of wondrous calm came about and we began to come together, I heard it again. That voice on the wind, near my foreleg. What was it?

"...the trut... real tr... she is sti... tore hope..."

"Murky, you did it!" Glimmerlight interrupted my thoughts, galloping up to me and tightly hugging me. Breathless and stunned, I grabbed back.

I felt Coral's hoof stroke my mane, felt Protégé rest one hoof on my shoulder proudly, and after letting go of Glimmer was immediately taken in by Caduceus for another tight hug. Brimstone caught my eye, smirking as though knowing how silly a hug would be. He offered a respectful nod, a lot from the big earth pony.

"Now, Murk," Protégé moved before me when I let Caduceus go, "we have to get you out of here. Back to the life you have and to strive to make it better. We have to get you to the sunset, over that wall, so I believe."

"Thank you. Just... just thank you!"

He smiled gently, turning me to face the cathedral doors. Through them I could see the long road to the wall and the glow of the sunset coming from above it through the shattered windows.

Then the doors slammed shut.

A fierce rumbling across the ground shook the debris of chains and glass, so much so that we fought to keep our footing! I even felt myself grab hold of Coral to keep my little hooves standing!

"You think it's that easy?"

The voice was everywhere, all around us. Shackles' fallen form shook, jerked, and began to lift, simply floating up and turning.

"You think that Fillydelphia is but one pony's vision or dwelling? That it is simply a place by which they make their own rules? You poor naïve fools."

The rumbling turned to a full earthquake. I heard walls cracking, felt every bone shaking terribly, and felt the crash of a huge pillar collapsing. We ran. Nopony even had to say to go, but we rushed for a hole in the cracking wall at the top of the stairs that once led to Shackles' throne.

From below us, the chains flew up, surging like flying snakes in the air as they tore through walls and pulled window frames apart.

"Even before I made it into the greatest it ever had been, Fillydelphia was a city of slaves! I was not the first and I will not be the last! Generations of Master and Slave time and again throughout history in this one shell of Equestrian life. Forced into their factories and drafted to war, the ponies here knew slavery before they even understood the word! Nopony ever escapes it."

I screamed as a massive pillar slammed between us, separating Coral and I from the rest of my friends! A full wall began to crumble, revealing the outside of Fillydelphia in all its hellish glory! Wall by wall the entire building came apart, lifting Shackles' body past it, wrapped in writhing chains that flew out and began to tear into nearby factories and buildings!

It carried him up amongst them as I saw the huge industrial cranes turn and take on a life of their own, swinging around upon their weights to bring beams of iron crossing over one another. Around us, the entire city of Fillydelphia itself was a living, breathing machine casting its metal and winding machines upward around the cranes, extending across their great arms to lock and slot into place. It was building something between them!

"Beating or escaping a Master is but one thing! Being able to take that freedom from the city that had always enslaved is another! You do not face merely Chainlink Shackles. You face slavery itself by coming here. The slave city! Fillydelphia itself is not somewhere no upstart, no destined pony, and no well-wishing friends can simply leave. There are always the same things. The city. Its Wall..."

In the distance, I saw the great wall shift and rise, nearly blotting out the sun itself, while the factories roared and swelled as though in anger at anypony daring to escape.

"The willing masses..."

From every crevice, I heard them before I saw them. Even as we regrouped away from the collapsing cathedral I saw thousands of slaves, all bearing my face crawling from the ruins and machines to appear before us.

"The Master."

The monstrous moving nightmare before us did not create a shape so much as an icon. A great monument before us. A visual pattern of slavery in one condensed mass with a single hole at the top between the crane heads where the sunset showed. A sunset that turned to blood red through a filter of cracking energy.

Before us, immense and stretching hundreds of feet above our heads, the very personification of slavery around Shackles' body and Fillydelphia's very industry beamed down upon us. The smog from factories turned in mid-air, flowing down into the streets and igniting upon furnaces to set everything ablaze! On either side of the street there was no other way out now as the fire streaked through the clouds to surround the cathedral, barring all ways out other than directly toward the new structure forming above us. The smoke whipped up, travelling to the sky and forming around it to allow that baleful red energy to highlight itself.

A single great eye of crimson, staring down upon us.

“Red Eye may be different. He may have plans greater than the slavery that has defined this city since the raging balefire, but he is the one that brought forth its potential to entrap. It is *his* Fillydelphia that will hold you in behind *his* wall under *his* authority! You cannot leave.”

The immense eye seemed to turn, a beam of red glaring down upon us and drawing upon our muscles like weights.

Protégé saw us fall, collapsing as though all the weight of industry and authority had fallen on our backs. He turned to move, but that red glare fell upon him.

“Not even you, little ‘prodigy.’”

I heard even Protégé cry out, falling to the floor as the slaves surrounded us. Even Protégé couldn’t say anything against Red Eye’s authority! My mind was reeling, the weight dragging me down for all my will to stand!

I felt a force grab me, lifting me up high. Even briefly, I heard a scramble of electronic noise near my right foreleg. What was it? I couldn’t think much for now, as I was lifted high into the air, brought before the eye itself, so bright and crackling with energy of the surrounding machinery in this colossal scrap-built icon that my eyes stung and my skin seemed to burn!

“You, little slave! You are nothing! Wishes and crying will get you nowhere from Fillydelphia!”

“NO!” I screamed back even as I felt my body crushed in its telekinetic-like grip. I wouldn’t be a slave!

“Will or not, you are trapped in this city!”

That electronic sound screeched again, louder and forming words that I couldn’t understand, like they were trying to get my attention! But opening my eyes to see Shackles’ leering face within that red glow, slavers both even if history saw them enemies, drew a chill across me. How could I compete with an army of slavers and a fortress!

“You can want out all you want, but it is nothing but pain that awaits you back in life. I tried to tell you. You will be a slaver’s plaything no matter where you go! Better to die. There *is* no choice! Not for you! Not any more!”

“I... want... out!” I struggled, trying to find some way to free myself before outright howling in pain when my body felt crushed! I knew what would happen if I were ‘killed’ here. I would be sent right into the oblivion awaiting below all over again! My ears screamed in pain atop my head, a rush of static refusing to go away. I heard words, a familiar voice. I just couldn’t... make it out...

“You have lost, slave! You can’t fight the chains in your mind! There’s no pony left to save you now! Your little ‘sister’ is lying down there screaming! Your surrogate mother caught beside her! That guardian brute cannot move! The dead one is far from you! Even your preferred ‘master’ cannot save you! There isn’t any pony left to call, little slave, and your words can do nothing!”

Suddenly... clarity. I heard words even as its tirade continued.

“...landers... truth... ealed about Ar...”

“No pony to stand against Red Eye’s authority! No pony can change the wastes, slave! Not one!”

The static and words reached a peak, drowning out even him as I struggled and cried out, feeling my vision going dark. But those words I had heard, I knew them! Yes, they mattered!

My eyes shot open, the pain fading for just a moment, as I drew my right foreleg close.

“No...”

My hoof fell upon the broadcast button. The PipBuck had always been with me, but now it meant something to be *there* to be touched! The static washed through the air, expanding and growing to an almost deafening volume, my faith pushed all into it!

Then the voice finally broke through the static and breaking up signals. That one voice I *needed* to hear!

“GOOD EVENING, WASTELANDERS! This is DJ Pon-Threeee, and have I got news for you! Major update on the situation at Arbu and Bucklyn Cross! First and foremost, let me say hallelujah! Sounds like our Wasteland Saviour hasn’t fallen to the darkness after all!”

Narrowing my eyes, I looked into the red glow and Shackles dead on. The broadcast continued, on how the truth came out. It washed across me, rekindling a faith that had been lost! Days of aching and worry over losing her legend coming back to me! But that grip held tight, crushing me tighter and tighter. I heard a voice saying that it didn’t matter! Striving, I finally shouted the rest of what I had tried to say.

“...there is *one* who can!”

Exploding into rage, it simply and ferociously clung to me in my defiance!

The red glow shattered, bleeding light at odd angles as a full crack came across it. A second later, the harsh report of what I knew was a revolver rippled through the air. A metallic scream from the construct threatened to burst my eardrums. Another shot tore into it. Then another and another, six in total, smashed into it and broke me free. All holding sensations gone, I fell. Tumbling, seeing the inferno of Fillydelphia below me, I shut my eyes in vertigo inducing terror.

Something gently caught me, and with expert control I felt my fall slow and then cease. Instead of collapsing, I was lifted to the ground in the middle of a glow, a colour I would never forget. A colour I had once seen long ago at the very beginning of my waking eyes.

Then I felt my whole body tense as it laid me to the ground.

There, before my friends who groggily got to their feet.

She was there.

Standing amongst an aura of magic, lifting the dust around her from the effort of lowering me, her horn gradually dimmed its glow. Dirt settled back to the ground in the wake of such magic, before I felt a cold chill of disbelief when her eyes turned to look at *me*.

She was just how I imagined, how I remembered, and how I’d heard. That revolver she carried that I’d heard of, so iconic to her as a hero, was floating at her side. Her shining new PipBuck on her right hoof just like mine.

Perhaps five seconds had passed of me just standing in disbelief, staring as though everything that had just transpired was gone and there was but us alone. Yet it felt so long, my stomach turning between the relief of the radio message and the betrayal I had been made so clear of. What was I supposed to say? Was this her? Truly? How?

“I’m s-s-sorry...”

It was the only words I could think, as I staggered toward her while afraid that every step would somehow be wrong.

“I heard so many things and-and they said what you did or were working for Red, um, Red Eye and-and...”

Stopping, my hooves crossed. I lowered my head and averted my gaze. My words fell over themselves. Blushing, I tapped my own forehead and shook my mane out. She stood

patiently, her mane falling and lightly drifting in the winds from fires all around us.

"You were my hero." Finally, I found my stride. "You were my *icon*. The pony I put faith in to give me purpose! You sh-showed me what it meant to defy! I just needed somepony to believe in. That was you. You saved me in the Pit, you inspired me, and you got me by tough times."

I rubbed my eyes, screwing them up and looking away.

"But then all that horrible stuff happened and... I was so reliant on seeing you as perfect that when I lost that belief I just... let go, because I'd staked everything on an idol. An idol that wasn't even in my life anymore, and I was ignoring the very things right beside me."

I felt a hoof on my shoulder. Glimmerlight's. On the other side, I could feel Brimstone move up. Coral Eve stood into view, and smiled. Protégé removed his eyepiece to look at me. Caduceus shifted beside Glimmer.

"You gave me a spark to get going. And I'll always be thankful for that. But it's not you, somepony far away, that I need to believe in now."

I finally looked back at those who had pulled me from the brink.

"It's time to start believing in my friends... and in myself."

Ahead of me, amongst that strong magical glow of her horn, through the smoke and fiery haze, I was certain I saw her smile, and nod.

A surge of light washed over us, bringing me out from that one gentle moment to the gaze past the inferno surrounding us. Behind the machination of industry looming before us, behind the red gaze, I saw the sunset glow with radiance. Dust blew around us seven ponies as I saw even my hero turn her head with a stern look to that which opposed her.

And as that dust settled, the fires were blasted back by what I now felt as a stronger power within this nightmare. A form of magic beyond that of anything holding us down.

One I knew came from all of us, because we were together.

Narrowing, the spotlight of crimson seared toward us, weakening and hissing as it could not rest upon us for long.

"You really seek to escape to the sunset? Nothing lies there but another failure, and a life of slavery eternal."

The words hurt my ears, but as we turned, atop the wreckage of the Cathedral and standing before upturned brick walls, we saw our final challenge ahead. Fillydelphia in all its living mechanical glory, with sparks flying from raging furnaces that cried with pony voices. A huge street that ran away through the wreckage toward a colossal wall miles high on the horizon, abstract from the reality and blown to its mythical way in which my own mind saw them!

Above us, between scaffold and factory roofing, lay the scrapheap baleful gaze itself that focused directly upon the seven standing before its defences, and a growing mass of slaves willing to try and stop the one part of them that wasn't quite ready to give up yet!

"You have no hope to to make it over that wall, Number Seven. That life is gone!"

I galloped up to the top of a piece of scrap, standing before it all.

"I *will* do this..."

Beside me, my hero stood and magically sent six large bullets spinning into her revolver, her eyes clenched ready with all the adventurous spirit that carried her!

Behind her, Brimstone Blitz stomped through the smoke, bearing his armour across his body and the great horned helmet offering but a wink from the barely visible eyes.

To my left, Glimmerlight hooked something onto my battle saddle for me, before picking

up her own long rifle and grinning to me. I turned to see *Rarity's Grace* sitting ready upon my side.

Beyond her, Caduceus bore a wealth of potions and the same sub-machine gun he had used to try and save lives in the Mall.

Coral Eve's horn sparked and lit the air with a hiss of ozone and burned air. A gentle nod gave me all the reassurance I needed that she'd hold it up as long as need be.

Protégé shifted to beside me, his own design of revolver swinging up ready. He shared a knowing look with me.

"...because at last, with them, I believe I *can*!"

Immediately, I took off, leaping from the scrap to charge directly forward into the cauldron of hell awaiting us that would try to prevent our escape! Behind me, between a mix of encouragement and war cries, my friends followed! For *once* I felt no fear! Only a determination, backed by my friends, those I trusted, and those that inspired me both in dream or reality! A light went with us, passing around us and throwing back the flames!

Ahead, under the bellowed command of their master in the sky, shadowed slaves rushed forward in their masses. Driven before their masters and the authority above them that clamoured and sought to stop us!

Brimstone Blitz picked up a pace, his armour rattling madly as he tore in front of me, lowering his horns. With a sickening crash, he impacted into the slave crowd like a battering ram, sending dark forms flying in all directions to explode into a black mist. Tossing his head from one side to the other, he broke their charge before the rest of us hit.

I heard the rattle of gunfire and the surge of magic around me. Dark forms rose and were slapped down. Protégé fought by my side, picking off those who tried to block my path, keeping me moving forward toward the sunset!

"Keep pushing, Murk! We'll protect you all the way there!" He cried out, slapping a slave from his back and spinning to throw them within his magic into another. Then he pointed ahead, "Coral, clear them!"

Wind almost blew me off course as her powerful magic crashed upon their line and threw ten or so of them far away! I ran for the gap, seeing Brimstone amongst the main mass of slaves, taking their attention and crushing them with a cold fury of controlled anger!

We seven ponies held back a tide of my inner dark thoughts, each of them showing the strength that kept me going even now! I felt Caduceus rush up beside me, bearing a potion to help my ailing pains and bring life to my numb body to keep going! I yelped when a ruined form of myself grasped my leg, diving from the crowd. Caduceus threw himself at it, wrestling it off me.

"Keep going, Murk!" I saw two others leap upon him until Coral's magic again sent them flying from the studious earth pony! Taking a potion for herself and her likely splitting headache from all this use, she was being covered by my hero standing there atop a splinter of upturned wreckage!

She fought... oh *wow* how she fought!

Horn flaring, her revolver fired and reloaded with blinding speed, punching through two or three into mist even in one shot! Boulders and scrap whirled about her powerful magic, crushing or slamming them back. Her eyes lit with the confidence of a legend!

"Come on, Murky! Stop studying those flanks for your drawings, we gotta move, hun!"

I gaped a little as Glimmerlight pulled me along while Brimstone hurled an overturned wagon and cleared the next portion of street! Staggering backwards, my eyes on the Dweller

herself until I simply had to turn away. I saw her look to me for just a second with a small smile.

Galloping beside Glimmerlight, her rifle knocked a slave from leaping through a window as she took us around a line of carts to hide from the majority of the slaves. I fired as well. Rarity's Grace sending one dark form back to the abyss I'd crawled out from, before my grapple hook slapped into one slave in the chest, crushing that one horrible day it represented in my mind!

The red eye above us kept its focus upon my path, drawing all the slaves of my mind toward me! Brimstone fought at the front, backed up and kept going by Caduceus and Coral. Protégé ducked down behind the carts with me and Glimmerlight, looking around.

"We'll just hit the bottom of the wall if we keep going! There's no way up it!"

He reached out, snapping off three shots and hitting two slave forms that rushed for us. Glimmerlight's rifle cracked and struck a third, before she looked up.

"Up... yes! Murky, the buildings!"

Having been watching my hero fight further off, I turned to look to what Glimmerlight now pointed at.

There was one way. A way born of hope.

The buildings rose toward the wall's brink, towers, and scaffold linked by scrap, like it should have been there all along. The way out I'd dreamed might exist when I first ran for it!

"Can you make it up there?" Protégé looked warily at it.

There was no other answer worth saying.

"Yes."

Both of them nodded, Glimmer smiling and hugging me to hear such positivity for once. Behind us, I heard a cry of pain, Coral's magic overloading again. Caduceus ran to her, dragging her into cover with us. The Dweller herself was nearby, holding off the great mass alongside Brimstone, our two best warriors here.

If I had to go any time, I had to go now. Take the chance.

Dare to dream.

I nodded to Glimmerlight, hooking up my grapple again, I'd need it from now on. I knew they couldn't come with me, but I knew where they'd be waiting for me... most of them.

My eyes fell to Caduceus, helping Coral to take a potion. He caught the gaze and after a quick glance up. He saw the reality too.

Shifting closer, I felt us simply hug closely once more.

"Thank you, C-Caduceus..."

"I'll always be in here, Murky. For you and Glimmer and all the others. We didn't have long, but it was enough. No regrets. Take care of Weathervane for me, huh?"

Sniffing, I nodded into his shoulder.

"I w-will..."

Each of my friends backed up a little. Brimstone and my hero came closer, backing off to use the thinner area between carts in the street against the overwhelming numbers. I went around each one of them, to Coral, to Brimstone, and lastly to Glimmer. Each of them I thanked, each of them I hugged tightly. Turning, I saw that little mare standing just nearby.

She smiled at me with pride.

That meant more than any dream of her I'd ever had.

"Come on, Murky." Glimmer nudged me and whispered, "Doesn't Protégé get a hug

too?"

How could she still be joking that at a time like this! But yet he was standing there, watching the wary slaves approaching. Soon they would need to fight again. I had to go now!

"You've come far, Murk. I hope I've done at least something to help you, that I have been more than but a master to be hated for sending you against your will."

Long had I looked to him with a kind of trust, feeling safe around him or knowing that he would not harm me like all the other masters had. I knew what he was. Just like me.

Hell with it. Glimmer could laugh if she wants.

I simply moved forward and wrapped my hooves around him.

"Thank you... just... just thank you! Please be okay, I... I tried to stop Barb and—"

"It's all right, Murk." He surprised me, returning the gesture. "Let's just get you out of here. You need to go now. Go to the sunset! Make that last gasp and rise to see the world through different eyes!"

Letting go, I saw them all there, before flipping my mouthpiece around to fire.

"Thank you... all of you."

I turned, hearing the voice of slavery sounding their last charge to reclaim me, and I fired my grapple. I had no wings to fly, but I would still rise! Rise to the sun ahead of me! I would fly with or without wings!

With a jolt, it shot up, spiralling true to latch upon a building. Behind me, the cry of battle joined as they guarded my back with all they had! Zipping upward, feeling the rush of air as I bit the button to pull me in, I soared skyward!

Higher and higher, before I came to the top of the building, clambering over the lip. A red glare fell upon me, that hideous icon watching me.

"Pointless!"

Shadows warped, slaves grew, and chased me! I tore off across the rooftops, leaping vents and sliding down air ducts to keep moving. Leaping between the buildings and always going *up*. I climbed fire escapes, leapt onto scaffold metres away, and travelled through ramp after ramp! The ground fell away, higher than any building in reality as I neared that huge wall!

Above it, just poking over, I could see the lip of the sunset appearing.

"Your dreams won't follow you! Fillydelphia will cast you down again, and again."

Nothing but empty threats and a life I wouldn't accept! I wasn't going to listen, no matter what voice it was! Sprinting over a jury-rigged extra floor like at the orphanage, I fired my grapple while on the move, pulling me onto the next tower! Then the next! After that I leapt to a large hanging girder from a crane, galloping up it! I felt a sensation all over. A warmth as though there was feeling was returning to my body once again! Every metre rejuvenated me, made me feel more alive.

I was above the red eye itself now. Behind me, the rooftops were crowded with every day of slavery in my life chasing me! Thousands of pained faces determined to keep me from the life they wanted away from! The wind picked up, throwing into my face, trying to cast me down, but I kept my footing and rushed straight up! Almost there! I could see one more jump! The wall filled my vision, I just had to get up there! Spinning around, I started to climb across a fallen tower's roof over a narrow stretch of metal. It led right to the edge of the wall!

Something crashed into me upon the thin metal pathway I ran upon! Falling, a weight landed on my back. Scrambling, pulling me to the edge, I turned to see the Ruin fighting

with me.

“Don’t go! Please Murk! Don’t go! Don’t take us back to the pain! No more!”

Yelping, I fought its wiry strength born of frenzy! But it clung onto my back, raking at my mane, trying to pull me over! I saw his eyes, pinpricked and desperate, the last gasp of a fractured mind trying to pull me back in; reduced to pleading and begging in its fear of me succeeding.

Something I’d always done.

“PLEASE!” The terror in his voice, my voice, was all too apparent. “It hurts so much, there will be more pain! I don’t want it! Not any more! It can’t be escaped!”

He threw his full strength to simply try and pull me from the precarious area, knocking us nearby to the edge.

“You can’t dream, it won’t let you!”

“Then...”

I gritted my teeth, trying to knock him off me.

“I *dare to!*”

My back hoof *shot* back, crunching him between the legs. With a hideous cry, the Ruin staggered away and fell screaming into the fires below. Exhausted, I tried to pull myself back up proper.

Having just bucked my own subconscious in the nethers, I *really* hoped that it wasn’t a metaphor for something.

But the way was clear! I stood, staggering in the wind and heat that was beginning to harm and sting my body as feeling returned. Crying out at the pains in my hooves and legs, I staggered forward. Then trotted... then cantered... then galloped! Up... up! UP! It was so close! The sun filling the sky with its heat and the light of life just above the lip of the wall! One! Jump! Away!

Screaming as loud as I could, remembering every single lesson I had learned from my friends and every time I had *done* something, I rushed forward and leapt.

Stretching my hooves out, I saw the lip. So close, so very close! Aching my joints, I reached for it! Just grab it and I’d be over! So high... just one desperate shot!

I saw my hoof pass by it... missing by over a foot.

Then I felt the gravity of all the pain below begin to pick up.

Pulling me down.

No... no...

Then a shape before me, a figure suddenly stretching down toward me from on top of the wall! A hoof reached out, grabbing around mine as her face became clear amongst the blazing sun that covered the entire sky behind her!

“*Come on, Murky!*”

Unity cried out the words as she pulled me over, straining her all and yanking me toward the sun, pushing me onward with no time to say anything more but to smile and give me the last energy I needed to push that last distance!

Over the wall, flying onward, I soared into the sun itself born upon the wind that flowed with me, pushing me toward life. The feeling in my body seared, pains all across flowing down veins and muscles! I felt the burning of radsors and the thickening within my lungs and throat! Lash scars and knife wounds upon the bruised and battered body I possessed! A feeling in my gut and neck like hot metal!

Then air, actual air flowed into my breathless body, forcing me to take that first gasp, and

then a long scream as the pain flowed over and over, pulling me away from limbo, feeling was life! The light was getting brighter, turning to white and sending me shooting forward, all the way back up the fall into darkness I had taken! I juddered, squirmed, and burst—

-upright screaming as oxygen poured down my neck and my eyes shot open. My back arched, lifting me from the firm bed, crying out in shock and pain. Above me, a spinning silver orb shone and cast sparkles all over my body. It whined and flared before making a snapping noise and dropping out of view.

I flew upright, my scream ending in a choking cough...

...as I fell right into Glimmer's embrace.

"Murky! Oh! Yes! MURKY!"

I felt the tears running onto my shoulder from her, as I blinked and tried to get my bearings. My body hurt so much. I could feel bandages wrapped around a lot of me along with tubes poking out of my front legs, but blinking my eyes, I finally saw where I was.

Around me, I could see the familiar wards of Hearts and Hooves Hospital. Glimmer held tightly onto me, short maned and bruised all over, but her in the flesh. She cried and stroked my mane over and over. Behind her, I could see a damp-eyed Coral, her horn still glowing. Come to think of it, so was Glimmer's! To the other side of the bed, I could see the ghastly figure of Doctor Weathervane looking almost stunned and relieved all at once, before hastily reasserting himself with a smile. His horn too, glowed.

Behind him, Brimstone Blitz stood further from my bed, his body a mess of scar tissue and bearing only one eye. He had barely healed, but apparently enough that he wasn't going to lie down when I was... here...

"Murky, you're alive. Oh gods and goddesses you're *alive*. Thank you... thank you, Weathervane!"

Glimmer was lauding, completely lacking any of her spunk or normal wittiness as she kept hugging me and shaking. She looked a mess, as though she had been brought from a brink of loss and despair.

"I thought-I thought you were just gone, oh Murky..."

She just kept holding onto me, and I onto her. My own eyes teared up, wrapping my bound legs around her and swaying gently.

They'd brought me back.

I was... alive.

"Thank you!" I tried to hug them all at once, failing utterly, but I had to say it, had to try.

They'd helped free me. Below me, I saw my cutie mark sparkle a little.

The shackles, as always, were open.

"See! We told you it would work!"

"*Piss anchors!*" Weathervane snapped. "It *shouldn't* have worked! I only agreed to it because even half-dead your big 'guardian' promised to snap me in half if we didn't try!"

I lay back, Glimmerlight sitting on the bed beside me and holding my hoof. I was exhausted more than any time before, my throat was dry and my head spinning from

medicine I'd been given after waking. But the argument had gone on for a few minutes now ever since Weathervane had retrieved the now dead orb.

They had used the healing megaspell Brim and I had recovered from the ghouls. Its massive power seeking out the one spark of life left in me to hold onto and give me a chance to save myself. It alone had not saved me, even if it had healed my body. It had simply held me in there long enough to give me a sliver of a chance. One I could scarcely believe I'd had the strength to pull off.

Not that the megaspell had been the only thing that saved my life. Allegedly, the moment my 'corpse' had been tugged from the Pit, Brimstone had rather caused a stir in the Pit's under levels, taking the potions he'd been given and pouring them down my throat. Whether they helped or not was unknown, but he'd taken my body to Hearts and Hooves afterwards, Coral and Glimmerlight finding him soon after they heard the bodies were taken there.

I couldn't imagine how they must have felt.

The entire time, they had spent their rest day with me. Glimmer had gotten my PipBuck and sat it playing the radio near me the entire time, trying to spot any life of memory inside me. I owed her more than I knew.

"I fucking *told* you lot! The spell requires four unicorns to work!" Weathervane was casting a horn over me even as he argued. "It's that simple!"

"Apparently not." Glimmer smirked. "Maybe it just took three who genuinely cared? You *did* care didn't you? You know what they say magic *is* after all."

"Fuckbuttering dinglecunts, I've *told* you a dozen shitting times! It's not about the power! If it were I coulda' done it on my own! It's about unique magical signatures! It requires four to work! It... hm?"

There was a pause as he looked over me. I felt everypony in the room freeze a second. Glimmer must have felt me grip her hoof a bit tighter. What was...

"Well..." Weathervane stroked his ruined beard. "Murk, would you sit up, please?"

Glancing from Glimmer to the ghoul and back again, I shakily started to move. Lying here with them, I'd been trying to grasp the new feeling of being awake and... free. But now I strained my body upright. I felt different all over, more well-adjusted even through the pain. No longer a tug toward the ground or my hooves from the chains weighing on my soul.

Sitting up, I felt very strange. Oddly... balanced.

"Well, would you look at that..." Weathervane peered at me, but everypony else before me just looked to him. I felt a creeping horror.

"This might prick a little."

What?

His horn zapped. I felt an electric shock run right through me, squeaking out loud and grabbing Glimmerlight. I made a long gasp and turned to look at Weathervane in anger, wings flaring out in anger as my face screwed—

...wait.

Before me, Glimmer's face lit up and her mouth went wide. Coral's eyebrows shot up while even Brimstone's remaining eye seemed shocked. Beside me, Weathervane grinned and lifted the bandages away before offering a mirror held in his magic.

Spread to either side of me. My... my *wings*! They were out! Standing on their own! I simply opened and closed my mouth, making squeaky little noises and trying to turn in my

bed until Weathervane had to hold me from hurting myself around my bandages! My wings! *My wings!* I could move them, even if it hurt a little and... and they were slow but... *I could move my wings!*

"Seems the megaspell sort of overdid it. Very sorry. If you want me to make them go back down I'll—"

"NO!" I screamed, not even getting the joke amongst my excitement. I grabbed the mirror, holding them to look at the little things as I sat up properly and let them *flourish*. Either side of me, they spread their dirtied and uneven feathers.

Jittering when I flexed them slowly, not quite flaring fully or clasping properly yet, but I saw the delight on my face, a look I hadn't imagined I'd ever show again. My mouth only kept growing and growing into a massive smile that burst out into a laugh. I had *wings!*

"They're beautiful," Glimmer breathed out. "Aww, they suit you like it was always meant to be, Murky!"

Coral smiled, moving behind to look.

"Because they were. Our little Murk's a new pony now for sure. Now isn't the time to fall, my dear." She smiled. "It's to soar. This marks a change. You hit the bottom but now you've bounced and you'll come back strong. I know it."

Weathervane tapped the edge of the bed.

"Well, yes, it's pretty fuckin' great, but he needs his rest now. They won't fly, sorry to break the moment, but he'll be able to work on moving them now. Now come on you lot, shoo. Patient time is now. He's got a lot of fluids to take in before I'll let him out of here."

They began to troop out. Brimstone stopped by the bed, lifting a hoof. Smirking back, I tapped his with mine. Coral kissed my forehead as she went, before handing me my saddlebag filled with my journal and other things. Weathervane offered a rare smile to me alone as he went with them to collect some materials.

Glimmerlight was left with me alone as I pulled out my journal. I had a lot of drawing to do. Somehow I knew I would be able to now. Watching me, my sis' just smiled and ruffled my mane before turning to leave.

I felt something near the bottom of the saddlebag.

A statuette of Littlepip, given to me by Unity, made of scrap metal bent into place and bearing words below it.

"Wait! Glimmer!"

"Yes, Murky?"

I held it up in my hooves carefully, seeing the image of one who had so fought to save me standing upon it.

"What does this say?"

Her magic reached out, lifting it from my hooves as she moved back into the ward briefly. With a little glance to it, she smiled and returned it to me, her magic tossing my mane with a smirk as she told me what they said.

'I believe in you! ~ Unity'

Glimmerlight left me looking at the little bronze item with a mixture of a endearment and wonder upon my face. I heard Weathervane again arguing with Coral outside about the damn megaspell. 'It needs four, not three!' I heard again.

I felt my wings flutter a little behind me. Stiff and sore, barely responsive, but they were there! Then, I simply hugged the statue close; a tiny, almost unnoticeable sense of that belief reaching my heart.

“Thank you...”

Footnote: Perks Upgraded!

'Lucky Break' becomes 'Signature Item' – While once it may have been a little charm for good fortune, on true realisation it has always been something that matters all along to you. Something that truly belongs with you. You regain your +1 to Luck and now also acquire +1 DT whilst bearing your item.

'Confidence Boost' becomes 'Freedom of Will' – You took refuge in your friends before, but now you see yourself for the pony you truly are inside! While their support will always be with you, you can now stand on your own. You gain +2 Charisma.

'Path of the Lightbringer' becomes 'Virtue of Hope' – You merely followed before, but you have been helped to see that the true strength isn't in those you are inspired by, but rather how it helped you remember the real virtue lying in your heart. One that had always been there. You regain the small boost to health when reduced to 10% or lower once per encounter, but now you also receive +1 to all SPECIAL statistics while below 20% maximum health.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Pegasi Balance – Finally, your life has come full circle to once again bear the wings that made you what you were at birth. No longer are you as clumsy and off-balance without their natural weight and movement to keep you steady on your hooves. You gain +1 Agility to your statistics.

Footnote: Perks Reacquired!

Low Hoof (Rank 1) – Additional unarmed first strike critical damage

Runt of the Litter – Resistance vs unarmed non-critical attacks

Shadow Canter (Rank 2) – +20 to Sneak, thefts 2x success rate, and +10% boost to sneak speed

Luna's Moonlight – Night Vision

Sleight of Hoof (Rank 2) – May steal while detected and bonus to reverse pickpocket

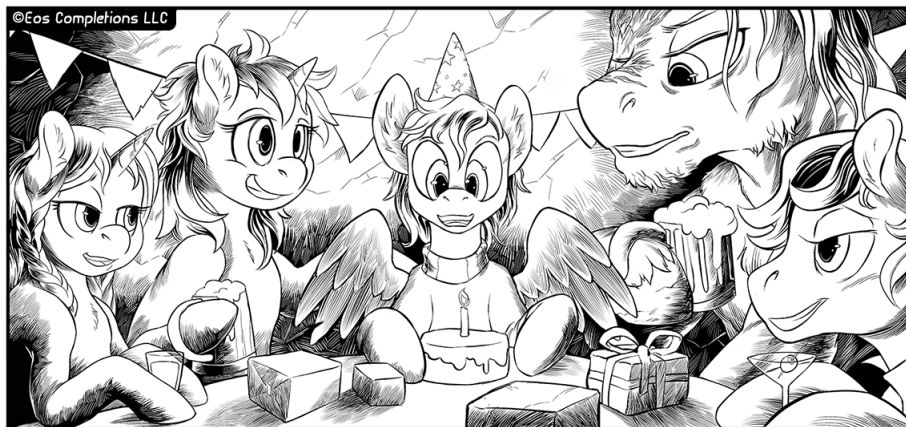
Galloping with Ghosts – Reduced chance to be correctly detected

Skittish at the Bit – +2 to Perception when standing still

Organiser – All items weight 2 or less are halved in weight

A Very Little Dash – +10% boost to speed with light or no armour on

Mad Gallop – Less chance to be hit with ranged attacks while galloping

Somepony Old, Somepony New

"Don't you know you get presents on your birthday?"

"What's it like to be given a second chance at life?"

Honestly? I didn't see it like that. A second chance implies I was just starting from square one again, like a... resoo... resurip...

"Resurrection?"

Yeah, one of those! This was different. It felt more like something had unlocked inside me and a new wave of thinking had come over me. Everything that had happened while I'd been fighting for my own soul and life amongst the dark hallucinations of my mind just seemed to blur. It became hard to remember the specifics, like a dream.

I didn't need it though. On my back I bore a symbol of what had changed. This wasn't starting again. This was reclaiming the pony I was supposed to be. The wings and cutie mark I'd now sat on my body like patient reminders. I'd hated them, but they hadn't abandoned me all this time even if I hadn't seen them for what they were.

Now I knew.

This was the point of change. The part of my life when I lay in a hospital bed and began to dream freely again. I'd taken on the slave in my mind. Beating it back and bringing that part of me to the surface that truly wanted freedom. Now nothing was going to force it back down ever again. We'd stalled, we'd struggled, and we'd suffered greatly, but with my revival a clarity of purpose came over all my companions as well in their relief. As though their hope had been rekindled at the sight of my own breaking of the chains. Glimmer talked more of the things we'd gathered, how we could convert empty bullet casings I brought into small, explosive lockpicks. That sort of thing. We knew that the escape was back on.

"What about, y'know... him?"

Chainlink Shackles?

"Yes. You could actually say his name now? No more 'My Master'?"

Yes. That was the breakthrough. The moment I looked at him and saw a pony, not simply a master. Don't get me wrong, Shackles terrified me to my core and I knew given half a chance he would seek to break me all over again. But I could look him in the eye and defy now. I could be honest and truthful when I said that I was going to escape. That I had found the purpose that drove me, to forever hope for a better life out of this slavery hell we were all trapped in.

Of course, that hardly meant that the trials were over for any of us.

"Hmm?"

Even as I woke filled with hope and found my friends spurring their relief into an energy for an escape plan. Even as we began to gather tools in secret or work out routes in our heads, there was something else coming to the fore in Fillydelphia. I had once seen slavers as a great singular force, but events of not too long ago had shown me different. Times were changing.

Their great game of intrigue and politics was emerging. That which was old was to be given new purpose as I found my life mirroring that of a certain somepony once again. A revelation that brought their internal struggle closer to me than I might have ever realised.

Even as my friends and I took refuge in Red Eye's day of rest, the past was about to make its intentions very clear.

A blank page sat before me.

The charcoal tasted foul in my mouth, as ever, but it was the fear underneath my skin that really affected me. What if I couldn't do this still? What if I made a horrible block pony? I'd spent a lot of time in recovery trying to work up the courage to try this and yet I still couldn't bring myself to put charcoal to paper.

Curling my thin blanket around me, feeling my body ache and sting under bandages, I rolled out my neck and felt a couple of stiff movements on my back. It still hurt to move them for my muscles hadn't been used there in many years. The sensation was somewhere between relief and a long strain every time they shifted, the sort of thing you'd feel after a long exercise.

Yet still, the knowledge they were there gave me a little hope. Taking a deep breath, I leaned forward. The charcoal shook, unsteady and nervous. Could I do this? Really, could I?

A hoof wiped the worried sweat from my brow. I had to try sometime. He wasn't going to beat me forever! Not after all I'd been through. I was going to take back what was mine!

Leaning down and bringing the charcoal tip to the centre of the page, I hesitated to draw one more breath, and drew a *line*.

Shaking, yet straight, it lightly scrawled upon the paper, gaining ease with every inch until I let it flick up at the end, becoming a *curve*.

I almost dropped the charcoal from the squeak of delight!

Leaning back down, I caught the end of the curve and wrapped it around. Winding and lightly whipping off here and there, it became a more knowing *shape*. Yes, yes this could work!

I fell away into the moment. Free from their confines, my wings habitually spread out a little unsteadily to balance me. Wincing on one side of my face, I leaned down to keep drawing. Black shapes formed and gelled together. A strong 'almost circle' there, with

current lines drawing back for a perspective, yes! At the end I started adding the detail with little flicks for the mane and then filled it in with shading! Big long lines around the edges for the light glowing from behind them, and then come back in to add that glint to their eyes with tiny circles to show light!

Eventually, I realised it had all formed into something that became *life*.

Feeling oddly exhausted, I sat back. Before me lay the proof of my release and if anything the one image I remembered from that dream above any. The one sight that had saved me at the very last moment.

Before me I had drawn Unity reaching out toward me off the page, her hoof outstretched to try and grab mine. Biting my lip, I lightly touched my own hoof to the drawing.

“Thank you...”

“Hmm?”

The deep and rumbling voice made me jolt upright and turn. Across the ward, near the door, Brimstone Blitz looked up toward me. I still wasn't quite used to his scarring. I kept wanting to somehow wish he could regain that lost eye or make his body less warped and burned on that one side. Almost out of sick humour, the blast had taken off his ear that *wasn't* scarred.

“You say something, Murk?”

“Oh, um, no. Just muttering to myself.”

I rubbed my hooves together awkwardly and felt my ears droop back. Feeling my wings mimic the movement, I realised they were going to be an expressive side of me that was going to take a whole new world of getting used to. Getting them to fold completely down wasn't so hard, but getting them back out from being folded back was occasionally a nightmare of little strains and pains. I hadn't been able to fully outstretch them yet either. Weathervane had promised that would come in time, instructing both Glimmerlight and Coral on how to help them exercise by gently aiding their movement with hooves.

Brimstone glanced across for a few more seconds before returning his gaze to the corridor outside. He hadn't left my ward since I'd woken, remaining permanently on guard against anypony coming this way. I didn't want to imagine what he'd do if anypony he didn't like came to try and visit.

Not that it mattered. Fears and horrors could wait. I could *draw again!* The more I stared at Unity's caring eyes upon the page, the more I began to be delighted that I could do it! My mind was doing backflips with ideas and concepts. What to do first? What best represented how I felt? Something big? Doodle madly on a page? There were so many I had to get out of my system! I even thought about asking Brimstone, but I didn't imagine the stoic earth pony would have much to say.

Oh wait...

I began flipping back through page after page. Masses of drawings flew by until I came to the one I wanted.

Before me, I saw myself standing happily with my wings outstretched. Just to my right, Glimmerlight stood mischievously and playful with Caduceus politely smiling from beside her. A drawing I had started long ago and had somepony well overdue to add in.

Behind myself and Glimmerlight and toward the left of the picture, I began to sketch. Little faint lines to get my bearings first. They became more frantic, more emotionally driven. Their size seemed to tower over myself, almost like a colossal shield around us. Ripples across the shape of a pony to draw it out and give the form definition took shape.

Having to be quick, I only glanced up a few times to check before putting my head down to work all the more.

I had to erase a few lines, rub them out with the edge of my looser bandages and redo them, but that didn't matter! My mind fell away into the drawing, my greatest release and calming activity as I started to solidify the lines. The outer shape I made really thick, trying to get the right impact of presence. Even just seeing them made me feel as safe as I was with...

...with him here watching over me.

Upon my drawing that I was quickly thinking of as a family photo, our great guardian now resided just behind us. Brimstone Blitz stood with us. Tall, heavy, and stern, his eyes nonetheless held a spark of intelligence and knowing. Even without a smile, I could tell he was at better peace with us than anywhere else.

My eyes looked up from my page, seeing him sitting at the ward's door perpetually terrifying every nurse that happened to wander in without noticing him.

I could see the same look.

The guardian had found his calling at last, just as I had found mine.

I screamed in pain.

"Oh, hold still!"

"I—yargh! Ow! OW!"

"Come on! I've got to learn to help you with this as well."

My wing twitched and stung, my back and side muscles twitching and making spasms. Glimmerlight's hooves gradually let the wing sink back down again without allowing it to snap back onto my side. Eyes watering from the effort, I sank down on my front and relaxed to allow it to droop off to the side. Then yelped and squeaked as Glimmer began to knead around the base and stretch out the length of my wing.

"Just think of the end result, when you can swish these babies out and woo everypony you want. Now, try to lift them. Come on, you've got to start doing this more naturally yourself."

Lying on the hospital bed, I sighed and closed my eyes. The muscles felt distant and dull. Sometimes my wings followed emotive response, like when I was shocked or happy, but manual movement just wasn't as easy. Glimmer had been helping me try to get them to flare right out and up, but the process was slow.

Seeing my little wings making tiny flaps and not quite coming to their full expansion, Brimstone grinned and chuckled to himself.

"Anypony got a photo of that little Stable Dweller? Pretty sure that'll get those wee things right up."

My eyes bolted open as I felt a blush form. I hadn't even thought about that, uh... 'problem.' Oh dear. Glimmer was going to have a field day sometime in the near future.

Now however, she just laughed and patted my back before helping my wings to ease back to my sides. I may have been embarrassed, but I was enjoying these hours of rest and recuperation with my friends. They had been permitted to stay due to Red Eye's rest day and so far as the rest of Fillydelphia knew, I was dead. No slavers would come hunting for me

and Weathervane had provided me a secluded room. I knew we could trust his staff. All of them were fiercely loyal to Weathervane above anypony else.

Really, I'd spent the majority of my time trying to work up the courage to do those drawings. Now that I no longer felt like I depended on her efforts to define me and my own goals, I had instead felt a healthier and simpler respect for what she did out there. Sitting listening to the DJ talking of Littlepip going 'off the map' on some legendary quest had set my imagination alight. I'd even drawn her a few times battling dragons or finding some huge artefact that could cure all the taint, including my lungs. I'd have liked that.

As though on cue, I coughed.

"Looks like it's time for your medicine, then." Glimmerlight ceased her chuckling to lift a measured portion of RadAway to me from across the room. I knocked back the small amount, a specific level of it the nurses had set out for me to avoid wasting some if it wasn't needed. At least in here they could keep an eye on me and give me just as much as I needed to preserve stocks. I hoped I could get some to take away.

Taking the cup from me, Glimmerlight glanced again to my wings. She'd been the most fascinated and delighted by them (bar myself, of course) of all my friends. While I thought it was simple happiness for me, many times she'd mentioned that she wished she had them. Briefly, I had wondered what that really said about Glimmerlight.

I felt her hooves sorting my feathers and trying to help it all move better, muttering away as she did so.

"Leastways I know to get you a feather comb for your birthday now." She paused, blinking a few times. "That's a point, when *is* your birthday anyway?"

"I... I don't know..." Biting my lip, I felt my wings drawn in, nervous. "Nopony ever told me really."

"You don't... I mean—huh?" Glimmerlight looked up at me, then to Brim, then to me again. "Are you seriously telling me you have never had a birthday in your life?"

Shifting, I sat up and rolled my neck.

"What do you mean? Of course I have. I just don't know when it is but it happens each year. Isn't that what you mean?"

"Murky..." Glimmerlight moved around, looking me in the eye. "You do know that ponies have, y'know, parties for birthdays, right?"

They did? Aren't birthdays just like a day that denotes the precise time of birth each year? Glimmerlight clearly saw the confusion on my face for she only shook her head and took a deep breath through her nose.

"Well!" Her hooves grabbed my shoulders. "If you don't know, then why not make it today? Your first day of being awake to who you really are! What better to choose if there's no other choice?"

"You can do that?"

"Sure! Who says not to? I had my birthday a week early last year because I couldn't be assed waiting! So welcome to your first known birthday, Murky!"

I just sat and blinked. Was this allowed? Glimmerlight only laughed and hugged me gently.

"Just you wait, lil'bro. I'll show you what a birthday's meant to be, to welcome you to the day we head back up. I did a little inventory in the Mall earlier. We've got a little food, some stored rainwater, a few large shells, makeshift mining tools, and after a little persuasion, we even got your battle saddle back off Blunderbuck... minus the pistol I'm afraid. The

moment you're better we are back in the game!"

She ruffled my mane, seeing the hopeful smile. I couldn't wait! I loved that feeling of checking things off my lists and seeing our little escape armoury grow!

"Him being better shouldn't be a real problem by the end of today."

The rough voice from the doorway caught our attention. Doctor Weathervane trotted in, bearing a small medical saddlebag no doubt intended for me. Lifting it onto my bed, the ghoul began to wave his glowing horn across me.

"The megaspell did its work pretty damn well. Better than I could have hoped. Back when I spent days on those pissing annoying intricacies, I always figured it'd fuck up somehow."

"I... I never said thank you, for using it to save me." I could feel Glimmer's hoof around my shoulders. My near death had hit her hardest of all. "S-sorry it had to be it, your life's work and all."

"My life's work is to be a healer, kid." His horn travelled to my back. "I'd be a pretty fucking awful doctor if I let a pony die just because a spell was a one use thing. Who am I going to wait to use it on? Just didn't think it would work at first, was all."

His horn changed its glow a little, picking a few potions and tablets from his saddlebag. I recognised the foul purple potion he'd given me a lot of already. Seeing my look of disgust, he chuckled.

"The worse it tastes, the better it is for you. Get it down that throat. Now, most of the superficial damage is healed. The cut on your flank and the piercing on your leg have pretty much faded. I'd keep the bandages over your midriff and neck for the time being though. Those were the worst wounds. They've closed and so far as I can see, the internal bleeding around your abdomen has ceased, but I don't want to take any chances with removing the healing bandages yet."

I snuggled a little closer to Glimmerlight. I didn't want to think about those injuries.

"Your wings have come along nicely. The real problem is in your scapulars, marginal coverts, and alulas. Very fragile things, pegasus wings. Capable of the most furious of movements and immense wind stresses yet so very light and easy to harm. I had to lecture the Wonderbolts back in the day to stop those hotrod sods trying to showboat the day before their events. One scapular strain or pinched alula and the whole thing shuts down. So keep on gently stretching them out."

Biting my lip, I nodded. I had no idea what all these fancy words meant but I decided it probably meant 'the bits that hurt'.

"So don't strain them and you should see a gradual healing take place. I think I already told you not to expect any flight ever to come of it?"

"Y-yes..." I turned away slightly.

"Mm. That is unfortunate, I know. Your growth development is likely already finished, Murk. So the muscles around your scapulars near your body don't have any significant expansion left ahead of them. But, just keep working at them and we'll see what happens. Now, I should think it best you get out of bed for a while."

"H-huh? You mean... leave?"

"Yes. Leave the hospital." He began setting out a small series of potions. "Pegasi have a certain trot to them, their wings are not simply tacked onto any other pony body. Remember how I knew what you were the second I saw you wander that skinny arse into my lab? You've got to get a trot going as part of your recovery, it'll help the muscles. If I still

had the physio pool I'd have thrown you in it, but it's pretty much my own personal pool with how fuckin' irradiated it is these days."

He looked as though he was unsure about adding something else.

"Well, that and the slaver inspection's soon. Always complaining about me using too much to save a life as though they fucking know how. Moronic, cock-guzzling dildochickens! That they are! You don't want to be here when they arrive and I don't want to risk Murky in the radiation below to hide in the basement. You're best to leave while the route outside is clear."

"Then I'm going with him." Brimstone immediately spoke up, having been on his silent vigil.

"Me too." Glimmerlight nudged my side lightly. I couldn't help but smile. Much as I liked being in here away from Fillydelphia in my mind, a trot with my friends would be good. The industry was quiet today anyway. Coral Eve had returned to the Mall to rest, her injuries from trying to save me at the Pit still hurting. She had brought the news that Shackles seemed oddly absent and the doors were wide open to come and go as you pleased.

"Good, just make sure he trots right. None of this head down bullshit I've seen him doing. A pegasus should stand with their head *tall* to have the optimum muscular layout. Why do you think the Wonderbolts had that big, proud stance? It's a pegasus thing. So you two keep him doing it or I'll make every medicine taste worse than brahmin shit every time you come here, got it?"

I had to laugh, for I'd spotted the grin on Weathervane's face. For all his bedside manner, I could see he was happy to have gotten back to his speciality with pegasi. I could only hope it helped him against the growing anger and flickering light of sanity inside. He left me with a small amount of healing potions that Glimmerlight made sure I took. The tingling in my belly, back, and neck from their effects healed up a little more of the horrific wounds as they took effect. They had already closed over but there was much damage to repair before I felt fine.

Then I had a realisation, something I had forgotten. I shouted out to Weathervane. He turned at the door.

"Hmm?"

"I... I met some ponies. Friends of yours!"

"Friends?"

"From before. Um, ghouls! N-Nurses Splint and Bedlay Bloom with um..um, Windtail Breeze and Baton... Baton..."

"Baton Round?" Weathervane's voice lifted a little, a genuine unknowing in his eyes lighting up. "They're all still alive?"

"Yes! I found them as slaves. I just thought you'd w-want to know. They're still alive. In the metro, I mean. Splint's keeping them going. They're on the route we're taking to get out."

Weathervane looked genuinely stunned. As did Glimmer and Brim. They'd never heard me talk of these ghouls. The ghoul turned in the door, leaning on the frame for a second.

"I thought they died decades ago. If they're still alive, then..." He looked up. "The metro is Shackles' personal nightmare, Murk. If they're down there they can't last long."

"No... they didn't look in a good way."

"Slaving motherfucker..." Weathervane muttered to himself, following it up with a curse so foul I saw even Brim wince. "I will have to get to them, they were good friends. Thank

you, Murk. I will see what I can do. If it's the last thing I do I will save them. Such good ponies do not deserve that. By what remains of my life as a healer I *will* save them."

"We'll help them if we can, Doctor." Glimmerlight nodded to him. "We owe you more than life itself for what you've done for us."

"Sounds like you're heading that way anyway, not that I could talk you out of that stupid fuckin' plan... but thanks."

He trotted off. I guessed he wasn't one much for optimistic moments. I wished he'd just believe someday that he *could* take another life for himself out there. Right now, however, we had to get moving.

But I had one more thing to do before we left.

Glimmerlight had brought me my fleece from the Mall, expecting me to wear it. Picking it up from my little pile of belongings on the side table and offering a little smile to my statuette as I did so, I brought out my thread and needle along with a small pair of scissors nearby we'd used for my bandages.

"Murky? What are you doing?"

Glimmerlight watched intently. Even Brimstone cast a glance now and again. Lifting my fleece, I held it to my side before going to work with the scissors and needle. Strengthening areas, repairing the collar and legs of it, and patching any holes with black thread, I made it anew. But then I took to the sides, digging in and scything chunks of wool out from it. A new sense of self-confidence came over me, a declaration of who I was as I slipped it on carefully and let my wings spread through the holes.

Glimmerlight smiled brightly as I turned to her with a little grin, strapping on my PipBuck by the whipcord and slotting my goggles onto my head. My saddlebag went over, neatly fitting over my wings with the straps.

"I'm not going to hide who I am anymore, sis." I spoke with more pride in myself than I ever had, swishing my wings a little stiffly until they settled in. "Sha... Shackles tried to make me resent the kind of pony I am. I w-want to show myself that he was wrong."

Glimmer helped me off the bed, taking my weight as I unsteadily trotted a few steps forward before finding my balance properly.

"I'm glad you finally see that, Murky. They're a part of you and I can't imagine you without them."

Joining Brimstone, we set out. Glimmer giggled, bumped my shoulder and continued.

"Besides, just imagine what it'll be like to show a certain red-maned unicorn when he sees them."

"Glimmer!"

We hadn't gone too far from the hospital. With me trotting slowly and Brimstone still noticeably favouring his injured side, our walkabout wasn't exactly what you might call fast. But the chance to simply wander and talk with my friends on a rest day was something I'd dearly needed. It gave me time to voice my feelings and concerns to them or get a reassuring hug when I needed it over what happened in the Pit and afterwards. Not to mention telling Glimmer of my dreams, and thanking her over and over again.

Fillydelphia itself had come out of the storm. The ground was damp, but above us the dark clouds had parted to bring sickly yellow tinged with Filly's red haze. In comparison, it

felt almost as close as this city could get to a sunny day. With the forges silent and the slavers mostly indifferent to those who wandered free, there was a strange peace I'd never truly known from this place.

Of course, we weren't going to pass up this chance.

Open to explore, we headed toward the emergency exit from the metro I had climbed out of once before. Climbing through the rubble to find the ruined staircase, I pointed into the darkness with a hoof.

"This is it. The ghouls, Weathervane's friends, they showed this to me. It'll let us get into the metro quietly with a few ponies along with us."

Brimstone cast a dubious glance to the dark hole and its crumbling spiral staircase riddled with holes.

"Doesn't look steady. If we've got us three, Coral, two foals, and those two other mares you know the last thing we need is it to collapse."

"Um, y-yeah..."

"Doesn't matter." Glimmerlight lit her horn to look down herself and dropped a stone in. Numerous seconds passed before I heard it hit the bottom and nodded to let them know. Glimmerlight pointed to a big stone pillar beside us from the old building that housed this part of the metro. "We'll send Murky down first. He'll fire that hook of his back up and we'll tie it up here to lower everypony down one-by-one in a harness. They sent me to work in the place they make their battle saddles once. I think I could maybe get their stronger ones to sustain even Brim's size. If they can support ranger armour I'm pretty sure they'll support you."

"Good. You get that then." Brimstone nodded in approval, before waving us away. Last thing we needed was to be spotted here. "Just keep in mind we'll need to bring all our kit with us as well, that's one more lift. Now let's get out of here. We don't need to attract any attention."

I went back out first. The building the emergency staircase was sat in was an absolute wreck, not unidentifiable at all other than perhaps as some sort of construction for the metro system, one intended for staff only. Just down the road I could see the much larger public metro station on the surface. Shackles' guards hung around the top of it. Even the memory of what laid down there frightened me.

We'd have to go in there at least once. Sunny was trapped in that mining hell down there and I was not leaving without her. Not her or Unity. There had to be a way to find her. I wasn't abandoning her after what she'd done for me. The moment I was better, I'd see about sneaking into the metro to evacuate Sunny through this hole. Shackles wasn't going to bash me into submission now. I had *wings*!

We decided that we should head back to the Mall. Shackles wasn't there for sure and I knew a way to sneak out now anyway. We'd head back, count out all the cool stuff, get to hear Glimmer talk about the cool things she would make, and then I'd get to—oooh yes. I'd get to *check things off the checklist! Eee!*

Glimmer chuckled, seeing the light bounce to my trot. Ruffling my mane, she leaned down to me.

"I'm glad to see you smile, Murky. Keep that hope alive, you smiling makes *all* of us want to."

"I will. I mean, I'll t-try." I offered a grin to seal the deal. Glimmerlight nodded curtly and resumed looking ahead. We weren't being bothered and Brim's presence made anypony

who looked at my (proudly) displayed wings with distaste think twice before causing a problem. All the same, we tried to avoid attention. We had enough enemies in this city.

To avoid just that, we took the other way home, passing around near the old pegasus skyport and sticking to the smaller streets. I trotted behind them, with Brim leading the way. All the while, I simply tried not to look at the control tower. I didn't need to remember that now.

Beep!

My eyes jolted open further, stopping on the spot. Raising my PipBuck to my eyes, I glanced at it. Didn't it only go off at heights?

Beep! Beep!

The sound was quiet. Likely only I heard it. Ahead of me, Glimmer and Brimstone moved out of the building. Glimmer was chatting about something to him, but I didn't pay any attention. Just something about what we needed.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The sound picked up, before my PipBuck's screen seemed to flare, spark, and struggle to display something. Wincing away as a part of exposed circuitry popped, I worried if it was breaking.

Instead, it only flickered more. Squinting and looking close, I saw something appear upon it. A set of words at the top scrolled by quickly. Then below it a symbol began flashing. The smashed screen flickered a lot, but it looked like a set of three party balloons.

A little chill passed through my body. I knew what they were. No. Nooooo no no *no!* That creepy ever-watching pink *demon* could stay out of my PipBuck! Just because they got Sundial doesn't mean they'll get me!

The balloons warped and disappeared, being replaced by what looked like an arrow.

I looked up, but it only pointed to a blank wall.

Glimmerlight really needed to have a look at this thing. Some circuit probably blew out. I'd never been to this area of Fillydelphia before. Maybe its map systems were freaking out from some old Pinkie-related broadcast in the air. Best just to ignore it.

Not so easy. As I trotted to catch up, I saw the arrow changing and constantly pointing backward in one direction. It occurred to me that perhaps it had been pointing to something on the other side of these houses we trotted amongst.

Carefully, bending low and sneaking forward, I poked my head out into the road. A few slavers half-drunkenly staggered down it and the occasional converted home into a small slave den cast light onto the tarmac, but otherwise nothing. Looking down, the arrow pointed across the street and down the road a little. Then I saw it.

Standing taller than the rest, there was some form of government building. It held the same strength I'd seen on many of the Ministry related constructions, with thick corners and sometimes even unbroken windows. Yet it was not a Ministry Hub, for I could see a large sign on the outside bearing a book. It was a library.

The arrow on my PipBuck pointed relentlessly toward it, no matter which way I held it. I just didn't get it. I wondered if I should get Glimmer and Brim, investigate what this was to

A sudden shout disturbed my thinking.

"You! Get away from us!"

Glimmer!

I didn't even think. I simply turned back into the alley and galloped toward my friends. I

heard a group of voices all shout out. Weapon safeties clicked and hooves stomped. I heard Brim snort and grind his hooves upon the ground in warning.

Then I burst out of the alley into an almost completely destroyed warehouse. The roof had flown off long ago in some balefire-driven shock wave, leaving it a featureless skeleton of gantries and girders where the flimsy walls had once been.

Within it, I saw Glimmer and Brimstone surrounded in a half circle by slavers. At their centre stood an altogether annoyingly familiar figure. Wormtail.

"It's not exactly hard to track two slaves when one is about four times the size of anypony else." He stopped, looking over toward me. "Oh hello, what have we here?"

Skidding to a halt, I found Glimmerlight quickly blocking the way between me and him.

"You're *not* having him!"

"I don't think you all have much a choice. See, my own master tasked me to find you two. He wasn't particularly pleased with the result in the Pit. Seems he wants you eliminated, but now I see a much *better* prize we all thought gone to bring home to master."

He leered at me. I shook, the thought disgusting and terrifying me. I wouldn't. I wouldn't!

"As if you can just take him while I'm here." Brimstone snarled at the scrawny figure of Wormtail, who only seemed to fake a pout and make a snorting laugh.

"You can try."

A dozen large rifles and even a double shotgun battle saddle spun his way. Brimstone's eyebrows narrowed.

"You think you can wander? Oh sure, the normal slavers might not go for you, but I come from a much higher authority. One who can get a griffon to spot you from the air. One that wants his pet back. Now come on, little runt. Daddy's waiting."

"N-no!" I stomped one hoof, before squeaking in surprise as my saddle's mouthpiece whipped out accidentally from the movement. The slavers laughed, but Glimmerlight had my back.

"He's not going back to him. Not after what's happened! Murky's no slave any more. Don't bring this to violence because I promise even if you kill us all I'll make sure I get you *somehow* before it goes down."

"Of course you will, my dear. But you see, I have twelve heavily armed allies at least twenty feet away with their tongues on the triggers and you have a half dead raider with no weapons. Hand him over. I'll maybe see that you at least find a home, my dear."

"Not a chance."

"You don't have much a choice, you know! Hah!"

"Want him, you gotta take him." Brim lowered himself down. "If Glim doesn't get you, *I* will."

"Yes, yes, of course, but hooves don't do well against *guns*. Do learn how fighting works, big boy, before you try and act like you understand it."

For a second, I thought Brimstone was going to simply charge for that one remark. However much it his condescending attitude infuriated me, he was right. We didn't even have space to retreat.

Stalemate. Only they could end the stalemate with a victory whenever they wanted!

So... not a stalemate at all then.

"Come on, little slave. Maybe I'll even let your friends live if you come here. I'm sure the Master wouldn't mind that once he saw he was getting you back. Come on. Just trot over."

I looked around. Anything to grapple? Just old bars, nothing above them. Nothing they couldn't shoot me long before I managed to tug anyway!

"I said come on! Just obey and trot forward. Do I have to shoot one of them to get it through to you? Do I?"

I paced on the spot. I tried to think, my wings shaking a little by my side. The same look was on Glimmer's face.

"He is *not* going back to him!" She grit her teeth. "He's realised who he is and he is not that monster's pet slave!"

"Oh for crying out loud, must you make this so tiring? Blockhead, shoot the mare."

"Yis, boss."

The rifle came up. I saw Brimstone look to dive, his instinct to protect Glimmerlight kicking in. I think I screamed. I knew he was too far away.

The gunshot snapped out.

The rifle seemed to flare, but not from the barrel. A bright spark from the stock nearer the slaver's face sent the weapon spinning away. My ears stung from the sound, but even while recovering I began to hear where it had come from. Behind and above us.

"Stand down! *All of you!*"

Glimmerlight had winced back, expecting the pain. We met eyes in disbelief, before both turning to the real source of the gunshot.

Behind us, atop a set of gantry stairs from a far entrance, we saw him. His revolver floated just near a blinking red eyepiece to aim down its scope, his red mane blew loose in the light breeze around his head.

Protégé trotted forward down the stairs. Keeping his revolver trained on the group of slavers. He wasn't wearing his armour, just the scholarly vest and day clothes. As he passed, I saw his eye briefly turn to me and acknowledge my presence before returning to Wormtail. The weasel-like aid to Shackles had clenched away from the disarmed slaver on the gunshot and now strove to keep his presence up.

"Wormtail, you don't have authority to go around shooting workers. Especially not valued ones."

Wormtail merely snickered, wringing out his neck.

"I'd heard you were back on your hooves. Looking to make up for how you failed at the Mall, eh? Trying to make up for all your bad planning by acting hard, pointing a gun at another slaver?"

"You know as well as I what transpired there. Just as you know why I keep this drawn."

I saw some of the slavers actually grin. Suddenly, I got a sense that something bigger had suddenly transpired in the background. Protégé wasn't paying us much attention despite saving Glimmer's life. Ahead of us, Wormtail calmed a little, shaking out his neck again.

"Well I'm afraid this is a stupid little move for you again. See, Chainlink Shackles doesn't like you, and you've just revealed yourself, on your own, with only five shots in your revolver. I'm sure no pony would be able to find you after you mysteriously disappeared."

"Not going to happen. Murk and his friends are coming with me. You know I've been put back in charge of the Mall. They will be protected."

What? *YES!*

"*Only* until Chainlink is healthy again, since that brute over there got near him! Don't you smirk, raider! You've got a day at most before you'll be kicked out all over again! The slaver council isn't too happy with you. Not that it matters. Didn't you hear me? You aren't

leaving here alive! Shackles told me you were back on the trot, aiming to save your little favourite runt."

His eyes narrowed.

"He also told me if I got the chance to simply kill you and dump your body in the taint. See? That's why it's good to have allies. Something you don't know."

The weapons aimed again. They were all Shackles' lackeys, I knew it! What was Protégé doing? He had to know he couldn't win!

"Hm, funny." Protégé smiled. "I happen to have a friend in a very high place too."

There was an odd silence. Nopony really got what he meant. I saw it first, a small red dot creeping over Wormtail's face. Reaching his eye, it made him squint and yelp from the glare.

"There's a helpfulness to having a sworn griffon bodyguard who's a handy sharpshooter too, you know? You give one order, she'll pull the trigger. Murk here can attest to her accuracy on the move, never mind your head standing still."

The atmosphere seemed to change. Wormtail looked a lot less confident all of a sudden. Glancing from side to side, now he was the one having to really try and think.

"You... you..."

"Goodbye, Wormtail. I'll no doubt enjoy your presence again later."

"Insufferable... everypony, let's go. Shackles will want to know the runt's alive! You didn't save him, upstart! You *can't* save him! You're alone in Fillydelphia now, Protégé! Just a slave playing at slaver! Just you wait!"

He turned, trotting away. Almost disappointed, the slavers obediently left. Only then did I notice how much I was shaking. Thank the Goddesses for his return! Trotting over, I saw Protégé let out a relieved breath of his own.

"Thank you, ma..." I coughed a little over my word. No using that any more. Even if he is the only one I ever perhaps respected back. "Thanks."

He turned back to me. Out of the moment, I began to see how rough he really was. His normally ponytailed mane was loose and his clothes loosely fitted from a significant loss in weight. I presumed it was from the treatments to cure Barb's poison.

"Wormtail is a coward. If he thinks his own skin's in danger he'll always back off. He relies on hiding behind Shackles' power. I'm just glad you had that PipBuck on you to track once I got out."

I could see a heavy swathe of bandage over his neck just like mine. Seeing my own, Protégé's face turned from relief to concern.

"Murk, I heard about the Pit. They said that 'the pegasus' had been in there and it's all they talked about. Even Master Red Eye was rather perplexed by it. I am most grateful to see you're alive, for the longest time I... I thought..."

"As did we." Glimmerlight cast a hoof around my neck. "A few miracles and a lot of self-discovery involved perhaps, but he's still here trotting with us. Thank you, Protégé. You mentioned you were back in charge of the Mall?"

He nodded curtly, then winced from the motion shifting his bandage. Of course, he hadn't had a megaspell to help it.

"A temporary judgement. I know the Mall so I've been assigned to merely care for it until Shackles is healed himself. Not very long at all. Grindstone has convinced the council that the riot and its outcome was my doing. He and Shackles played their cards well. Make no mistake, there is a great game of intrigue and politics coming to light now. Something I know of but cannot prove beyond my own words."

He cast a glance to Brimstone.

"It seems you did more than you may have thought. Allegedly, once he got back to his office after your attack he collapsed. He must have just been trying not to let it happen in front of the slaves."

I couldn't help but see a satisfied little smirk across Brim's face.

"He will return as walking wounded in a day. Shackles is no weak pony. Until then, I have overseer duty similar to Shackles' own limbo period before he was handed power over the Mall. Somewhere I advise we return to now rather than be exposed."

"No argument from me." Glimmerlight nodded. I could sense how relieved she really was.

"Good, then let us make swift pace. I have no wish to meet another group of those loyal to Shackles and Grindstone."

Behind us, Ragini bounded across the remains of the warehouse. A gut-wrenching feeling hit me as I saw her broken wings clasped to her side. She was ground-ridden. There was a brief moment as she saw my wings half spread where I saw confusion and shock in her eyes. Before I could think of any words, she hid it under a veil of professional blankness.

With her there, we began to move off. Falling back in pace with me, Protégé glanced over and saw my wings. I noticed he kept his voice low, respectful of Ragini's presence.

"I'm glad to see that the ghoulish doctor's treatments are helping, Murk. Please, would you do me a favour and attend my office upon your return?"

"Um, y-yes?"

He looked surprised, as though expecting a 'Master' on the response.

"Good." He picked up his pace, trotting ahead to lead the way naturally. "I have missed our talks."

The mall was bustling. Ponies were coming and going in a constant stream with hazy eyes. Shackles' influence finally being lifted was like a brief haven for them, even if just for one day. Most took the chance to grasp what little freedom to wander as they could, enjoying a day free of toil to get some food or simply a change of scenery.

Protégé cast a disapproving eye upon the quality of the slaves. Most regarded him with something of a curious glance, some asking if he was back forever. I saw one slave plead that he be with them again. Red Eye's apprentice could only offer that he would do what he could within one day.

When he saw the plaza, I almost felt like he was going to break the stoicism he bore to look upon what had changed in horror.

"This isn't what I wanted."

Likely only I heard it, the pain in his voice. With a deep sigh, he turned to me as he moved to the stairs back to his office.

"Please, do come visit. I want to hear in your words what has happened. I'll give you a few seconds to settle."

He spoke quickly and curtly, before swinging to leave. I was left with Glimmerlight and Brimstone, both rather quiet at first. Naturally, it would fall to Glimmer to break the silence a little.

"Well? Let's get in there and get to work. Got a lot of planning to do."

We trotted into the plaza more fully. Cells were laid open with a skeleton crew of slavers waiting around, however the main draw was a series of tables set up around the area manned by slaves themselves. The slave market had come to visit the beleaguered residents of the Mall, seeking to gain from their wish to escape harsh control. Trinkets, foods, purified water, and clothing were all laid out and being furiously haggled over. Sooty wasn't to be seen. I presumed he was above this now, or that several of the traders reported back to him.

We returned to our cell, finding Coral waiting for us. But even as they trotted in, I looked to the balcony above, seeing a brief glance of Protégé passing by it to his office. Something felt different about him. He was quieter, less poetic and optimistic of purpose.

I felt a hoof on my shoulder. Glimmer.

"You go see him, Murky."

I turned to her with an aim to cut the joke short but saw only a calm seriousness.

"We can handle checking all we have ourselves. Go see how he is. That pony saved our lives as much as you saved his. I know you'll want to catch up, but could you just leave your PipBuck here a moment? I want to try and see if I can't load a stored map from Aurora's files onto it."

Biting my lip, I looked back up for a second before nodding.

"Thanks, sis."

Feeling her pat my cheek comfortingly, I hoofed over my PipBuck and left them to it, trotting toward the stairs. I knew the way just fine, but even so I felt an odd nervousness of confronting him once again. As though I didn't know quite what to say or where to start. Things had changed and it had been so long. I wasn't the same pony he once knew.

Would he be the one I knew?

Carefully cresting the stairs and poking my head out to watch the corridor (too near *his* office for my liking) I began to trot toward the office door, and found that Ragini stood on watch outside it. I didn't imagine Protégé was taking any chances with another attempt on his life. She regarded me as finely as ever. (By which I mean as though I were something she'd accidentally stepped on.)

"Want in?" Her voice cut into the air, as though trying to use as little syllables possible.

"Y-yes please." I nodded, stepping forward as she nodded to the presumably unlocked door. As I passed her, I saw the ruin of her wings by her sides and knew from horrible experience the true meaning of it.

"I'm... I'm sorry for what happened to you, Ragini." I looked up at the huge griffon. "I know what it feels li—yargh!"

She grabbed me by the collar, pulling me right up to her beak with *fury* in her eyes.

"No you *don't*, flightless! Don't you dare tell me you know how it feels to lose your wings! You've never tasted the air above the clouds, never felt the rush through your body in a straight dive or the satisfying ache the day after a challenging flight! Those feathers of yours do not *know* what it is to be a flyer! So don't you come here with your magically healed little shaking wings by your side and have the *nerve* to say you know how I feel!"

She dropped me. Landing on my rump with a yelp, I cowered away from the furious griffon, her face screwed into anger alone.

"So answer me two questions, flightless. Could what you got for your wings work for

me?"

Shivering, I shook my head.

"Then fuck off with your concern. I'm one of the Talons. We don't want sympathy.

Second question..."

She bent right over me, turning her head to the side so that her eye could better stare at me.

"Did any of those that did this get away?"

"Y-yes."

There was a pause, then she seemed to smile. It was not a nice smile.

"They had their little revenge pacts. The Talons don't let this sort of thing go unanswered either. Eye for an eye. Thank you for telling me this, flightless."

Her back leg knocked the door open rather too sharply before harshly inclining with her head.

"Now get your scrawny ass in there."

Afraid to even voice any further words, I darted inside and closed the door readily, taking a second to breathe on the other side.

"I see Ragini still adores you, Murk."

The moment the door closed, he spoke from across the room. I turned a little too sharply to see him amidst a state of devastation. Protégé held many books in his telekinesis, trying to sort out the mess that Shackles' slavers had made of his office. Bookshelves were tumbled over, papers spread out of cabinets, and all his furniture shifted around. I even saw one row of books simply thrown across the floor.

Oh wait. That bit had been me...

...oops?

"It's, um, all right. I guess I'm sort of used to it now." I trotted forward, allowing my eyes to fall instead to him.

"She has a lot of anger to get out, don't take it to heart. Anyone not in her contract has been getting it from her lately."

Protégé turned back to me, setting a dozen books on his desk. I couldn't help but be struck by how little energy he really gave off. Every time before I had seen him, Protégé had a certain presence, a spark within him that had controlled any given encounter. Yet now, he moved slower, favouring his neck with any movements around the tightly wrapped clean bandages. His eyes looked tired and his mouth seemed to fight to not allow for a frown to come over him. I almost wanted to just start telling him it would all be all right somehow.

"I must thank you personally, Murk." He sat atop a stool nearby, indicating another across the room if I wanted it. "There's no other way to put it. You saved my life by taking on Barb. I heard what you did to him and all I can say is... I'm glad that I was right about you. There is certainly more to you as a pony than many saw."

Taking a careful seat, I toyed with a small book that had been in the way.

"I just got lucky."

"Nonsense, Murk. That took bravery. Even now I look upon you and I see a different pony than the one that I last saw calling me 'master.' Something has changed you, I don't need to see your wings recovering to know that. There's one crucial difference I spotted the moment I saw you again, and again the moment you wanted in this door."

"H-huh?"

Protégé allowed a small smile to cross his face. "You turned to me and you looked me in

the eyes. You've never done that before, not like that. Please, tell me. What changed?"

I nodded, placing the book down. "Yes, yes I have changed. There's a... I-lot..."

I felt a pressure behind my eyes. What I'd been through. Of being broken, forced into work, held down and made to call Shackles 'Master' again and again. It all flooded back in one tidal wave. Clenching my eyes shut, I wiped away the little dampness that had come forth. I heard Protégé shift, leaning forward in concern.

"I told you once before that I was willing to hear you out, Murk. That offer still stands."

Looking up, I tried to hide the wetness in my eyes with a hoof. I was stronger now. I could see I was not meant to be a slave. I could see I was meant to be free. But that didn't mean it all didn't still hurt terribly. Sniffing, I began to tell him everything from the start. Since the moment he had been crippled; and I held none of it back. He was a very good listener. I might have sniffled a few times, or stumbled and repeated myself, but he was patient and only interrupted me to clarify some things or to ask intelligent questions.

Eventually I spoke of the mostly faded nightmares and dreams I had travelled in my near death. Protégé leaned forward, closely interested as he heard me talk of my past with my mother and of how I gained my cutie mark.

"That's what changed, it all stemmed from this one thing." I wiped my eyes and looked across the room, turning slightly that he could see my cutie mark. "It means to be free. My life isn't to be in slavery, it's to escape from it! Coming to Fillydelphia was nothing more than me reaching the end of the line, the place I would escape from and begin my life for real! The friends I've met here were what I was to truly find. A family I chose for myself. I want to be free. I've said it so many times but only now do I really... well, *understand* it. I *have* to be free."

There was an odd silence, before Protégé nodded slowly.

"I see. Believe that by my power I would want it for you, Murk. I gained my freedom to choose my path, so I can but say I wish the same for you in return. However, Shackles will not want it of you. What you have been through under him."

He looked away.

"I know what it's like. Perhaps not to the same malicious extent to focus on you above all, but I know the weight of his authority upon my shoulders and now he seeks to do it again." He slowly drew himself up, opening his eyes. "You can gain your freedom in Fillydelphia, Murk. So long as we can keep you from him then I believe you can last the two years to—"

"I will not wait *two years* more to lose my life, Protégé!"

I snapped up, standing and facing him.

"Don't come back and tell me that I am just to go back to slavery!"

"I cannot simply release you, Murk. You know this."

"I've seen what I need to do in my life now! How can you stand there and tell me that I've to endure Stables and risk my life for years to 'earn' my freedom that I need to seek for myself! After all this, after all *you've* been through, how can you tell me that it's right?"

"Master Red Eye offers only these options, Murk! I can help you—"

I stomped a hoof hard. "Not for two years of this! I won't last two years! I thought you were better than this when we last talked! That you wanted something better that wasn't going to be pain and misery simply to get what I have always been denied! You can—"

"Enough!"

Protégé snapped at me, standing up. Yet even as he did, he sighed, looking away.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout. I said I could help you, but you didn't let me speak. I

spent a long time recovering, Murk. A long time to think, to read, and to speak with those I could. Old Grizzly predominantly visited in lieu of my master from his attentions to the final preparations for the cathedral and Unity. I would have spoke with him, told him all of what happened, but there are greater plans at stake now.”

He trotted closer to me.

“I have a way I can help you, Murk. To make this journey easier to bear. If you will but listen?”

I was breathing hard. The emotions of slavery in the past few days had wrung me hard and I felt ready to burst out at anything. But I nodded and sat again. Protégé sat upon the floor near his desk, lifting the eyepiece from his face.

“There is something happening in Fillydelphia, Murk. Something you saw an example of when Shackles betrayed us both and from what Wormtail was saying. It is being called the great game by some, a power struggle as they sense Master Red Eye’s final victory drawing near. Every member of his staff seeks to be in the most advantageous position to reap the rewards or bask in the power that it shall bring.”

“I... I know. I’ve seen Shackles’ meetings, he made me serve for them.”

“Then you know what kind of seriousness they give to this, Murk. Intrigue and hidden politics are crossing over into a mess of loyalties and back room activities. I shan’t drown you in the specifics, but due to my position of favour beside Master Red Eye they see me as a threat. I have precious few allies left, yet many seek to discredit me. My time is rushed and I am fighting a losing battle to keep my own interests solid while maintaining my responsibilities.”

He spoke even as he wandered the room. His magic began to lift more books, replacing them on shelves before leaning down with a painful grunt to try and lift a bookcase. Without thinking, I went over to help him.

“What—ergh... what *are* your responsibilities now?”

“Logistics.” The bookcase snapped upright. “I am to help direct Master Red Eye’s material supply and personnel reserves as his supervisor. It is... without recognition. A demotion for sure.”

We both leaned back on the bookcase. Glancing over, I could hear the disappointment in his voice. Here was the pony I knew who once dreamed of making something better out of all this, now denied that link to the very ponies he sought to help.

“I don’t understand. You said you could help me. What does this have to do with their arguments?”

Having trotted back to the desk to begin picking up his notes, Protégé turned back to me.

“As I said, I had a great amount of time to think, read, and talk. Hearing of what Chainlink Shackles did to you, forcing you to admit his ownership of you made me realise and see the way out for you.”

He turned, trotting right up to me, placing a hoof on my shoulder.

“I can offer you a new task in Fillydelphia... by my side.”

My eyes shot open wider. “Wh-what?”

“Murk, the ponies who control things in here are often not nice people at all. Yet if one requests a pony join them as a personnel liaison and assistant it is up to the *slave* to decide. It never gets brought up much because no slave would want to go with it. Shackles trapped you in it, but you hold the power to choose to accept *me* as your new immediate...” He

paused, clearly not sure about the word. "...master."

My mind reeled somewhat. Was it really that simple? I knew I could say yes and avoid Shackles forever now! He held no chains over me to stop me simply agreeing!

Yet something stopped me. I could tell how much Protégé saw this as something only for good but there was one thing that mattered before I simply agreed.

"My friends can come too, right?"

There was an uneasy silence. The look on his face said it all, the look that wished I hadn't asked that. Protégé didn't need to say a word.

"You want me to come with you and you alone? To abandon my friends to Chainlink Shackles?"

"I know, Murk."

"You want me to just-to just go from one master to another! To ask me to be *your* slave

—"
Protégé looked up quickly. "An assistant."

"A slave is a slave!"

My outburst seemed to have surprised him. I knew I could say it now, my mind felt more free! All the things I wished I could stick up for and say suddenly felt able to be said!

"How can you expect me to leave behind my friends? Can't they come? Please, tell me they can come somehow! Be your team! We can all help you!"

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Murk. I can't simply take such a chunk of his workforce away. The rules of Master Red Eye's organisation do not allow it. I am sorry, Murk. I know this is harsh. But I'm sure they would want this for you. When he returns, Chainlink Shackles will destroy you. Think of what you told me, what he wanted Sooty Morass' despicable outlet to have you for."

That struck deep. I trotted back from him, any exultation and bravery replaced with fear. This was toying with my mind, giving me choices I wished I didn't have to make. H-he was right. I didn't want to go there. I'd come to realise so much but it all felt so fragile. If he got a hold of me again...

I sank down onto my haunches.

"Murk, you don't have to decide now."

Protégé moved forward again and sat before me. His eyes showed genuine care as he set a hoof on each of my shoulders.

"This is all I can offer with what I have now. You have so much to offer and I could help you find it. You would be more independent and active with me than you would ruining your body in some mill or factory. You will still be able to participate in the salvage programs to earn your freedom, but you will be away from his ownership. Safe with me. Please, I only ask that you think it over before he returns and I am forced away from the Mall."

"I... I will..."

"Thank you, Murk." He closed his eyes briefly. "If it's worth anything, I am so sorry for what happened. I wish I could have been there to help you."

He got up to trot back to his desk. Behind him, I let my head droop. Every bit of logic said I should agree, but leaving my friends behind to serve a new master... even if that master was Protégé? To help Red Eye's efforts still? Wasn't this just what I'd been seeking to get away from?

Unless...

"You could come with us."

My voice was barely a whisper, just enough that I saw him stop.

"Murk?"

I got up, moving one step closer.

"Come with us. Join *us*. Protégé, you're too smart a pony to not have noticed what we're trying to do. You have to have known that we're trying to escape someday. Look at what's happening. The ponies after your life? Being put into organising what spare parts go where? All instead of what you wanted."

I moved a little closer, this time resting my hoof on his shoulder instead of his on mine. He didn't move, simply staring ahead.

"You're a better pony than anypony else working for Red Eye. You can come with us. They would allow it, I'm sure they—"

"Stop, Murk."

His voice cut in sharply before mine, tapering to a gentle tone.

"Please, Protégé. If you're free with us you could do something better out there! With your help we could—"

"I said *stop*." He trotted forward, the eyepiece floating up to his face as he made for his desk. "I have a path I chose for myself. The day I ceased to be a slave I chose to stay and share in his dream. My place is here in Fillydelphia. By his side."

"Even while he promotes slavers like Shackles above you to do what they do to us?"

I stood before his desk as I saw that quill and parchment roll out, no doubt a message. He hesitated and looked up only briefly.

"Master... Master Red Eye sees fit to choose. I... trust him. It's his decision."

Biting my lip, I watched him begin to write. I saw the weakness in his eyes, the tiredness and the harm across his body. I remembered the scars.

My voice was quiet, fragile in its hushed tone to ask.

"Are you really sure you stopped being a slave?"

The quill stopped, but he did not look up.

"...good day, Murk. Enjoy your time of rest."

That was that. He went back to his message, leaving me nothing but to turn and leave his office.

I trotted a little morosely down the stairs. Heading back to the plaza, I was a little surprised to find Glimmerlight, Brim, and Coral Eve coming the opposite way. Behind them I saw Blunderbuck in tow.

"H-huh? What's g-going on?"

"Turn around, lil'bro! We're going out!"

I didn't have much choice. Her magic picked me up mid trot and spun me 180 to follow their direction. In my confusion, I didn't even stop trotting the entire time.

"G-going out? Where? Glimmer what's going on?"

She just ruffled my mane, glancing to the smiling faces of the others. Even Coral Eve held a little rare grin.

"Red Eye's day of rest, remember? You *really* think I'm going to miss a chance to attend the Roamer Bar when it gets opened to slaves? I've got a date with some *serious* ethanol!"

“Ethawhat?”

Her eyes glinted as we passed out the front of the Mall. Only now did I notice that she carried a new saddlebag filled with unknown items.

“Liquid fun, Murky. *Liquid fun*. Besides, we’ve got something to celebrate.”

Glimmerlight seemed rather lighter of heart than I’d ever seen her lately. Even with her bruised body and great deal of exhaustion, she somehow found the energy to make a flighty trot toward the Roamer ahead of our group. Sometimes she would skip in circles until we caught up.

“Been so long since I’ve had a proper booze up! Wonder if I can still down it with the best of them?”

She chirped and hummed all the way there across the gravel fields of what was once Fillydelphia’s main park. Up ahead I could hear a crowd of voices, scratching music, and the clank of ceramic objects fairly repeatedly. The Roamer sounded busy, but only after we rounded a large dead bush and saw its light across an empty pond did it truly sink in.

“Behold, Murk!” Blunderbuck wrapped a hoof around my neck and swept the other one out toward the bar. “Fillydelphia’s prime establishment of alcohol, drunken hijinks, and absolute fun!”

It was much bigger than I had expected! The only bar I’d ever seen was just a small tavern a slave caravan carrying me had once stopped at. But this was a full converted building! I saw two floors lit up over the old cobbled road with crude letters made of all materials bolted onto the abandoned third floor. They flickered with Hearths Warming lights wrapped around them and dropped a rather garish mixture of colours mixed in with the warm light exuding from the building. Outside, everything had spilled out to accommodate the slaves taking the time to visit. Benches and makeshift tables spread almost across the road, filled with riotous ponies gulping drinks and laughing amongst themselves.

I just gulped. It looked pretty crowded in there with numerous ponies already showing the effects of the drink as they staggered around.

“Aw yeeeah!” Glimmer shouted and hopped up onto a bench to gaze down at the Roamer. “Now that’s what I’m talking about! That, my friends, is where you can really feel alive and free.”

Coral Eve just shook her head and muttered something about certain ponies never growing past their teens. The others trotted forward toward Glimmer. Brimstone actually seemed to be grinning a little himself.

“Aye, can’t deny it’ll be welcome. Even if it is that water they call ale.”

“Seemed to get me plastered just fine last time.” Glimmerlight pouted up at the big pony, who simply shrugged.

“Then what does that say about you, Glim?” Brimstone didn’t even turn his head as he trotted off, still limping on the one horribly scarred side of his body.

I had to stifle my laugh into my hoof at the sudden look of having trotted right into that one on Glimmerlight’s face, before she stomped a hoof and stuck out her tongue at Brimstone’s back. Then she turned back to me as Blunderbuck moved forward, carrying another of those saddlebags.

“Hey, Murky? Wait out here with Coral, she’ll bring you in soon.”

"H-huh? Why?"

"Can't tell!" She grinned brightly, patted the saddlebag, and galloped off while shouting over her shoulder. "It's a surprise!"

I exchanged a look with Coral, who simply nodded to me. I opened my mouth, but she cut in before me.

"Not. Saying. A word." She pronounced it all cheerily and patted my head. "Just wait a few minutes, Murky. Then we'll go in and meet them."

Confused, I looked to my other friends disappearing into the Roamer. The crowds parted before Brimstone while Glimmer and Blunderbuck waded in behind him. Away from the noisy crowds and clank of tankards, Coral and I stood waiting patiently. In the dark of the evening, I saw her eyes stare across the city.

"What is it?"

Coral kept looking. Only after a few seconds did I realise it was toward the direction of the Alpha-Omega Hotel. Coral sighed briefly and patted a hoof on the ground.

"Just... just hard to ever stop thinking. You see them lying in a cot, so vulnerable, and you promise to yourself that you'll take care of them forever. Not a minute goes by I don't wonder what he's doing. If he ever looks out a window and wonders the same."

"We'll, um, do it? Right? The, uh, escape thing." Why did sounding inspired have to be so wordy and hard? How did Unity do it so easily? "And, uh-uh, we'll get them all out. You and your son, Lilac, and Unity, and-and Sunny! We'll all go out of here, yeah?"

Coral Eve chuckled at my awkward little speech.

"You've been nattering on about escape ever since you woke up. It's adorable."

I didn't have any say in the matter as she rubbed my cheek and stood up.

"But it's just the sort of thing we love you for, Murky. You're the dreamer. The one who wants it harder than any of us. Now come on, I'm sure they're done. There's a time and a place for emotional little moments, but now isn't it."

Coral trotted away and I rushed to keep up. I felt my wings ache slightly as they half fluttered in excitement.

"Done? Done what?"

Coral just smiled as we entered the throng of ponies. She led the way, pushing a path through them and checking back to ensure I was following her. Truth be told, aside from being nervous around such cramped and smelly slaves (not that I was exactly anything but the same), it wasn't so hard to navigate, I could just move through all the little spaces. Soon enough, we entered the doorway and I felt a wave of heat slap me in the face. A mixture of sweet alcohol, body odour, and old oak drove through the room to the doorway by the fumes of a roaring fire against the far wall. Unable to see much over the ponies shouting, singing, drinking, and flirting all around me, I strained to figure out where I was. The biggest crowd was around the makeshift bar while others clustered in small seating booths at the edges. Where were we—

"Murky! Coral! Over here!"

My ears perked up, pulling Coral toward where Glimmer had seen us. This was crazy! What were they up to before I came... in... oh my...

The crowd had parted just enough as Coral and I moved toward Glimmer's voice on the edge of the room and I witnessed what awaited. The sound seemed to fall away as I just stood and gaped. Many other slaves around were watching with bemusement as well. Before me stood a sight I didn't quite understand but felt such a connection to.

They had gotten one of the side tables to themselves. Hung between the wooden poles on either side, I saw a little half-ripped string of multi-coloured flags, and below that, a bright red cover draped across the table itself. A few small boxes sat there wrapped in rough, coarse rope over different colours of plastic bags that shielded my eyes from whatever they were. But in the centre there sat something I'd never seen before me like this. A *cake*! Small and likely looking as though it were made from condensed oatmeal with only a single bent candle, but still! A cake!

Blunderbuck lounged back with a great big grin as he pulled a string on a little device.

With a sharp crack that sent a few squeals around the room (not in the least mine) he shot a few strings of multi-colored paper into the air. After a few awkward moments of detaching myself from Coral, she chuckled and nudged me toward the table. Glimmerlight stood before it, lavishly indicating it all with her hooves like a salespony and wearing a ridiculous sparkly pointed hat tied with a string under her chin. Come to think of it, so was Blunderbuck.

"Wh-what is this? Glimmer? Coral? What's going on?"

"Welcome, Murky!" Glimmerlight trotted up quickly and pulled me toward it. "I told you that you could choose today as your official birthday from now on. Every birthday needs a *party*!"

I just kept blinking. A birthday party? Such a thing existed? For me? I couldn't stop staring around all the individual paper hangings and balloons tied to the table. No pony had ever given me a party for me before.

"While it may be informal, it's all you deserve after everything lately. Come on, my dear, sit down." Coral Eve nudged me forward again, her and Glimmer having to direct me through my wide-eyed shock.

"Yeah! We got presents, a hat for you to wear, then the *drinks*. Ooooh yes! Brim had a few words with the bartender to get the reserved seat. He can be *very* persuasive." Glimmerlight flung herself into the recessed seats and tapped beside her for me to move to.

I couldn't believe it. I just *couldn't*! A birthday party for me! My first one *ever*! I loved my friends so much!

Only thing was I had stopped and stared again, before being unable to stop myself seeing what sat there and attempting to stifle a laugh. My eyes had turned across the table once again, where they had found Brimstone Blitz sitting at the back dwarfing it all. He sat hunched over in the room, face as twisted and scarred around his one eye as ever... and bore another of those tiny ridiculous hats on his head.

Seeing the sight, no doubt Glimmer's doing, I couldn't help but chuckle. She joined me, winking up to the big pony. Brimstone just let out a long and deep breath.

"Kids..."

Somewhere in the bar, somepony had gotten an old jukebox working. Accompanied by a cheer from the bar, the happy bopping music spread into the room. It was an upbeat and relaxed tone, one that set everypony to more smiles and laughing than I had known slaves capable of.

I had been pushed in beside Glimmerlight at the back of the recess, furthest from anypony else and surrounded by my friends, while Coral had shifted opposite me closer to

Blunderbuck. It wasn't difficult to notice she had chosen the chair furthest from Brimstone, but the mere fact that she was willing to put that aside to be here for this spoke volumes of where her real loyalties lay with us. If I hadn't already done so, I'd have let my respect for her become boundless.

Despite the seediness of the Roamer and the gradual decline in sober ponies in the room, I couldn't help but feel a cosy warmth in this place. The oak décor and hanging lanterns before the big fireplace set a quaint tone.

"Hey, so... gonna open these babies any time soon, Murky?" Glimmer nudged my side and nodded toward the boxes on the table. We'd just been chatting about the bar and stuff lightly while I had pondered what they were.

"Oh? Sorry!" I bit my lip. "I didn't know I was meant to!"

A hoof ruffled my mane fiercely. "Aww! Don't you know these are for you? You get presents on your birthday, Murky! Now come on! Those pressies won't open themselves! Dig in!"

"Aye. You get started on them and I'll fetch the drinks." Brimstone pulled himself up and stomped off with a thin smile to the bar. I couldn't help but notice him removing the hat the moment he left.

"Typical Brim." Glimmerlight muttered with a shake of her head. "Just as little idea about parties as you. Now let's get started!"

Feeling oddly unsure if I was doing everything right, I pulled the nearest one toward me. I was quite surprised at the size of it, so much so that it rather hid me behind it when I pulled its weight across the table toward me!

"Going for the biggest first? I *like* your style, Murk!" Blunderbuck grinned madly at me with a rub of his hooves.

Blushing, seeing the others smiling (Blunderbuck most so. Why was that?) I pulled it onto the wide seat beside me and started to tear at the coverings. My hooves ripped a couple pieces off, before a new feeling I'd never known started surging through me. Sheer *satisfaction* at tearing open the covers of the present! Ooh, I liked this feeling! The paper and plastic bag coverings ripped and pulled off to reveal a thick cardboard box beneath it. Excitedly I threw it open... to find a smaller box inside.

Huh?

Tearing this one out, I opened the lid and found another box below that. Then another. Then another! Again and again until a thin wooden case rested in my hooves after at least eight boxes that now littered the floor under our table. The others were laughing. In the past, I might have seen this as a joke at my expense but I just giggled on each box and relished the opportunity to rip into each new one! Only now I sat with this small wooden case that I slid the top from.

Oh. Oh wow.

"I can install it for you when we get back to the Mall, Murk!" Blunderbuck beamed brightly across the table at me. "Too short notice to put it on before we had to leave for here, but I figured I'd use the big box anyway!"

In my hooves rested a little spur of metal with a few tiny pistons and a ring on the end. I knew what this was! It was an Ironshod battle saddle aiming reticule mark four! I'd *adored* these things ever since I saw my first one on a slaver's saddle!

"Thank you, Blunderbuck!" I laughed madly, hugging the little piece for my treasured saddle. It'd look *so cool* flipping out with the mouthpiece to flick in front of my eye for

aiming properly! Sure it was only a couple of little metal pointers in a thin circle but it'd let me aim that grapple hook so much easier now rather than just hoping! *Eee!*

I wasted no time on grabbing the next present. It was thinner and surprisingly weighty, but shockingly well wrapped. This one seemed to have been done by an expert. My hooves struggled to find purchase! Across the table, I saw Coral throw me a sly smirk. Oh, she knew her business with presents.

Even so, I finally found an edge and dug in with my teeth to get the string off. Bit by bit it came apart to reveal...

...a book?

It bore upon the cover a huge map of Equestria under some massive letters and a *gigantic* word that made my mind spin. I didn't understand.

"But I... I can't read."

"Try opening it." Coral gestured patiently with her hoof and I did as asked.

Pictures! So many pictures! Photographs of animals before they'd become mutated! Huge vistas of Canterlot Castle and that idealistic little country town I'd seen in the Stable! There were images of earth ponies, unicorns, and pegasi in depth along with flowers, insects, and even types of buildings! I kept flicking from page to page, staring in wonder at the pre-war... well, wonders!

"This is an encyclopedia, Murk." Coral leaned around the table and pulled me closer to plant a kiss on my cheek. "It will let you see the happier times and give you plenty of ideas on what to draw."

"Thanks, Coral."

"You're welcome, my dear." She sat back again, clearly finding the sight of me flicking through every page rather satisfying. There was a bird, and then a few pages after a huge picture of Celestia and Luna themselves! I couldn't wait to look at more of this!

Brimstone returned, carrying a tray of drinks and mugs filled with very strong smelling liquid. Setting it down at the edge of the table, he took a seat again but did not pass any out. I presumed the drinks were for after the presents. However seeing what ones had been opened, the big raider grinned and tossed a package toward me.

"Catch, kid!"

Yelping and swinging my hooves up, I barely managed to grab it. Clearly Brimstone had never been an expert at wrapping for it felt loose around whatever was inside. The package wasn't huge but I could feel something sloshing around like liquid. With a brief glance at Brim's encouraging face, I began to pull the packaging from it with little trouble.

Below it, I felt hard leather and saw a stitched brown design with a waxed screw cap. A real proper wasteland wanderer's canteen! Eagerly, I unscrewed the top to see what he'd put inside it. With one sniff I knew precisely what. That one substance I needed almost as much as water these days.

"That RadAway you need should stay safe, Murk." Brimstone voice's rumbled over the table with a slight slur from his partially disfigured muzzle. "Keep that topped up when you can and it'll let you take some when you need to without anypony knowing you even have it on you."

I... I...

I couldn't help it. I felt a few bits of damp tears in my eyes. My illness was still with me, but he was helping me to make it easier. Letting me feel more normal to just swig from a canteen every so often.

"Th-thank you, Brim." I wiped my eyes even as I smiled and saw him turning his head a little more to let that one eye see me.

"Heeeey, c'mon!" Glimmerlight patted my back. "No need to get all tear-filled yet! There's still one present to go!"

Indeed, there was one left. I sat the canteen down beside me on the seat to pull it across. It wasn't large or heavy, but the look in Glimmer's eyes led me to really see her eager for me to open it. Taking one breath, I pulled the paper free and yanked open the old faded box she had no doubt scavenged to put the gift in.

Within it lay my PipBuck.

"I... h-huh?" I blinked a few times, before Glimmer's magic lifted the PipBuck free of the box for me.

Only then did I see the changes. The whipcord had been replaced with actual buckles taken from clothing, and fed through the metal holes to let it hold to my hoof without needing to retie it all the time, while the top looked a lot more clean. She had even been filing off the sharper edges and procured a button from somewhere to replace a missing one!

"The trademark once-over by your good friend, Glimmerlight." She winked at me, knowing where I'd once heard of the concept before. "Go on, turn it on!"

I was already delighted and ready to thank her immensely, but the instruction led me to stare down and hoof the big button I knew would normally activate the device. A little hum and a flicker of dark green gave way to the main screen springing to life. Immediately, I saw what was different. Less of the screen was damaged, and it was almost evenly lit now! Before the picture had faded in and out, not that I'd ever even really looked!

"I gave it a good fix up with some of our spark battery and talisman stuff we stole for the escape. I've fixed the geographic locator spell talisman too, so now that the map function actually works, so we can use it underground in the metro. Tried to make the light stop going on and off but couldn't quite manage it. The screen diodes were just too worn."

"W-wow."

"That's not all! I've fixed the rad-counter inside it, so now it will let you know when you're in a bad spot. Oh and one other thing."

Her telekinesis flipped over the PipBuck to see the worn back that would normally hold against my hoof; the sole smooth part of the entire half-destroyed mess.

"I felt this only right."

On the bottom, I saw that she had somehow engraved a little set of drawings upon it. A set of open shackles with... wow.

Upon the PipBuck's back there lay a rough image of a sundial inside the curve of the shackles. One mark for both of us. I knew the others may not have understood Sundial like Glimmer did, but it hardly mattered.

This was a true gift. I actually managed to make Glimmerlight gasp for air with the tightness of the hug I gave her.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! You're the best sister *ever*!"

"Woah! Y-you're welcome! Hehehe! You deserve it. Old and new. Matters to both. Happy Birthday, lil'bro."

There was a moment, out of the corner of my eye, that I saw a strange look on Coral's face at the sight of us before her. It looked almost... relieved.

"Thank you. Thank you all. I... I-this is-I just..."

My chest heaved a little, looking at the assembled items and finding the feeling

inconceivable. They had gotten them for me, all because they cared, wanted me to see better things, or help keep me going. I kept smiling even while crying right in front of them, holding onto Glimmerlight and just rocking back and forth.

Across the table, I saw Blunderbuck sigh and dump a few caps into Brimstone's waiting hoof.

"Told you he would." Brimstone winked at me (or was that a blink now?) with a little chuckle even as he spoke to Blunderbuck. They had been betting on whether I'd cry with joy? Oh come on.

All the same, it let me keep smiling, wipe my eyes, and sit upright again. Glimmerlight's eyes were fixed on that tray of drinks with a predatory glee.

"Now, methinks it's time for—"

"Hold on!" Coral's hoof shot out and almost playfully slapped Glimmer's away. "Aren't you going to get him to blow out his candle and make a wish first?"

You did that? I got to make a wish? Glimmerlight seemed to think so, grinning across the table as Coral slid the cake to me gently. This close, I could see it for what it really was: condensed oatmeal coated in a thin layer of hastily melted chocolate. I could tell baking wasn't any of my companions' talents, but that didn't matter. I had a *birthday cake!*

The single candle on top wafted to and fro. Okay, let's do this! I knew just what to wish for.

"Hey, Murky?" Glimmerlight edged closer, whispering to me. "I think anybody knows you want out of here."

"Um, yeah?"

"Well then, make that wish something special and close to you. Make it shameless or selfish if you want. Doesn't matter. This is *your* little moment to wish for something, and you don't need to tell *anypony* what it was. Just have fun."

Ruffling my mane, she leaned back again and left me to the candle. I could see faces watching us now and again with confusion or rolling their eyes in the crowds, but who cared? Right now it was just me and this candle and one little wish in my mind. My hoof rested upon that little statuette as I took a short breath and blew the candle out.

Glimmerlight and Blunderbuck cheered, all of them clapping hooves as I looked up and grinned. Blunderbuck produced a knife to cut it while Glimmerlight eagerly began to spread out the drinks. Brimstone's mug frothed over at the top, containing something he grinned and almost completely downed right away. The others seemed more than content for the fiery liquid that no doubt was contained in their glasses and mugs of no uniform design.

Much to my surprise, Glimmer's magic passed one in front of me.

"Um..."

"Hmm?" Glimmerlight looked down from eagerly taking a first long swig out of her glass and sighing with satisfaction. "What's wrong?"

"Th-this is, um, alcohol?"

"Fillydelphia's finest fire water, Murky!"

"But, uh..." I looked from person to person. Even Coral sipped hers with a thin smile. Gradually they all stared back. Oh dear. "You see, I... I've never had any before."

There was an odd and somewhat shocked silence.

Then Glimmer grinned with that unmistakably mischievous look.

"A small-bodied and hollow-boned pegasus just coming off a medical flushing out who's

never touched a drop of alcohol in his life before?”

Her gaze turned to the others as the mug before me lifted itself in her magic’s glow to my hooves.

“Oh, this is going to be *good*.”

Mugs clanked across the table.

“Cheers!”

We all drank. The fiery liquid stung my throat and made my eyes go wide. The first time I’d tried it I’d nearly spluttered it everywhere from the coughing. But as I kept trying more it became easier. With each sip, the drink went down with less worry.

The cake was cut by Blunderbuck and passed out. Even a small coating of thin chocolate was enough to make it feel special and sugary in my mouth. I’d never had chocolate before either! Turned out all this had been bought with Brim’s arena winnings. Technically it was *my* bet, but given I’d stolen the caps anyway so I could hardly complain; especially not when it bought all this!

“You know-heh, you know what I’m going to do when we get out?” Glimmerlight leaned back in the chair, slouched as she began on her second drink of the night. “I am absolutely going to finally go to that spa in Tenpony. And *you*...”

Her hoof nudged my shoulder.

“*You* are coming with me. Get you a proper day of relaxation the likes of which you’ll have never known!”

Coral chuckled across the table. Even her bitterness seemed to have filtered away but for one night. “I may have to do the same. I heard once they did wonderful hot spas taken from the powered boilers in Tenpony. Definitely have to get one of them.”

I nodded furiously. That sounded lovely!

“Hah! Can even see if we can’t get Murky a wing preening if they’re up for it!”

“Oooh!” I grinned widely. “I’d like that!”

I felt Glimmerlight’s front leg tap my side. “Might have a nice happy ending, that one!”

“Yeah, I think so. That sounds great!” I smiled widely, then wondered why everyone at the table burst out laughing. What? Had I made a joke? Hehe! I must have!

Blunderbuck seemed to have a strangely specific taste in drinks, only downing some of the grape-coloured stuff from glasses. Rolling the glass around between his hooves, he cast a glance over the table at me.

“You know, I was just thinking. Murky Number Seven’s the full name isn’t it? You still gonna wander around out there calling yourself that? Number Seven?”

There was a brief silence as they looked at me. Well, as silent as a bustling loud bar could get as the slaves around us steadily got more drunk. Eventually, I shrugged and sipped the oh-so-wonderful drink again! Hey, since when was there so little left?

“I, uh, dunno?”

“You could choose anything you want, Murky!” Glimmerlight dropped down her empty mug, lifting another across to her. “Got any ideas? What about something the wasteland sees as heroic? How about Littlemurk?”

The joke was awful, but I laughed anyway. My cheeks felt rather flushed. Why did I find that so funny? I felt like I was blinking a lot too, getting ready to think of a name idea when

Brimstone leaned across the table over the large number of empty tankards before him already.

“Aye, I dunno about that. If Murk gets the wish I’m betting he made on that cake, there’ll be a few ‘little Murks’ galloping around before long!”

“Hey, I didn’t mean with he—” I shut up *quick*. Why had I said that? Oh dear, my mouth was betraying me. It had just slipped out!

Even Coral allowed herself a giggle from it. Glimmer laughed loud enough that I saw numerous other ponies glance at our table. I just sat and blushed deeply, hiding it as I lifted the big tankard suddenly before me with both hooves.

Across from us in another recess, I heard a raucous song start up. Much of the bar began to listen in as the group of miners kicked up.

Drinking, drinking, drinking!

Drinking till we’re drunk!

Standing up, falling down!

Getting in a fight!

Bucking someone’s lights out!

Falling on the floor!

Waking up next morning...

They stood, waving their hooves, and rose their mugs.

Then getting drunk some more!

The mugs clashed together, spilling ale everywhere as they cheered. Ponies clapped and took up the song themselves, repeating it louder and with greatly less consistency in the lyrics. I waved my hooves and shouted along with Glimmer and Blunderbuck as the song picked up amongst the bar.

Falling back into my seat, I stumbled a little on the way down. Wow, this... this, what did they call it? *Alcohol!* Yes, alcohol! Wow.

I fell against Glimmerlight to get a sense of balance and comfortingly rubbed my head against her shoulder.

“You’re all the beeeest friends I ever had. Do you know you’re all my very *best* friends?”

Glimmerlight looked as though she was fighting to not laugh madly. Come to think of it, so was the rest of the table. I’d told another joke! Ha!

“We know, my dear.” Coral chuckled into her hoof, sipping further on her drink.

More songs broke out, mostly tales of screwing over the slavers accompanied by much stomping of hooves and banging of cups on the heavy tables. The noise was giving me a headache, but with every sip and gulp the pain faded away. I clambered over the chair toward Coral, and with great effort convinced her to do the little hoof clapping game I’d seen her do with Lilac. We shared tales of times past and spoke of how awesome life would be outside the walls.

Eventually, the drinks Brim had brought ran a little dry and Glimmerlight and I took our turn to fetch some. This was awesome! Ponies seemed to love my wings and more than a few mares even gave them a stroke as I wandered past. Why weren’t ponies like this more? I flared them out and waggled them a little, hopping from hoof to hoof as I went past, leaving them laughing behind me. Glimmerlight brought down a small tray for me to carry, fighting through the crush at the bar herself via her own rather unmistakable means. Leaving her to get the rest, I made my way back to the table.

“Oi! Watch it, short stuff!”

A hoof clipped my ear. It took all my serving skill to not drop the tray as I stumbled away from the buck and plopped it upon the table before... oh, hello floor, how are you?

"Fuckin' lightweight ass, I'm trotting here!" The buck shook his hoof at me and stormed off to the bar. "Stupid winged rat."

I lay against the table a little stunned, clutching my ear. Glimmerlight watched him go.

Then Brimstone got up. Glimmer briefly moved before him.

"Oooh, oh no! Brim! Down boy! Leave it!"

He wandered right past. "Just getting' a drink."

I lifted a hoof from the ground. "But I got the... drinks."

The huge earth pony wandered past us, still rock solid as ever without any hint of losing sobriety. Momentarily broken from my haze, I watched Brim move without any trouble to the bar itself and sit alongside the same buck who'd struck me. I was the only one who might be able to pick out their conversation as the others set about organising the new drinks Glimmer had brought.

Apparently, the buck hadn't noticed Brim was with us when he'd passed. He instead leered at the mare next to him, putting his hoof on her shoulder a lot and giggling at everything she said before he slid a drink toward her. They chatted for a few moments before she left to rejoin her own friends.

"Good catch." Brim grunted to him, apparently an off-hoofed comment.

"Oh, fuck yeah! Thinkin' I might get lucky tonight! Hey, mate? Mate, you drinkin'? Or are you *drinkin'*?"

"Aye, do I look like a softy?" Brimstone grinned at him, before tapping the bar (upturning a few drinks in the process) to attract the rushed ponies serving us all. "Bottle of the hard stuff, few shot glasses. My new friend and I have some more serious drinking to do."

Both Brim and the buck laid down their caps and a large bottle of orange liquid was placed before them along with a bunch of tiny glasses. Why so small?

"Your accent, mate. Northern? Fuck, wish I had that, get the mares that much easier!"

"Aye, it used to." Brimstone began to pour a couple of glasses and the pair downed them in one quick gulp.

"Ah well! Least I know I got that piece of hot flanking waiting for me. She's still looking over."

To my surprise, Brimstone laughed. Something was wrong with it. I knew he was faking, Brimstone never laughed out loud like that. His hoof went to his new 'friend's' opposite shoulder and patted him.

"Aye, aye..."

Then he pulled. The buck hadn't a chance to struggle as Brim got him around the neck. Still sitting up, Brimstone didn't even look away from his drink. The buck choked out loud as his throat clamped shut.

"...and if you've any interest in being conscious to let that happen, you'll listen to me. That little pegasus you knocked over? Sure, he can be a little ear-sore at times but this is his first, and knowing this damn city, possibly *only* little party. If you come near him again, I'll eject you from this place without using the door. If you make him cry, and trust me that isn't hard, then I will remove your ability to perform for a mare ever again. Do we understand one another?"

The buck made a noise.

"Good."

Brimstone dropped him, allowing the buck to clatter to the floor and choke, grasping his neck. Leaving him to lie, Brimstone took all the drinks (including those that the buck paid for, I noticed) and returned to us, giving me a little wink with that one eye as he sat down again. Glimmerlight, having been chatting to Blunderbuck, turned and marvelled at the bottle now present at the table.

"Oooh! Brim! How did you get all that?"

Brimstone just grinned. "A new friend's gift to Murk. Pity he won't be joining us. Couldn't hold his drink."

Glimmer's magic excitedly began pouring the warm coloured drink into the shot glasses, pushing a couple in front of each of us. Coral, however, gently refused hers.

"I think, if that's the direction this night is going, I shall take my leave."

"Aww, c'mon!" I patted my hoof on her shoulder. Hey, I only missed once!

Her hoof patted my cheek. "Darling, given what you're like after only a portion of one pint, I believe the night will be a little wild for a pony such as me. *Somepony* has to be together enough in the morning to get you all up. You just have your fun."

Glimmerlight nodded a few times. I saw her cheeks were bright red and not from a blush either. Before her lay at least twice as many drinks as I'd had. What she said about her drinking wasn't kidding.

"Not a problem, Evey! We'll look after 'em!"

Something in Coral's eyes twitched at the name before relaxing.

"Good night, all. Enjoy your birthday, Murky."

Coral took my presents with her, just to keep them safe and gave me one more hug before she left.

"Never was a heavy drinker, our Coral." Glimmerlight rested her head on a hoof. "Now, let's get down to the more proper birthday style drinking!"

Blinking rapidly, I gazed at the little shot glass before me. The ale wasn't the real stuff? Then why did I already feel all happy inside?

"Let us see if it makes you as wild as this whiskey claims you pegasi can be. To Murky!"

"To Murky!" Brimstone and Blunderbuck repeated it, as did I before I took it in a single gulp just as they did.

Oh *my*.

When I had finished squirming, blinking, and opening and shutting my mouth like I'd just swallowed a hot coal, I found the glass already refilled. My head went all fuzzy. Another!

"To freedom!"

"To freedom!"

...

"To better days!"

"To better days!"

...

"To, um, something else!"

I wasn't quite sure how it all happened after that. Who were these other ponies that joined us? Glimmerlight had brought some 'new friends' she'd met who now crowded around the

table with us.

“...and then I threw my tongue down ‘is throat until he filled that damn bowl with every bit of gruel he could! That is how you swindle free food in here!”

The table cheered and I threw my hooves up at the old tale. Her speech was slurring a little, giggling madly as she fell against the buck beside her for a little support. I couldn’t help but see that her hoof was lightly stroking his chest as she did so.

Things all got blurry again for a while. Glimmerlight, Blunderbuck, and I were—wait what was I doing?

“Glimmerlight, what am I doing?”

“This is called *dancing*, Murky! Shake dat flank!”

Oh. Oh yes! *Music!* That was it! The ponies all leaping from side to side and stomping upon the floor knocked me from side to side without really meaning to. Quite easily the centre of attention on the Roamer’s main floor, Glimmerlight stopped dancing just long enough to lift me up with her magic and put me on a flat surface.

“You dance here, Murky!”

The lights span around me as I hopped from hoof to hoof, my wings flared out as much as they could in their stiffness. Hey, hey, drink makes you *tall!* Everypony was shorter than me! Oh wait, that’s a table.

She’d put me on a table! Everypony was dancing around me and some even cheering up at the little pegasus bouncing about on top of it. Why didn’t they care I was a pegasus? This was great! Glimmerlight joined me on the table and we linked hooves to dance back and forth as the slaves stomped their hooves in time with the flighty music of two slaves who’d somehow found some pots and a flute.

Spinning, I felt the entire world all melt together. How many hooves did I have on the ground again? Oh wait a minute, where was my back left hoof? Oops!

Staggering, dizzy, and falling, I dropped from the table into the crowd, finding myself caught by everyone below.

“Hey, everypony!” Blunderbuck shot a hoof up. “It’s his birthday!”

The crowd cheered, before with a lurch I found myself *launched* into the air! Wheee! I was flying! Dropping, they caught me and threw me up again on every count!

“One!”

“Two!”

“Three!”

“Uh, how old is ‘ee?”

“Just keep throwing!”

Laughing each time, I eventually fell into Glimmerlight’s hooves where she pulled me close and hugged me tightly, her cheek resting against mine as she looked sideways toward me.

“Doesn’t your good ol’ sis’ throw the *best* parties, huh?”

“Your parties are dizzy.”

The moment her hug was released, I moved forward. Wait, no. Sideways. Sideways was good! I could do sideways still!

Glimmer chuckled and hiccuped as she caught me and took us back to the table. I crammed in among the ponies that had sat there, with Glimmerlight beside me. On the other side, that same buck she’s stroked before made a bit of an effort to be alongside her. I could see the *wonderful* stuff I now knew as whiskey was about half-empty in the middle of

the table. More shot glasses were handed out and the talking only kept going. Sometimes I didn't even know what I was nodding to with my half-closed eyes. My cheeks felt like they were burning and I occasionally hugged whoever was to my side. She even hugged back! I liked this mare.

My journal got produced from my saddlebag under the table. I had to chuckle as I fetched it, seeing Glimmer's hoof wandering a little with the buck's thigh. That's my sister! But I had something much more important! I could draw ponies! I was gonna draw *everypony* at the table! The mare beside me and all other ponies present crowded and leaned to see my drawings. They loved them! I flicked past them.

"Ooooh! Look at that one!" The mare beside me pointed with her light purple hoof. "You are one *cheeky* little buck!"

The table laughed, Glimmer winked, and I grinned widely. They liked my drawings! I showed the rest, getting lots of 'Ooooh' on each of the really *good* ones. Then I started to draw them all around the table. The charcoal slid a little madly but each of them finally came together. Masterpiece! The table cheered at the finished result, while the mare beside me whispered in my ear if I might do one of just her in a nice silky dress.

Well, who was I to say no?

The table *loved* that one, as did she. I even got a kiss on the cheek for it!

But then the table's topic seemed to change. My drawings had drawn the topic of conversation to the subject of mares and bucks. I leaned against my new best friend as I listened to them chatter. Talk of fine flanks and, well, rather more specific things drifted to and fro. Glimmerlight was *more* than willing to share her own stories. Even I could spot that buck beside her watching places other than her eyes as she leaned forward to talk. I was pretty sure she did too, if that 'tail under the chin' trick I knew she loved was any indication.

"First times!" Blunderbuck shouted. "Come on, everypony's got a story, right? Share em and laugh! I got a good joke for that one too, but you go first! Someone go first!"

A resounding cheer met this idea, the table apparently in the mood for a cheeky chatter. A stallion beside Brimstone started and told a tale of him and a caravanner's son during him hitching a lift. Glimmer elbowed my side a few times. I didn't know why. I was too busy drawing little swirly shapes in my journal while listening. The mare beside me jumped in next, wrapping a hoof around an already sleeping buck beside her and saying hers would count for both of them.

Blunderbuck lay his hooves upon the table.

"Oh, you should have seen her! Lovingly figure!"

"Yeah!?" The table egged him on.

"Yeah! Long and slender! Coloured cream with streaks of black! I'll tell you all, she bucked hard!"

Wide mouths and laughing responded to his mad grin.

"Hit all the right spots too! Went off soon as you touched her!"

He smirked wider, before slapping the table.

"And the mare who carried that pistol wasn't bad either!"

Everypony burst into laughter. I didn't get it but I laughed anyway! A few more shared shockingly *detailed* stories of their young forays, before Brimstone (behind a near forest of mugs and tankards) just grunted.

"Killed her father, broke two stallions' heads. She always fucking hated them."

There was a confused silence. Brimstone just shrugged.

"Raider logic. Strong is good to grab."

Glimmerlight shook her head with a grin. "Moving *right* along, I guess I could say there was the tale of a fellow initiate in the Ranger base."

She grinned widely, before telling us of him. He was a pretty high flying student of the Rangers, and the only one in their young group who was as good with magic technology as she was. So much so, they shared a lot of projects.

"Now, we were out on a training exercise! Got shackled in the tent together. Oh we'd had a few moments hidden in the lower levels before, we kept it all hidden and stuff. But then while on patrol duty we stumbled across this old cellar filled with all the wine! Literally, all of it! Ever!"

Everypony could see where this was going, but they still waited eagerly.

"So we *may* have been a little inebriated, but I don't consider that bad! I remember what I was doing and fuck knows I wanted it anyway! He did too! So eventually, I just turned and did this and then said to him..."

She grabbed the buck beside her by the cheeks.

"You gonna just stare at my flanks from behind all night or are you gonna *do* something with them?"

Then she leaned forward and gave him one smacker of a kiss, pulling him into her. Oh, she was *clever*. The table cheered them on, the stunned buck recovering admirably fast to take advantage of the situation and let his own hooves wander around her back. The story took a little pause as Glimmer proceeded to apparently try and *suffocate* the poor buck. Eventually, with a circling hoof on his chest, she moved back. I saw her quickly wink at the flustered-looking buck.

"Exact recreation there, honest! Gotta be authentic, y'know? As for the gory details, well, I dunno if you'd all want to hear *them*."

Never had I heard a group of ponies demand something in greater enthusiasm. My own will for freedom *paled* in comparison. She didn't disappoint them either and lay with her head resting on the buck's chest as she told them all. I simply sat and laughed when they did, hearing these tales of other ponies and their first experiences felt really cheeky and fun! Why hadn't I ever felt like this? I honestly blurred out a little, missing most of it, but seeing everypony so happy...

"What about Murky?"

My eyes shot open fully.

"Yeah, what about the little guy? What's his story?"

"Come on, lil'bro! I'm sure yours is cute as anything!" Glimmer's knocked my shoulder. "Surely you've had a little moment with some slave you cuddled too close when staying warm?"

My front hooves rubbed together as I sat up, surrounded by some eager faces.

"I, um, I haven't."

Glimmer blinked. "*Never?*"

"Nope."

"Not even a little cheeky thing close to it?"

I just shook my head. Glimmerlight seemed a little stunned, as did many of the others. Then she clapped her hooves. "Ideal!"

Wrapping a hoof around me, she patted my pocket with the statuette in it.

"Then why don't you tell us all... what you *would* do? Lets see, you thought that little

Stable Dweller was cute, huh? What about if it were her?"

Oh. Oh my. My cheeks went bright red. The room seemed to be more than a little spinny right now and I was finding it hard to find the words to tell them why I wouldn't say! I just bit my lip.

"Um, oh. I don't know if I—oh dear..."

I spied the still full shot glass before me and in a bid to escape sitting awkwardly, I downed it to pass a few extra seconds of thinking and...

The taste rolled down through my body and up into my head. Liquid fun? More like liquid *courage!*

I stamped a hoof on the table to balance my shaky body and rose onto my hind legs upon the seat.

"Well... *first...!*"

The table threw up their hooves and cheered.

Best. Birthday. Ever.

"I don't want to set Filly on, um... fire?"

"Yeah, that's the word!"

"Yay! Okay, okay."

I cleared my throat.

"I... just want to start a flame in someone's heart!"

What a night. We stumbled and rambled through the ruins of the park to return to the Mall. Glimmerlight trotted back and forth dizzily while leaning on benches and walls to see her through. Me? I lay on my back atop Brimstone (who seemed still utterly unaffected despite drinking four times what we all had), waving my hooves in the air and singing my heart out, with Glimmer doing accompanying vocals!

"In my heart I have... how many?"

"One! One big fucking one!"

"...one big fudging one desire!"

The Mall wasn't far ahead. Even as I giggled between lines, I could see it looming up before us as we came toward it. We had left only after that bottle had been drained. Glimmer had disappeared with the buck not long after my grand tale of passion! Brimstone had been the one to decide when to leave and sent me to find Glimmer.

I'd found her all right. I'd trotted, crawled, staggered, and scooted back to Brimstone to pass on the most important message she'd ever asked me to deliver. 'Gimme ten minutes.'

"And... that one big fluffing one... is you..."

"Last bit! Last bit! I think..."

"I know! I'm... I'm building my voice! I just had a lot of whiskey remember! Add up the shot glasses into full glasses! I had... had almost a half! Whiskey *champion!*

I hiccuped, sliding off Brimstone as I unsteadily found my own hooves to limp alongside Glimmer the rest of the way back to the Mall. We leaned on each other for mutual support, both belting out the last line that we could remember.

"...no other s-s-somepony... will dooooo!"

The main doors fell open before us and we both collapsed to the ground in a giggling heap.

"I see you all were taking advantage of Master Red Eye's generosity to its fullest, then?"

I looked up, I saw Protégé standing there in the main corridor. He bore a saddlebag as though ready to leave for somewhere. We struggled and slowly got ourselves back up, Glimmerlight eagerly smiling at him.

"Hey, hot flanks!" She laughed out loud, offering me a hoof to lean on. I giggled and took her up on the offer. Oh, she was funny! She called him hot flanks right to his face! Hah!

Protégé seemed to blink with surprise, his usually stoic look dropping into one of mild confusion, before rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"I suppose every worker needs their time to let off steam. Brimstone Blitz? You will make sure they get to their proper accommodations? I see you at least can hold your drink."

Brim nodded. Glimmerlight blew a raspberry at Protégé. It looked fun, so I did it too. Then she began to trot on. I noticed Protégé looking at me. Oh, he cared that I couldn't trot! He always cared about *all* of us!

"You... you..."

"Yes, Murk?"

I slumped forward a little. I had wanted to pat his shoulder but slid to the ground and suddenly could only reach a kneecap.

"You're my *favourite* master ever."

"I'm... glad you appreciate my methods, Murk. Now, I think perhaps you should be in bed."

He trotted on, nodding a thank you to Brimstone as he picked me up again. I spent the time back to the shop cell humming aloud. Soon enough, I felt myself placed onto the sofa. By that point, my mind was simply reeling and the walls were all going spinny, spinny, spinny!

"C'mere, lil'bro. That was a great birthday."

I felt her pull me into a little mutual snuggle. I'd have agreed with her.

But I had already fallen asleep.

Forget Wildcard. Forget Barb. Forget Shackles.

Now I was properly suffering.

In the haze between sleep and the waking world, I felt myself spinning and my whole head contracting into a tight, little thumping ball. I'd been briefly woken up earlier when Glimmer had risen. Somehow during the night I'd ended up flopped over her stomach sideways, and her movements to shift me off when waking up had led to a brief murmuring asking her to let me die in peace.

Only now the living world wasn't going to let me do that any longer. With a long groan, I let my crusted eyes creak open, and attempted to stir each limb into motion for movement. Hooves flopped and padded at the sofa and ground. Just... just move off it and—

I fell off the sofa, taking the blanket with me as I went. Rubbing my aching eyes, I gradually sat up and began to trot unsteadily toward the door, gasping for breath from a dry throat and a churning stomach. Oooh just kill me now. I could feel my barely healed wounds surging in pain as I moved. Perhaps a night like that wasn't the best idea even with a contained megaspell being my saviour.

All three of them were sat in the front of the store. Coral and Brimstone looked no worse for wear, while Glimmerlight rested against the wall nursing a little bowl of likely lukewarm soup. Her mane was a bit of a mess, but she still managed to look over and laugh as I staggered with dead eyes into the room.

"Uh oh. Looks like *somepony* is having his first post-birthday hangover!"

"Aaawuuughbya..." I responded.

She shook her head and laughed. "Come on. Protégé got them to fix and refill the fountain with better water. Go get yourself some of that and splash your face. I kept some food back from their morning handout for you."

Coral nodded in agreement, giving me something of a 'Why do you think I left early?' look and nodding her head to the fountain. Carefully putting one hoof before the other, I made my way out. Passing the shop's mirror on the way, I had to actually grimace as I saw myself. My eyes were sunken and glazed over, my mane and tail messed beyond quick repair, and even my wings looked a little ruffled.

"If you're wondering how I stay fairly normal, Murky?" Glimmerlight spoke up. "Just put it down to experience. Oooh that was a good one though. Seeing you smile, having a riot, letting loose, and ending it with a new 'friend' and some 'relief'... *just* what I needed after all that stuff recently!"

Coral rolled her eyes. "Because I clearly needed to hear that."

"Aw, c'mon! It's just a bit of fun."

I left them to the minor disagreement. Clearly they still had a little ways to go yet before they truly saw eye-to-eye, but part of me couldn't help but feel that they'd gotten better around one another.

Ow. Don't think too hard, Murky. Drama later. Cold water now.

As I trotted, I couldn't help but think on last night though. I couldn't remember too much. Everything came back in little spurts of memory. I remembered smiling a lot, getting lots of hugs, nopony cared about my wings, I'd danced...

Hehe! Maybe it wasn't that bad.

I stopped for a second, a certain little vision flickering into my head.

They liked my drawings! I showed the rest, getting lots of 'Ooooh' on each of the really good ones.

Blinking, I groaned and put a hoof to my forehead. Oh, please tell me I hadn't really done that! I trotted onward to the water, squinting at the disorganised order they came back in. How had I gotten back here again? Oh yeah, Brimstone had carried me. We'd met—

"You're my favourite master ever."

Oh no. Had I really... I had, hadn't I? My face sank as the nerves really began to kick in. How could I... oh dear! Leaning on the edge of the fountain, I just wanted the earth to open up and swallow me who—

"Well... first...!"

My mouth gaped open, before I simply gave up and dunked my entire head into the fountain with a groan of unending embarrassment, leaving my hooves hanging off the concrete lip. I was doomed. Cool cool water. At least you didn't judge me!

I felt my mane drift on the surface as my face cooled off and startled my senses into proper awakening. I could have sat here for hours, separate from the world until everypony hopefully forgot last night before I did.

Only, a sound caught my ears underwater. A single word that came through muffled. I

ignored it. Water was good. Water understood me.

Then it came again.

“...urk!”

Wait. Was that..?

“Murk, would you please sit up out of the fountain?”

It was him! Gasping, I shot out of the water, coughing a little as I flopped back onto my rump and rubbed my eyes.

“S-s-sorry.”

Protégé glanced to the side with a light sigh before offering a small grin and a shake of his head.

“I see you’re awake at last. All rested up?”

I nodded vaguely, then immediately regretted moving my head.

“Excellent. You see, the shifts all start in ten minutes...”

“*What.*” Every part of my face drooped. Oh, he had to be kidding!

“...but,” he quickly continued, “I was coming to make you a brief offer. I have a task that needs accomplished in my own service. It would keep you away from the factories or whatever they have slotted for you all in here. If you would perhaps prefer that?”

Holding my head in a hoof, I tried to scowl but perhaps only gave a meek turn of my nose.

“Last time you said that I almost got killed in a Ministry. I d-don’t like being somepony’s personal slave. It never ends well.”

“This is why you’re hesitant to my offer then? Well allow me to tell you exactly what I am asking first. It is not dangerous, rather, I just wish you to fetch me something from an old building across town. We were near it yesterday, in fact, when I found you. An old library near the pegasus skyport? I have need of a new reading lamp and I am not particularly supposed to leave this Mall until Shackles returns.”

My eyes blinked and opened wider. That library I’d seen? The one my PipBuck had...

“Yes!” I piped up, hopping to my hooves. “I, uh, I’ll do it!”

Surprised by my turn of opinion, Protégé gave me an odd look before nodding.

“I am glad to hear it. It really is as simple as that, Murk. Besides, I doubt the clanging of a factory’s power hammers would be particularly good for you right now. A nice, quiet library could be just what you wanted?”

All right, that I couldn’t deny. Sucking it up, I nodded to him. “Okay.”

“Thank you, Murk. Have you given my offer any further thought?”

Ah...

“Well, um... I—not really. We, um, we were sort of busy since I left you...”

“Believe me. I saw.”

Wincing with embarrassment, I tried to cover for it.

“We, um, we were just celebrating my birthday, is all.”

His eyes opened a little wider. “Your birthday? I hadn’t known. Many happy returns, Murk. I hope this easy task will give you the best of a break you can perhaps get in Fillydelphia. Be back before dark, however. Good day.”

He turned to leave. Breathing a sigh of relief, I sat down against the fountain to contemplate it all.

“Oh, and Murk?”

Protégé had turned back. I looked up. He smiled thinly before trotting on.

“Favourite master?” I suppose it’s good to know I’ve made an impression.”
There was a brief pause as he left... and then there was another splash.

In the back of our shop, I took the time to dry out my mane with a somewhat dirty and half-ruined towel. It did the job at least. Beside me, Glimmerlight was starting to work on our inventory that they had been carefully hiding in the walls and floor. We had a bunch of spare brass casings Glimmer would turn into explosive lockpicks, numerous cans of solidified oatmeal or packaged gruel. The water skins had been slyly filled from the fountain. Brim had brought back a few picks and shovels under the pretence that he didn’t want anypony else using ‘his’ ones. Nopony had argued.

Aurora’s files were stored beneath the sofa while I’d sewn the maps we’d stolen from Protégé’s office into the cushions. When the slave market had come yesterday, not only had the others bought things for my party, but they had gotten a few little essentials. An old lantern now hung from the roof. Innocent enough perhaps, but necessary for use in the metro system. Spare clothes and longer cloaks for the wasteland outside were now hidden under Glimmer’s pile of scrap while she had stocked up on spark batteries and various other parts I couldn’t hope to guess at.

“Library visit, huh? So long as it keeps you from trouble it sounds good to me, Murky. Pity we can’t all go for it though.”

She sat sorting through some wires and little glowing gems welded to small boards as she spoke. Throwing on my fleece again and strapping on my battle saddle (plus little crosshair thanks to Blunderbuck), I sat down to buckle on my PipBuck. It may have just been a library, but I wanted to get used to moving with it all on anyway. Even as I tugged the last buckle shut, I felt Glimmer’s magic lay my goggles on my head.

“Now before I forget, c’mere.”

“H-huh?” I felt Glimmer lightly turn me to face her. Just like me, her eyes were a little hazy from last night, and we both likely still stank of alcohol and body sweat from the bar. Yet she smiled and leaned in with her horn glowing. What was she—

Something moved in my mind. All the little memories I’d been feeling coming back to me gradually over the course of the morning flooded to the surface and flowed somewhere. I didn’t forget them, but I knew they’d gone somewhere else, like a copy. I closed my eyes and felt oddly relaxed, her magic weaving through my mind gently and soothingly. Eventually, Glimmer gasped aloud and sat back with a little sweat on her brow.

“Whew. That was a long one. But here we are.”

“We’re... what?”

With a grin, she held up a small glowing orb. It sparkled with a distinctive light green.

“It’s last night, Murky. Alcohol, it doesn’t so much change you as just lower inhibitions. How you were acting? I have a feeling that’s the kind of pony you wish you could be. Happy, smiling, and laughing without a care in the world. Now you can feel it as many times as you want. Just ask me and I’ll take you into it. Let you relive the happiest night of your life.”

The memory orb dropped lightly into my hooves, where I just stared at it. What a gift...

“Th-thank you.”

Sometimes, those two words were truest when simply left to themselves. I put my hooves

around her neck and tightly squeezed.

"You're welcome. Now you better get going. You want to be out of here before the shift leaders arrive."

I hesitated. "There is, um, one thing? Protégé, he, um, he gave me an offer. I... I don't know how to really describe it but, uh—"

"We all want you to do it."

"Because he, uh... wait, what?"

I looked up, but Glimmer just leaned onto the sofa from where she sat on the ground.

"You're a real chatterbox when you're drunk, you know that?" She grinned. "We'd all discussed it long before you got up and we all want you to take up his offer. Look, we know it means you'll be away from us, but we *can't* let Shackles get you again! He'll be back here after today is done and we need a way out for you *now*. Don't worry about us, we'll get by. Without you he might even leave us alone too."

"I... I..." I really didn't know what to say as I stared at her. She really was being genuine.

"This gives you a chance to see what you can do, Murky. We'll all get away from him eventually, and if you can convince Protégé to somehow make it happen it'll be great. We won't be separate for long. Do your best and see what you can do from the outside. If you stay here we'll all just get locked down again."

"Okay..." I nodded. "But I'm not leaving you here at all. He-he wants you all away from him too. He says all the slavers are fighting this really weird game to try and get things. I'll... I'll try to find a way to get you all out too."

"I know you'll manage it." Glimmerlight squeezed me back and set me down. "Now run along and don't think too hard about this. We'll be able to see each other before you leave to plan out how we're going to do this."

Allowing a smile to come to my face, I clambered away and moved for the door. Yes, Glimmer was right. I might be away from my friends for a little, but I would have so many more opportunities if I helped Protégé. I could try and acquire my friends back from under him! Yes, that was better than being with Shackles again! I wasn't any help to my friends stuck with them.

Also, last night was the pony I wanted to be? Able to joke? I got an amusing thought.

"Hey, um, Glimmer?" I smirked back at her from the door.

Seeing my smile, she leaned on the sofa with one hoof.

"Yeees?"

"Last night, when I came to fetch you before we left the bar?"

"Yeeeee?" Her face clearly showed she was wondering where I was going with this.

"Were..." I giggled to myself. "Were you really going 'woohoo'?"

Thankfully, even with a hard hangover, I managed to dodge out of the room and away from the shop cell, laughing, before she could catch up with me.

Unfortunately, the thick air of Fillydelphia, with all its chemical stink and ambient heat, was not particularly good for a pony with either a life threatening taint infection or a strong hangover.

Me? I had both.

It wasn't particularly far to the library, but the journey had made my head pound and the

dryness in my throat feel all the worse. By the time I was coming to the same street, I was more than contemplating finding a secluded little spot to curl up and sleep for a few more hours.

Something in me decidedly did not enjoy doing more slave work. I was free of my own mind now and openly able to dislike it without feeling guilty. No wonder I'd made such an awful slave. My cutie mark meant the very opposite thing! I knew this was building to something worthwhile now. I wouldn't be doing this forever, and at the very least I was getting a step away from Chainlink Shackles.

Truthfully, knowing that Protégé's offer was there had been all that allowed me to forget about that monster if for but a while. The thought of someday having to confront him ever again made me shiver to my core. Free or not, that slaver...

Beep!

I stopped, looking down to the PipBuck. It continued its beeping while I saw the same symbol flicker onto the screen with much more clarity now. Three balloons that then faded to an arrow. Glancing up, I could see the library just ahead of me.

Well, here goes nothing.

A small layer of stone steps led up to the scarred, wooden doors. The closer I got, the more my PipBuck beeped until finally cutting the sound once I passed some unseen threshold.

What was I even doing here? Those balloons meant Ministry of Morale! That pink freak's merry band!

Even as I opened the door slowly, I knew that the answer was all too easy to come to. Simple curiosity. This group had taken Sundial and now his PipBuck was sending me to something related to them. If I could learn anything about what happened to him...

With an almost stereotypical creak, the door slid open and slammed shut behind me. Echoing the sound into the dusty interior, I let my eyes adjust to the darkness in here before taking a better look around.

A grand floor swept before me, filled with small working desks or circular benches right up to the lines of bookshelves that filled the walls. Below me, a large mosaic of Celestia and Luna led up to a low podium for lectures, and behind that, a great stairway that split and arced up to either side. It led to a balcony of bookshelves in a circle all around this large main room. Beyond the stairs on the ground level, I could see a librarian's desk and staff book returns.

Taking a glance at my PipBuck, the arrow was pointing directly forward and to the right. Somewhere behind the stairs on the ground floor, I bet.

Each small clip of my hooves echoed dryly, the mostly intact structure cancelling all outdoor noise. The lack of ambience was just what I needed. A break from the clangs and hisses outside that so hurt my head! Hypersensitive hearing was not a boon post-alcohol, I was finding. This place would at least let my head settle for a while during my search.

I had a job to do before any hunting for old secrets though, so I approached the desks. Most bore a smashed reading light that clamped onto the desk and plugged into something beneath the carpets either side of the mosaic. I checked six before finally finding one that—

I heard a laugh.

Spinning around, I flicked out my saddle's mouthpiece. The crosshair pinged up before my eye and I stood ready.

Nothing.

I was *sure* I'd heard something! A clipped laugh in the distance, something likely only my hearing would have caught! I waited at least a few minutes, keeping watch with both sight and sound while feeling the sweat of terror drip from my forehead.

Absolutely nothing.

I turned back to the lamp and started to unplug it, warily glancing around me. It came off easily and folded into my saddlebag. Only as I touched it did I notice it bore a lot less dust than the others. For that matter, so did the seat. In fact, there were a stack of cleaner books beside it as well along with others littered on the floor.

I slowly began to realise why Protégé knew this place had reading lamps.

Looking at this one lonely seat in the library, I genuinely began to wonder just how lonely he was in Fillydelphia that he would have come to sit alone in this library. Every time I saw him it was like he was seeking somepony. Once, I'd thought it was simply his interest in seeing me begin my journey to freedom, (Two years, yeah right) but I remembered every time he had been staring off somewhere. Every time he seemed deep in thought when I would meet him. Like he just wanted ponies to share in his vision. Or was it something more specific?

Shaking my head, I decided to take a couple of the books as well, moaning under my breath about my stiff joints and rebelling stomach when I leaned down. Whatever drove him wasn't a concern of mine. He had made his choice.

Job done, I turned again to the back of the library. There was *something* back there and I couldn't deny I wanted to know. For Sundial's sake. Trotting like a ghost, I hunkered down and softly stepped one hoof at a time around the staircase to the staff desk.

That laughter came again, a sort of giggle followed by a snort.

Ducking down before the staff desk, I closed my eyes and shivered. What was I doing here? This was stupid! There was some freak out there pulling me in with temptation! Yet I could not simply turn and go! That arrow beckoned me on the PipBuck! The laughter was muffled and distant, it could be some stupid sign outside for all I knew!

Beep!

I squeaked myself as the PipBuck, well, pipped up again. The arrow flashed and changed direction to be flickering to the left now. Around it, I could see a map open up on the screen, showing there was indeed deeper corridors in here. I walked under the staff door's ledge (noting with some annoyance that I didn't have to duck at all) and followed the arrow again.

Beep!

It changed to the right, sending me down that direction again. I passed between lines of moulding papers and ancient books that were never resorted into the main library. I couldn't help but notice my wings were flicked out slightly as though ready to suddenly flap and lift me away.

I reached a dead end. Ahead of me I found the back of the storage area with piles of disorganised books that were knocked free from the staff shelves in the blast. I saw posters above the walls bearing images of Twilight Sparkle and other unicorns joyously reading, whilst others bore a zebra glancing over the shoulder of a young pony reading a black and white book. Even without reading, I admired their ability to tell a message through simply the art of the poster, despite the racially charged meaning.

Then something caught my eye. A single book left on the shelf perfectly still.

Beep!

The arrow seemed to be indicating toward it. I should have been questioning. I should have been running in fear to get my friends. I should have been worrying and thinking, but after everything that had happened lately, I simply knew I couldn't go back to being like that. It was time to pony up and do something for myself to make a discovery!

Reaching out, I pulled the book from the bookshelf. Or rather, I tried to.

With a thick grinding of metal, it jammed out before sticking where it was. I retreated quickly, diving behind a bookshelf as the whirring of machines picked up. Pistons churned and a gear turned with rusty squealing as I saw the entire bookshelf judder and move. My mouth fell open when it began sinking into the floor before having to groan and clutch my head. Noise! Too much noise for a hangover!

Groaning and holding my mismatched ears to my head, I simply curled up until the noises stopped ringing in my head.

With a clatter of mechanical movement, the shelf finally stopped moving. Carefully, I opened my eyes.

A small corridor behind an already open metal door lay before me. Rather dark, it led to a set of steel steps heading downwards similar to that of the ghoulish bunker in the crater. Standing stock still, I simply didn't know what to think. Should I? Was I that curious to see? Anything could be down there. That laughter could be down there!

Beep!

The arrow flickered forward. With a brief look on the underside of the PipBuck, I saw my open shackles interlocked with Sundial's own mark. I couldn't turn back. He had disappeared just as I almost had. I needed to know what happened.

Buckling it back on, I trotted down the stairs.

That laughter trickled up the stairwell as I kept going down.

My hooves moved slowly, taking each step carefully to avoid any creaking or slipping. If something was down there, I was going to sneak up on it.

Gradually, the stairs ended. Blinking until I got used to the darker nature down here, I saw the corridor widen out almost immediately and uttered a low 'woah.'

An entire secret base was down here. There were offices to either side with half-height walls and glass panes showing right into them. Each was filled with terminals and overturned desks, and coated in streamers or balloons that limply lay upon the floor. Walls bore the symbol of the Ministry of Morale, terminals had some inscriptions or strangely pink glows on their screens, and I could see (and smell) the stench of a long-decayed trolley laden with cake and chocolate ahead of me in the walkway between offices.

Of course, what remained of the staff were down here too. I tried not to look at the bones that flopped over desks or chairs in front of still functioning terminals. Some lay under rugs at the side of the office in neat rows. They must have tried to survive down here with no way to get rid of their dead safely.

Turning away, I tried to steel myself. I couldn't get too distracted. I would just find out what this PipBuck wanted and then get the hell out of here!

Gently, I trotted close to one of the walls and gazed around. Every so often, I saw huge poster holders bearing pieces of paper and marked photos of ponies in front of several chairs. Even without reading I could guess this was some place where they had once secretly

tracked certain ponies. The thought that I might find where they *brought* those ponies terrified me to the core.

I dove under a table, my ears picking up the traces of sound again. It was so much closer! Anypony could have heard it now! A laughing that descended into a mad giggle and a satisfied sigh. The sound wove through the dead offices and past the silent bones. Then I heard another brief snicker even closer than that.

Carefully, I poked my head out. It was in here! It was in this very room!

Yet I saw nothing.

Trembling, regretting coming here, I dared to step out.

"Naughty, naughty pony! You aren't meant to be here!"

Stopping dead, I let my head slowly turn to look the other way.

It hovered there. A little steel ball of a sprite bot buzzing silently in the air! No wonder I hadn't heard it. Those things made no sound at all when moving. Since I'd last heard its noise the machine had flown right by me without me knowing! Now it stared down at me.

"I don't mind though. Wanna play hide and seek?"

The voice was bright and chirpy, the kind of voice I imagined Pinkie might have.

My mouth stammered open. "I... I..."

"Okay, I'm 'it' first! Get galloping! I'll count to ten!"

It would have seemed harmless, had it not been for the small energy blaster that started whirring and protruding from the bottom of the chassis. Clearly this thing's definition of 'tag' was very different from mine! Scrambling up, I galloped off in the first direction I saw!

"One!"

Damn it! Why couldn't I see over the walls to find an exit!

"Twooo!"

Rounding a corner, I saw one door and struggled to push it open. The lock mockingly clattered in its almost broken hole.

"Th-Th-Th-Th-threeeezzzzzzzzh-TEN! Ready or not cheeky ponies, here I come!"

What!? That's cheating! I pulled at the lock and finally felt the satisfying crunch of the thin wood snapping beside the door frame. Joyful, I pulled it open to leap inside and—

It was a cupboard.

"Give me a f-f-flowering break!" I virtually screamed before turning to find another way. Behind me, the sprite-bot floated idly around the corner and spotted me galloping off.

"There you are! Ha! Ha! HA!"

The last shout came along with a flash of pink and a burning energy flaring right by my ear to atomise a chair ahead of me in the cramped office chambers. Screaming, I leapt onto and over a desk to avoid the next two blasts that slapped into the wood. On one hoof, the fact that it was only a sprite-bot was something of a relief compared to the nightmares of what that laugh I'd heard from upstairs was. On the other hoof, *it was a sprite-bot that wanted to kill me!*

Coming back to the main corridor that ran down the centre of the offices, I spotted the way out.

The sprite-bot had other plans. It whizzed out over the office desks and planted itself right in my way before charging its blaster again. I saw it leak some sparks and judder in the air through an electronic laugh.

"Nuh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uuuuuuuhFFFFKK."

I took the chance to flip out my saddle's mouthpiece and take aim. Blunderbuck's

welding had proven true, for after setting the crosshairs over the sprite-bot and pulling the trigger, I saw the grapple whip out and slam right into the little metal nightmare! Rebounding from the casing, the hook itself knocked it clean from the air with a dull *clang* and let its blaster open fire into the wall with a spray of pink sparks.

No time to wait around. I turned and galloped down the office corridor until I found a way out, using the few seconds I'd bought myself to put some distance between me and it. Behind me, I heard the blaster firing wildly and that voice asking me if I was having fun yet. I must have knocked its voice box on that impact, for the tone was more robotic and monotone now.

Great, only I would have the luck to make it *more* scary!

Exiting the office, I found a few enclosed rooms and another stairwell. The thought of being trapped in the store cupboards or likely interrogation rooms was too nightmarish to think about, so I took the stairs. They curled around into a darker level lit only by sporadic lighting. On my left, I saw a medical symbol of butterflies and dove inside. I just hoped this was far enough to lose it!

After a brief period of hiding near the doorway and listening, I heard it still chirping away in the corridors above me and judged it safe to take a few seconds to hunt. The cupboards and drawers were all pretty empty, but I managed to find a new set of scissors for my sewing and a couple bandages to add to our growing inventory. To my delight, the old fridge contained a half full bag of RadAway, something I eagerly poured into my canteen. I'd need it by the time I got out of here, or was that just the alcohol on my throat? Urgh, Glimmer's parties could wait till I was out of Filly from now on.

"Wheeeere are y-y-y-yooooou? Hehehe! This is *fun*!"

A hoof shot to my mouth to hide the squeak of fear. That thing had been so silent coming down the stairs I hadn't even noticed until it was *right outside*! Pulling myself inside the fridge, I heard it bump against the door frame.

"You're r-really good at this!"

It was in the medical bay! My hoof gently kept the loose door shut. Please don't somehow notice me. Please, PipBuck, don't beep!

But there was no sound. None at all. In a way that was worse. What if it had just given up and was waiting outside the fridge! Oh dear, there was nothing else for it.

Biting my lip and trying not to whimper, I peeked out.

Nothing. It had gone. Breathing out at last, I trotted out into the room again before heading to the door.

"Won't you poke your head out? I wanna see you grin!"

It was upstairs again! I wasted no time in getting out of the room and delving deeper into this strange, hidden bunker. I could see a crossroads up ahead, but the path directly in front was blocked by a collapsed corridor in this apparently more unstable area. Watching behind me repeatedly, I moved across the buckled floor to see what was left or right.

Immediately to my left, there was a gigantic metal door bearing a brass seal of three balloons about ten feet down the corridor. I could see a terminal beside it but otherwise no way in. The other way looked and smelled damp, but at least had someplace to go. Warily checking behind me again, I began trotting that way.

Why was my PipBuck bringing me here anyway? I'd found Sundial's skeleton with the PipBuck itself, so what was dragging me in? A part of the broken PipBuck? I noticed the ground felt wet and I realised I was trotting into a slowly deepening liquid dropping from a

broken pipe further ahead.

My ears perked up a little at an unknown sound: a mad clicking from my PipBuck. Huh? What did that mean?

Lifting it, I glanced into the PipBuck itself and saw it telling me nothing. It hadn't done that before. The symbol of balloons hadn't disappeared so what was... it...

My eyes fell to the water beneath me.

Glimmer had fixed the rad-warning. Oh *cupcakes*, I was in radiation!

I turned and galloped back the way I'd come, splashing through the water. Screw *all* of this! I was going to sneak by that thing and get out! This was too much now. I wasn't going to die of radiation down here from a leaky pipe! I was—

"I heeear you!"

I turned the corner back to the stairwell corridor again and saw the horrible sight of that sprite-bot wandering down it again. Seeming to hop with joy in the air, it began charging the blaster.

"I r-r-really am good at tag! I should have to-oooooo-old you!"

"Don't! EEK!"

I dove away down the other side of the corridor and curled away from the pink blasts flickering past into the wall. They left smouldering little holes in the thin metal that dripped slag to the floor. If that got me—oh no!

Scrambling to my hooves, I turned to run and slammed right into the huge blast door bearing three balloons. Oh please open! I started pressing every button on the terminal I could, only to have a cross looking Pinkie Pie shake her head in a two-frame animation at me from the screen accompanied by a rather loud honk of denial.

"OH COME ON!"

I bashed the side with my PipBuck. Come on, please!

"Coming to get you! Hehe! Nopony wins! I'm so good at tag I bet I would be the-*kreeeeeee*-champion!"

I fell with my back against the door, seeing the sprite-bot round the corner joyously and spin around to face me.

Another voice echoed around me. Male and robotic, it accompanied a sudden hiss of hydraulics.

"PipBuck unit confirmed."

Before I even knew what had happened, my frantic pushes back against the blast door led me to fall right through it into a pitch dark room. Rolling as fast as I could, with pink jets of energy spearing after me so closely that I felt one whip through my mane, I tried to scramble out the way. Immediately, the door slammed shut behind me, and cast me into darkness.

Lying still, patting out the small fire in my mane, I just slumped down, took a second to get my breath back, and swigged my RadAway, while making a mental note telling me to have no more adventuring when hungover. My head... RadAway did not agree with my stomach right now either.

Gradually, I brought myself to my senses again to take a few deep breaths and start to get up.

My eyes took a few long seconds to get used to the darkness, but I could see I was in a huge room just by a far off, tiny light. Clutching my complaining stomach while I stood, I began to look around. I could see vague shapes, but nothing distinct.

A beam spotlight snapped on, pointed directly at me. Yelping and closing my eyes again, I staggered back and peered out from under my hoof. Lights sprung on all around the edges of what I now saw was a circular room. Photos of a certain pink pony surrounded by neon lighting flickered into life and floor lights lit the borders of the room.

Only they weren't what took my attention. Yes, I could have seen the piles of balloon boxes, stuffed pony toys, and wooden candy canes against a wall. I could perhaps have seen the desk bearing that same tri-balloon symbol on a brass plate at the back or the masses of little tins across the floor near it. But my attention was rather more focused on the colossal *cannon* that now swivelled on the spot and pointed directly at my face. I had nowhere to go!

Pointed directly at me, the cannon fired.

I wasn't an expert on weapons, but the sound was unlike anything I'd ever expected. It sounded a lot more like the little thing Blunderbuck had fired last night at the table. A small, concussive force knocked me clean over onto my rump as shrapnel bounced and landed all over me.

It didn't hurt. Wait, I was alive?

Opening my eyes, I saw colours. I was *covered* in streamers and little paper flakes. The feeling of something striking me had been balloons that now floated above me.

What kind of cannon *was* that?

Even amongst my bewilderment while sitting back on my hindquarters, I couldn't quite bring myself to understand. I heard a little *clink* nearby as one of the balloons knocked something above me. Confused, I looked up to see the balloons had hit a suspended basket of little bouncy balls that now fell into tubes and pipes strung up onto the ceiling. I watched them twirl and cross over on their journeys. Eventually, they all began to reach one point within a basket that was slowly weighed down until it dropped.

The motion of it dropping pulled something at the side of the room up and let a large pink and yellow ball roll out across the room. It struck the side of the desk and upset a balanced pen that rolled into a mousetrap. I winced as it went off and set alight a whole process of strange 'coincidences' that carried all over the room and grew into chairs falling and stuffed bears being catapulted over my head with precision that would have made acrobats jealous. The whole room became a mass of activity until it all concentrated back in one epic movement of flying teddies and toy whirligigs whizzing across to the desk to all land in a huge toy chest behind it. Before my astounded eyes, the entire thing leaned forward under the weight, bumped the chair, and sent a fragile looking sphere rolling down a track that lowered from the ceiling.

I knew that sphere, and I could guess now what it would land on.

The moment it hit the holder, a little spark of light formed from within it and grew into a spiralling galaxy of shimmering gems suspended in mid-air. Whirling out from the orb they moved erratically and yet smoothly until they concentrated in one spot and glowed brighter. I knew the sequence now, following the recognisable shapes as they formed. A pink glow that solidified and wove itself with twinkling lines and patterns. Lines, curves, and shapes before... before...

No. ooooh no.

The shape of a pony with a poofy mane and rounded face bearing a gigantic smile came to. I shivered at the sight of *her* appearing. Pinkie Pie!

She looked at herself, as though no doubt feeling a magical sensation while recording this. Giggling, she looked up and directly at me. The shimmering lights shifted as she drew a

deep breath and opened her eyes wide.

Wait, what had surprised her? What was she so happy about—

“HI, MURKY!”

I blinked. Then I blinked again.

Then I simply pitched over and fainted.

Gradually, my eyes blinked and squinted. The darkness fell away from visions where I felt myself letting go of somepony else. Of sitting down and closing my eyes with the last sight that of somepony watching me. Then of being carried somewhere. Was that my mother? Was it Glimmer? Coral? Protégé? They were too small to be Brim.

Then my eyes properly opened and it all evaporated. Another dream cast to vague memory.

Instead, I found somepony else watching me from above. Two huge sparkling eyes made of tiny star shapes gazed down from above and blinked incessantly.

Pinkie Pie.

My own eyes shot open. Scrambling so fast my scarcely healed neck and chest flared up in pain. With a yelp, I shot back and away from the pink demon!

“G-get away from me!”

“Are you okay, little Murky Wurky? Cos’ you just fell over there really, *really* hard and hit your head.”

I kept moving backwards when she trotted forward. No... no, forget this, I’d take my chances with the sprite-bot! This thing was *talking* to me! I got to my hooves, turned around, and made to gallop. Only the moment I turned, she was right in front of me.

“And I know that hitting your head can make you go all woozy and crazy-eyed, like this!” Her eyes swivelled and rotated in their sockets. “So I just thought I’d make sure you were all right! I used to take chocolate to make sure I was fine after I had a fall, cos’ the doctors say that stops shock, you know? I know *all* about chocolate, and cakes, and all the wonderful things they do can do; as well as being yummy in your tummy!”

“Y-you know me! How can you talk to me!?” I virtually screamed it, backing off to crash into her desk. They were just recordings! “Stop following me everywhere!”

The pink pony snorted and laughed out loud, rolling on her back before darting to her hooves again and skipping toward me.

“Aww, but I told you before! It’s my *Pinkie Sense* that lets me know what’s going to happen before it happens! Sometimes it gets really crazy and I’ll do something even I don’t understand, like this! Right now, I’m just talking to my desk and really, *really* hoping somepony called Murky will be doing all the right things for what I’m saying! I sent him a letter before when I felt an itch on three and two-thirds hooves!”

My breathing wasn’t calming down much. Had I *actually* died and gone to some crazy land? The letter, though. That was all that gave any sort of proof that this somehow made sense, by not making any sense at all. Why when I had a hangover?

“S-so you predict the future? So you’re, um, predicting what I’m going to say and do before I, uh, say it?”

Her head nodded frighteningly quick.

“That’s riiight! See? You aren’t a dumb little pony even if you can’t read or write, yet. I did

this because I realised there were things I knew you wanted to ask and some things I needed to *tell* you! So I left little clues around to get you here, like a scavenger hunt! Did you have fun?"

At this point, I was terrified to disagree or inquire about exactly *how*. I nodded warily, and she beamed widely, the pink glow from the memory spell orb's form of her casting right over me.

"Goodie! The PipBuck, the letter, the little signal, and the picture of the balloons! I knew you'd get it!"

"The PipBuck? The-the arrow?" I looked down at it, before realising this was sort of what I had wanted. Answers! "This is Sundial's PipBuck! You took him away! Arrested him!"

"That's the smart bit! Let your old Auntie Pinkie explain!"

She reached out and dragged me away from the desk to trot beside her, one hoof around my shoulder. Then I stopped, and realised.

"Y... y-you're touching me..."

"Course I am, silly!"

"*HOW!*? The others! They couldn't touch me! Memory projections can't touch ponies!"

'Pinkie' merely rolled her eyes. "Eh, they just weren't trying hard enough. Now come on, I gotta tell you *all* about little Sundial!"

I just blinked and quietly decided to shut down the logical part of my brain for now. It was better not to be thinking too hard, for my own sanity's sake. Feeling her grab my hoof, I was dragged at high speed across the room before a little projector screen. Hopping back into view, I saw her lift a small pointer stick with her mouth and clap her hooves. The room darkened and I heard the projector spool up.

Before me, a sepia-toned image of Sundial popped up. The picture had been taken as he wandered in the front door of a small home.

"See, we spotted this cute little buck early on when some of those nasty zebras started talking to him! I felt so sad that he had to do what he did to try and help his marefriend! But we couldn't have our itty bitty secrets going to them, no no! But then we got a *better* idea!"

The projector clicked and changed. I saw a mass of small huts and tents in rows. It looked a lot like some sort of refugee camp. I sat in silence, partly through interest and partly through terror. I took this time to try and come to terms that Pinkie Pie was effectively here with me. Why my life?

"Fillydelphia's a really cool city! It's got awesome big machines that go *chunk-chunk-chunk* and sometimes even *woowoo!* It makes lots of the big fancy things we use, but it also meant that the zebras also kept trying to get stuff from it! All the ponies like me in the Ministries saw things going missing, like so many refugees in these camps. Poor Fluttershy was heartbroken, and I just kept trying to send her gifts to cheer her up."

It changed again, this time to Hearts and Hooves Hospital. Even in the pre-war era, it looked mismatched and in dire need of renovation.

"But then all these other ponies went missing too! One of the really big surgeons here called Doctor Heartcare disappeared for weeks at a time! That was so naughty that even the bigger doctors like Flowerpot and Weathervane started trying to get me to find him! Only Weathervane was out so often with Dashie and the Shadowbolts that it was hard to get a chance to see him!"

Heartcare... but that was the Magister in the ghoulish bunker Brim and I had found! What

did he have to do with this? The slide dropped into darkness between pictures and blew up another of the Wartime Manufactory.

"Then even workers here started to disappear! Some talked about how they'd gotten better jobs but nopony ever saw them again! That's why we caught little Sundial. We were watching the factory for the missing workers when a sprite-bot saw him. They're so useful and cute! I just *love* the music they play, don't you?"

"Uuuh, yes?" Disagreement was not something I wanted, even if one had just tried to kill me.

Her face went shockingly wide with happiness. "Thank you! *Nopony* has ever said they liked them before!"

"N-no po—ACK!" She had grabbed me and given me a hug so strong that two hundred years apart it still nearly crushed my ribs. Gasping for breath and wagging every limb that had lifted from the ground, I realised that Brim had competition in strength! Sucking in air as she dropped me, I heard the slide change again.

This one was Pinkie with her hoof around a visibly terrified Sundial.

I could relate.

"I got him to go on a super special mission! He wanted to help Equestria and I asked if he could become a double agent for us! How cool is that? He would go and speak to the zebras again, give them things only we gave them, and become one of those workers that I guessed the zebras were taking!"

The slides shut down and the lights came back on. Bewildered, but beginning to take a breath and accept at least the immediate reality, I stood up and looked at Pinkie. I was seeing a different pony. For all the posters and scary watchfulness, she seemed childlike and playful, despite being much older than I was.

"B-but what's this to do with me?"

The question hung in the air, a rare silence from Pinkie as she looked at me and clearly thought about how to answer my question.

"Murky, you've probably guessed by now but there was something really, *awfully* bad going on in Fillydelphia! That's what I wanted to find, but I knew that I couldn't do it on my own or give it out to too many other ponies. There's a big nasty thing happening in Manhattan I need to go deal with so I had to make Sundial into the pony to try and deal with it and bring it to my attention after he had proof."

Sitting down, she actually looked a little sad with her ears drooping down and that playful tail resting upon the ground.

"There's so much going on now that I can't do it all, Murky. See, I had this really big weird out moment and my Pinkie Sense told me that I needed to take some extra special precautions! Sundial wasn't the first pony we'd sent to try and find things in Fillydelphia, but I hoped that because he was just a normal pony he might stand a better chance than an obvious trained pony. Even then I knew that whatever the zebras were up to or building with stolen ponies, we might not figure it out or get rid of it forever!"

Her hooves grabbed me by the shoulders, leaning her nose in to press against mine and tapping the side of my head.

"That's where you come in!"

"M-me?"

"Even if Sundial gets word to us and we stop it, there might not be enough time if anything *really* bad happens! That's why I needed to make sure I had somepony in the future

who could pick it up to stop really bad ponies getting it! This might be a lot smaller than the big things we all need to deal with right now or that are going on elsewhere, but that doesn't mean it's not important! If all my old friends worked together we'd find it easy peasy, but we're too far away and busy to see each other these days."

I needed a second. Moving away from her, I trotted for a few seconds just to think. My mind just wasn't settling. So, this weird pony could see what was going to happen in the future, and had set up all this because she knew I'd find Sundial's PipBuck to act as some sort of *insurance* against something bad that would be left untouched in the event of balefire warfare?

A two hundred year insurance. One that I was meant to be in the grand scheme of pony history?

Suddenly, I felt very small indeed.

I couldn't deny it made some sense though. I had certainly seen these clues, just I hadn't figured they were all related. Magister Heartcare. Fluttershy mentioning missing refugees. Sundial.

Like the star shapes I'd once seen, it was all linked. Now somepony who had looked into future times had seen that I would know these things and chosen me to act as some sort of 'next in line.'

"I..."

This was insane.

"I just... I don't know."

I heard her trot up behind me.

"I'm really, *really*, *reeeeally* sorry for all you've been through, Murky. I know sometimes it gets real sad, dark, and lonely. I had to work on a rock farm too before I learned to smile! But I'll always be there to try and get you to learn how to as well! This is really important though. Sundial cared a lot and it could—"

"I just want out." I spoke quietly, turning to her. "I'm sorry. I'm no hero or anything. I just want *out* of this place! It's taking all I have just to do that."

Pinkie put her hoof to her chin and looked in deep thought.

"Well, I guess you didn't see my other little clue then, did you?"

"H-huh?"

"Didn't you see the little Pinkie-bot telling you where the way out was? I left it in an old, big cargo box that was so big I could hear myself echo in it!"

I stopped for a few seconds. I had—yes, I had heard it! List Seeker had sent me there before Barb's gang found me! What had it said?

"It said... 'the way out is just downstairs'..."

I thought I was remembering, but I saw Pinkie gurning as she twitched her legs and repeated it with rather frightening accuracy.

"You were telling me..."

"Uh-huh! Every scavenger hunt has gotta have a clue! Those zebras got out of the city somehow, those sneaky things! Every time we almost caught them they went underground into the metro and the tunnels!"

She was right. They couldn't leave above ground. The plan we had must've been on the right track! They had some sort of route out of the city down there in the metro! Briefly, I couldn't help but remember how Aurora had some strange goings on down there too. Coincidence? I thought not!

"So, Murky! If you take on this super Pinkie Mission, it'll lead you to the way out by the end! You were already on the right track, this'll just point you in the proper direction *and* make you the one to find whatever got left behind by the zebras and take care of it before anypony bad gets it too! It'll take you to the way out, ending all this forever. You'd have got there anyway, I guess but... I figured you needed to know it."

She paused, looking more sincere and serious than I'd yet seen her.

"Sundial believed in it. You've been so like him up till now."

Pinkie was right. Something about this felt *right*. I had been following Sundial's story, the least I could do was see how it ended and help finish what he had started before the spells fell upon Equestria.

"How many ponies *have* there been on this task?"

"Oh, before Sundial? Five! He was the sixth. This has come a long way, Murky, and if we can stop this now *and* get you your freedom because of it, that's perfect!"

"Yeah. Perfect."

I looked off to the side. Try as I might, I just couldn't comprehend this at all.

"Aw, c'mon Murky! Get that frown upside down!"

"Not exactly easy in the city these days. Pinkie, I don't know how much you know, but I don't even know if I'll get there! I can dream and believe but it's so hard to smile, and feel confident about it! Sure, part of me feels better now, that even if I die and don't achieve it, I'll have died *trying*. But I don't want that! I want to be free and feel it all! Live a life! I've never had the chance to truly feel happy. I'm not even sure I know what it actually feels like."

"Pfff."

I stopped dead in my ramble at her blowing a raspberry. How disrespectful! I was opening my heart here and—

"Course you do, silly! Here, let me show you!"

She reached up, standing on her hind legs and clapped her hooves loudly.

"Come on, bots! Get your voices on and come out to show him!"

I heard the vents open in the room. From within them, a low hum sounded. Growing in volume, I realised it was music. Bouncy and happy music. All around us, I saw sprite-bots float in. Arcing around in the air and between the laid out presents or candy canes, they bobbed and formed into big circles that constantly rotated around both of us with that music growing in volume! I fell closer to Pinkie, who only smiled and threw a hoof around my shoulders.

A quiet murmuring began to spread as more and more of them entered the room.

I recognised them! They were all the strange video screen ones I'd seen stalking me everywhere! They were speaking as they came, a low chanting chorus among them. Pinkie herself joined it, spinning us around to see them all, as three circles of sprite-bots floated in opposite directions around the room, all facing into me!

"*Come on little Murky, smile smile smile...*"

The screens began to light up. Each fizzing as they began to show me footage just like how Shackles' captured one had. I stood breathless in wonder as I saw myself in every single one of them.

"*Fill your heart up with sunshine, sunshine!*"

I was laughing coming down a helter-skelter, shouting with joy and my front legs in the air. Landing in the pit at the bottom, I upped and smiled directly at the sprite-bot's camera

before trotting on with a spring in my step. Another had me skipping in circles inside the Ministry of Image, delighted and happy with finding Littlepip's trail and a massive goofy grin on my face.

"All you really need's a smile smile smile!"

I was standing in Weathervane's office, smiling as I glanced at his picture of Sundial with a warm and gentle happiness across my face. Then I was with Unity as we chuckled and shared glances at my journal while huddled together under a piece of scrap.

"And everything will be fii-iiiine!"

Each sprite-bot joined in, growing in volume higher and higher as Pinkie whirled me around to see each screen one at a time. I saw me sitting up, my wings outstretched for the first time since I was a foal. The look of delight upon my face indescribable! The bots swirled and turned on the spot, almost dancing in the air as they chanted and sung, repeating themselves on the same chorus. Pinkie swung me to face her, her voice picking up.

"Give a perfect grin for me! Just smile as wide as a mile! You'll be as happy as can be!"

One more spin and I found myself facing one sprite-bot that had come forward. Upon it, I saw it staring through a window. Inside, above a sea of laughing and cheering ponies, Glimmer and I danced hoof and hoof atop a table as they all chanted and stomped in time with us. I was just having fun, carefree and happy. A glimpse of the life I had been having without ever truly remembering all the good times.

I heard them chant again, growing in volume every time.

"Smile! Smile! Smiiiile! Smiile!"

"Come on and smile, Murky! You've got a *beautiful* smile! One of the best I've ever seen! Why don't you do it more? Look at it!"

Her voice in my ear when I simply saw that last clip from the Roamer felt so familiar. Almost exactly like something Glimmerlight had said to me long ago. Under the chants, under the persuasion, I felt a grin come onto my face. We had a way out for sure! The secrets of the past would light the way if we could simply discover that path! Sundial would be my guide, the story I'd always been following and was always meant to follow!

I would be *free*!

What was there to *not* smile about!?

Spinning around, I leapt up and spread my wings as best I could, letting it grow upon my face before finally exploding into being. A huge beaming grin from ear to ear. Pinkie's face seemed to *explode* in joy at the sight, cheering aloud.

"That's it! You just have to smile! Sing it!"

"I..." I laughed. *"I just have to smiiiile!"*

"That's it! *You just have to smiiiile!*"

"I just have to smile!"

We continued like that under the ongoing chorus of the sprite-bots for a while, before simply falling over from dizziness, exhaustion, old injury, and hangover all at once into a giggling heap. The sprite-bots gradually filtered away.

"You're not as creepy as I thought you were, Pinkie. Hehe!"

The pink pony snorted at the odd compliment and rolled back to her hooves, helping me up.

"We've got enough problems, if I can make a pony who *really* needed to learn to smile do so, I'll do it! That's my *thing*!"

"Thank you, Pinkie..I see why it's important. For me, for Sundial, for everyone I care for."

I stood more upright, my neck up proper like Weathervane told me. "I won't let you or Sundial down. Me and my friends, we'll find the way."

Pinkie almost looked sad for a second. "Isn't that always how it works, silly? Hehehe! They'll wonder where you are. Go give them a hug for me! I've got *serious* business to get back to in Manehattan!"

Across the room, I heard something unlock and a portion of the wall slid open to reveal some stairs. I could see the sparkles around Pinkie Pie's star-shape form beginning to fade and flicker. The memory orb was ending. She looked with wonder at her own hooves.

"Oooh. Well, this is it. Off you go, Murky!"

"Thank you... for watching out for me."

I reached forward and Pinkie bumped her hoof into mine. She giggled once more.

"I told them all. Pinkie Pie was going to watch over them *forever*."

Her immense grin became a more genuine, caring smile as the apparition of a pony slowly spread and warped into a little orb of its own, that faded from view back into the sphere and left a few words lingering in the air...

"I meant it."

I simply stood still for a few seconds. A lot had happened and been revealed, but I just gave a quiet moment of respect before moving off. I was confused and filled with questions, but also a purpose and drive. I had regained my life, my free will, my wings, and now my drive. The world that had took so much away had given them back out of the laughter-filled past.

Without really knowing why, I felt a few tears drip from my eyes as I looked back from the stairwell.

I simply saw the orb sitting on its holder and heard the sounds of smiling music fading and echoing away into the dark future around me.

It was approaching later in the afternoon as I returned to the Mall.

I hadn't rushed. Aside from feeling stiff, an odd sense of melancholy had overtaken me upon seeing Pinkie's shape fade away. Every time I looked up, I would see a huge balloon, billboard, or some poster announcing her presence. Pinkie Pie was gone forever, but she had lived up to her word. Seeing the future, she had prepared for me and what I would need.

Somehow, despite the terrifying thought of some benevolent force watching me across history, I felt strangely reassured whenever I saw those eyes watching me now.

I didn't return to the plaza immediately. Instead, I went directly to Protégé's office. I knew my friends were likely out on shift still and I had no wish to sit alone. Ragini was waiting on guard and wordlessly opened the door. Avoiding her gaze, I simply trotted inside and closed the door.

"Ah, Murk. You are back."

Protégé sat at the window, leaning back into the frame with a book hovering before him. With a little surprise, I saw it was the Daring Do one from before. Seeing me looking, he merely smiled and placed it down.

"We all have our escapes."

I offered a small nod, noticing the small hint in his words. Sitting down before his desk, I began to pull the desk lamp out, only realising now that this was likely *why* he was using the

window rather than his desk for light.

"I, um, also saw these beside it. I don't know why I brought them."

I dropped the books out too. Trotting around his desk, Protégé picked one up.

"Ah! Applied mathematics, my my. It has been a while. Thank you, Murk. Judging from how relaxed you look, I imagine the library did you good?"

After a second, I simply nodded. "Yes, you could say that."

"Excellent." Protégé had turned to a smaller desk, fitting the lamp to it and plugging the magic wire leading into a tiny generator that sat in the corner. With a small flick, an amber light shone in the darker room.

"Um, Protégé? I thought about your, um, offer." I bit my lip, watching as he turned one eye to me even whilst sorting the new books. I couldn't help but notice he wasn't wearing the eyepiece. "I'd like to take you up on it, if it's still open."

If I had to choose a word to try and describe the 'ever hard to decipher' look on his face, I would have gone with relieved. Protégé sat a book on the small desk in front of a bench and placed a hoof to his chest.

"I'm glad you say that, Murk. I promise you as early as we can we will investigate getting your friends out too. For now, it will give you ample time to recover by acting as my assistant and aide. Truthfully, I just want you safe from Shackles. You can stay here in the spare room over there and you will remain under my protection."

"Thank you."

Protégé offered a small grin. "Now don't go thinking this is a holiday. You will be expected to still be my assistant. To be up and preparing my things for the coming day, to take needless busy work from my schedule, or to keep things organised. I'm sure you won't have a problem with that. Think of this to get you away from abuse as my gift to you."

That didn't sound so bad, even if the newly found will to never be a slave again in me hated the thought of doing *anything* for anypony. He was just doing his best and despite myself, I giggled a little and actually seemed to surprise him.

"A gift? You mean a birthday gift?"

Protégé laughed and shook his head, sitting upon the reading desk bench.

"No, Murk. A gift for you saving my life. No, no. *This* is your birthday gift."

My eyes shot open in surprise. He shifted in the seat to face the desk in front of it and pat the seat beside him on the bench.

"Come here, Murk. Sit down."

A little confused, I did just that. In the amber light, I saw him turn from me and open one of the books I'd brought back with me between us. It was just filled with words that meant nothing to me.

"Now..."

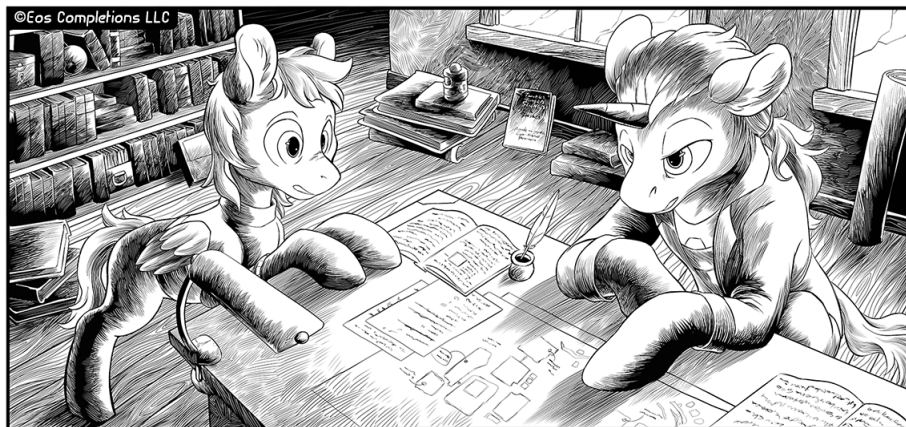
Protégé flipped to a certain page before turning back to me.

"...I believe we should start with the alphabet."

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Foal's First Literacy (Rank 1) – It may take some time to catch up with the rest, but slowly all those arcane shapes are starting to make a little bit of sense.

You may be able to recognise a few very simple words or letters from now on.

The Great Game

"It is of no use. They have never seen us as equals and they never shall."

"Was it any different, being his assistant?"

Different from what?

"Slavery."

Well he didn't strike me or shout at me. I guess that was better...

"You don't really sound convinced."

Of course I'm not. Slavery is slavery and I was still having to respond to his beck and call. The difference was I was knowingly disliking it and wishing not to have to do so. It felt more open or even honest if you want to call it that. I was a slave who didn't want to be a slave, kept by a master who didn't want to have to be one.

All the same, I can't deny that, from a sheer practical level, it was a massive improvement. In one clean decision, he'd saved me from Chainlink Shackles and the inevitable nightmare that would have descended upon me had I went back to him. Me being free from him, albeit still in the machine of Fillydelphia under Protégé, meant that I could focus on other things.

"Like getting your friends away too?"

Yes! I hated leaving them behind. There was a lot of guilt but we all knew this was for the best. With me away and with Protégé admitting he wished them free as well, I knew that I had to find a way to smuggle, steal or otherwise acquire them from him. Be it simply sneaking them out or finding some way to make them Protégé's stock as well didn't matter, it was simply a race against time before anything happened to them.

Glimmerlight had tried to calm me by saying he might leave them alone with me gone, but we both knew that wasn't true. They would likely suffer the hardest shifts and the worst attentions if I didn't get them out quickly. If I had to come back to even one of them... gone...

S-sorry, just a... yeah, I'd try to find a way, yet there were other advantages, too. With my newfound freedom by Protégé's side in his work, I would have access to the logistic hub of Fillydelphia. I made it my intent to steal and 'misplace' as much as my gleeful little thieving hooves could manage from the supplies or information contained there. Anything would be helpful for the final effort.

Of course, there was one greater prize than that.

Pinkie Pie's spell orb had shown me some of the truths to look at and help point me in the right direction. We'd been right about the metro being our salvation. Having that confirmed was a wonderful feeling. A way out was specifically built into it that zebra spies used to use to escape the city. If we wanted to use the metro, our best bet rather than aimlessly digging through infested caves was to find whatever it was *before* Shackles and his slaver 'council' managed to locate what they were looking for down there.

I had more than a suspicion that whatever Aurora Star was making there had something to do with all this. I may have been a dumb, uneducated pony, but even I could put two and two together with at least a moderate chance of getting four. The Ministry Station, I was betting, held the way out. At the very least it was linked into it.

Of course, that left me part of the intrigue that had been running through the slavers long before I even arrived. One that had sought to tear the mall away from Protégé and kill him off from the running. Now to find my own freedom, I had to aid a slaver against his enemies.

Then simply hope that he and I wouldn't come to a confrontation over our real objective in the end...

"Murk?"

There was a voice attempting to stir me. I didn't want to hear it. Right now, I was safe, comfortable and warm. No, no I didn't want to listen to any voices. Hazily, I could sense a thick blanket over me.

"Murk, wake up."

The words cut through the sleepy haze and forced their way into my warm little world. Oh just go away, I was so *comfy* here, the most I'd ever been in my life. I was having a really good dream as well. Let me go back to it. Lazily, I lifted a hoof out from under the warm covers and waved it to send the intruder away.

Annoyance taken care of, I drew it back in again. With a grateful sigh, I twisted further into the covers and tried to drift back into that same dreamland again. That was better. Now, Miss Pip... where were we?

"Murk, if you don't get up right now I shall have Ragini fetch a pail of water from the fountain."

Wait... huh?

With a sudden shock of reality, I felt everything annoyingly melt away to leave me staring at a blank beige wall and lying in a bed with the biggest sense of not wanting to move I'd ever felt. Shifting reluctantly under the covers I sat up and wearily opened my eyes.

The sight of Protégé standing by the bed was enough to drop a figurative dash of cold water over my mind. Bolting upright, I rubbed my eyes.

"I... huh... wha?"

His eyes narrowed.

"You were supposed to be up an hour ago, Murk. The tasks I set out for you this morning to arrange things have already been done. I trust this won't be an ongoing problem, will it?"

Even as he reprimanded me, I just kept rubbing my mane with my hooves and across my forehead to try and wake up. After my first lesson on reading (something I'd had a lot of trouble with) he had shown me to the spare room in his office area where I'd found, for the first time in my life, a real and proper bed! It had thick covers and everything, giving me perhaps the best night's sleep in my life had come from it. Unfortunately, that same comfort had now led to me oversleeping.

"Sorry... really really sorry, mm... just tired..."

"So I see." Protégé sighed and turned to the door. "Get yourself ready, Murk. We must leave the Mall within the hour if we want to dodge Shackles returning. I've picked out a few things we'll be taking with us, so be ready to carry some bags. This is your job now after all."

Carrying out the soul crushing movement of leaving the warm covers, I swung myself to the edge of the bed and reached for my fleece. The room was little more than a bed, a couple of shelves, and a bedside table, but it had been all I'd needed to feel comfortable for once. I hoped there was another like it where we were going.

"I'll, um, be up in future. I promise!"

"Don't worry, Murk. I'm not going to punish you for this, merely ask that you keep better time in future. Besides, I'd be something of a hypocrite if I did."

Turning back from his office, Protégé offered a small smirk.

"After all, I did the exact same thing on my first day as well. Now hurry up. We've got places to be."

Stumbling down stairs and veering from side to side in the corridors I had to quickly question Protégé's perception of a 'few' things. Two saddlebags were draped over my torso bearing books and scraps of paper alongside my own small amount of belongings while trying to carry the replaced reading lamp around my neck. The fact that Protégé trotted on with neater and smaller saddlebags only fuelled my annoyance. He'd said that it hardly cut a good impression upon those he needed to communicate with to be doing it himself.

Not for the first time, I cast an aggravated glance at him as he trotted so much easier than I did under all this weight. Apparently, this was the life of an assistant. At the very least it wasn't as bad as the factories or carts.

"We will make for the FunFarm, Murk. The logistics hub is off to its side, and there are a few errands to run across to the Alpha-Omega Hotel as well in service of our Master."

'Our' Master, Protégé? Try yours.

Really, I'd found it almost strange to so easily rebel quietly in my mind since my own revival. It was fast becoming a source of strength that I could do so and feel confident that I meant it than all the pondering of resistance I'd done before. Those days were over.

We travelled downstairs, Protégé reading over a small notebook as he went. Slaves passed us as they were directed onto the first shift of the day by Shackles' own followers. I couldn't help but notice the glances they gave Protégé the moment he was past them.

Truth be told, he was confusing me more than ever. Since his return, he had seemed more dedicated than ever to Red Eye to the point that he was willing to fight some sort of shadow

war against slavers within the city to try and maintain the status quo. Yet at the same time, I'd see occasional glances at me or passing slaves. He truly wanted a better life for them. All the things he'd said before we went in to battle Barb felt so much more important for trying to understand this peculiar pony now.

More to the point, after admitting our plan and even asking him, I had no idea where he really stood. He didn't try to help us directly, but he wasn't exactly trying to stop us either. He wanted me free, but simply seemed too wrapped up in his own dreams of a better world for everypony under Red Eye to do anything about it.

What about yourself, Protégé? What about yourself?

Reaching the bottom floor, we moved out to the main corridor where Protégé stopped me.

"Ragini should join us soon. I'll be sending her on ahead with some instructions prior to my arrival. You can rest for a minute or so."

I didn't need told to be twice, the saddlebags dropped the moment I heard the word 'rest' spoken. The procession of slaves were still trooping out the doors into the street ahead of us and I could hear others being gathered behind. If I wanted a chance, it'd have to be now.

"Protégé? Could I go say goodbye? You said I'd get a chance, remember?"

Still looking at his notebook for a few seconds, he lifted his head up and seemed to think before responding.

"Yes, I did. You've got five minutes, Murk. You'll find them just outside the plaza, if I remember the schedules right."

"Thank you." I didn't waste time in cantering off toward the plaza. I knew the part he meant. It was just outside the guard room where we were often organised for the actual shift divisions. Upon arrival, I could clearly see them beginning to troop out and Brim's head rising well above the rest. If any of the guards gave thoughts to bringing me in, they immediately kept any thoughts quiet with Brim around.

"Murk." He nodded briefly as I trotted up to him. I found myself trotting to one side, staring at the hole where his eye had once resided made me feel awkward. The fact that this didn't seem to bother him that much spoke volumes about the raider mentality toward injury, and expectations of their life.

"I just wanted to come and see you all again before I left with Protégé. To say thank you..."

"Mm. You've said it about forty times now since you woke up in the hospital, and I'll still say the same thing. We weren't going to let you go. If I have to accept what I am and direct that to protecting others then that's something I can be happy with. Coral Eve was right, giving up in some last rebellious instinct isn't worth it. I hope you see that now too."

"I do..." Sniffing and nodding, I briefly placed a hoof on his leg. "I just hate leaving you all."

Brimstone snorted a little, clearly not quite as sentimental when it simply made sense for me to get out of here when I could. Sometimes I found it hard to really judge that cold, practical intelligence he had.

"So long as that kid can keep to his word to protect you."

I wanted to tell them that I at the very least trusted Protégé's word, even if I was still unsure where his loyalties truly lay, but my ears instead picked up a bit of a commotion approaching. One all too familiar.

"It doesn't even matter!"

"Yes it *does*! You come out all high and mighty to me and say you're trying to be better, and then I find you stripping it out all over again!?"

"I'm not forgetting it! It's just... just not how I want to see him!"

Brimstone only now began to hear it too and turned his head as we both saw Coral and Glimmer coming near the doorway out of the plaza. Coral Eve was pointing a hoof accusingly.

"It's an addiction! The entire point is you *don't* think it matters for just one little thing! You've gotten so used to doing it that there's always that temptation! You don't have any will to resist that for all your words!"

"Seeing him lying dead in a hospital bed was just destroying me, Coral! I... I didn't even sleep last night, I just kept seeing him again and again!"

Glimmer was half pleading and half arguing, but Coral just stomped a hoof and bared her teeth.

"Perhaps if you hadn't spent last night screwing some buck you likely don't even remember the name of while drunk off your head, you might remember him being alive again better! You say you can handle the truth of the past, but you can't even handle remembering a friend *almost* dying. How are you going to cope with seeing our friends and family butchered on the earth of Creaky Hollow?"

"I will! I... I'm trying, Murky's helping me and... and..."

I could only see this firing up further. I galloped in between them.

"Please! Stop arguing!"

Both immediately turned as they heard me.

"Coral, she is trying really hard. I... I've seen what she's seen. It's not easy but she's trying!" I turned back to Glimmerlight. "But I'm here, I'm okay. You don't need to strip memories, please..."

There was a small moment of silence between them as the tensions simmered down. Clearly neither wanted this little moment of goodbye to be filled with argument. Sighing deeply, Coral cast a look at Glimmer that communicated all her bitter disappointment and turned down to me.

"I'm sure she is. Are you leaving now?"

"Uh-huh, Protégé's just waiting for Ragini before we go off to work."

Glimmerlight took a few moments to suck in some air after their exchange, only now joining us.

"At least you'll be safe, lil'bro. Just remember what I told you, we all wanted this for you. Something even Coral and I agreed on."

Clearly seeking *some* common ground for the moment, I saw them share a reluctant nod.

"I know... and Protégé says he wants you all away from Shackles too. He's going to help me find a way, and if he gets any way to demand some slaves he'll do it. We won't leave you behind."

"That's good, Murky." Coral seemed a little dubious, but any hope was better than nought. "We'll be safe enough, we've lasted this long remember? You concentrate on what you need to do. Now come here..."

She leaned down, giving me a tight embrace for a few moments.

"Just remember you're a free pony now."

"I will..."

"Good."

She let go, trotting on by to leave me with Glimmerlight. She looked somewhat ashamed, lifting a small orb from her saddlebag.

"I'm sorry, Murky. I... I just couldn't stand lying awake alone and seeing you like that over and over... I... I know I shouldn't have. I just, well..."

I didn't give her time to fall back into losing hope, simply moving forward and hopping up on my hind legs to hug her around the neck.

"I think you'll do it, sis'." The words were about as comforting as I could think up on the spot, but feeling her hooves wrap back around me as she sat down to support herself I knew it at least meant something. "I know you can."

Gently, I felt her stroke my feathers on my back and saw her try to smile again. "If you can do what you've done, I'll keep going as well. Go make us proud."

"I'll try."

Both standing back up, I met her eyes and saw her push a smile through again. "Just look forward to us getting to check out all the cool stuff you nick from them and sharing all the little drawings you do when you're away. It won't be long I know, but it'll all be better for this. We're on the upswing, Murky. Look on this as a chance!"

Nodding firmly, I smiled back. Yes, this was going to be a big boost to us!

"So I've got three tips for you!"

Blinking, I cocked my head to the side. Huh?

"Tip one! If you can get me a proper gun repair kit I'll be able to maybe fix up some of the stuff those idiots throw away thinking it's broken. With a quick scrapyard visit we could get some real weapons then. Tip two! If you're in logistics, see if you can't get some travelling bags from the wagons. A few things like flint, weather cloaks, and water filters could go a long way. Oh, maybe even see about some proper explosives too, just in case we need to blow our way out. Stash it all somewhere we can get to afterwards. Sound good?"

Grinning at the sound of all this wasteland stuff, I nodded. "Real good! Um... you said three hints?"

I grinned. She positively beamed in return, shoving all her worries back to let my last little moment with them for now be a happy one. She bent down to my ear.

"Tip three, showing just enough to make them fill in the rest themselves is better than showing all."

I blinked for a few seconds. "What... what does that mean?"

"It's a tip to stick with you forever, Murky. It'll bring you a *lot* of fun if you live by it! You'll understand someday! Now, off you go."

Shaking my head and chuckling, I hugged her once before and turned to go. There was just enough time to stop and wave to the three of them as they entered their lines, exchanging a brief goodbye.

Be safe my friends. I won't let you linger long.

Showing just enough... what on Equestria did she mean by that anyway? What did that have to do with anything?

If getting down the stairs from his office was bad, this was worse.

Protégé was taking the direct route, cutting across small alleyways and larger roads alike to reach the FunFarm. Even on such a strange direction, my own route was somewhat more

meandering under the weight of packages and bags slumped over me. Staggering from side to side every few feet, I desperately tried to keep the lamp from falling from around my neck while balancing his armour's breastplate on my back between the saddlebags.

In hindsight, why couldn't he have just worn it? For all his intelligence, he certainly could be impractical at times!

"Now, Murk." Protégé dropped his pace back as we entered the last road up to the FunFarm. "There is something I need to go over with you before we go here. You won't like it, but it has to happen."

"I'm not going to have to wear chains am I...?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. However, there is a bit of an expectation amongst many of our peers in the higher ranks that workers understand their place. I'd rather you not receive their ire, you *will* have to call me 'Master' when we are around others. Can you do that?"

I couldn't hide the look of annoyance on my face. With my cutie mark's new meaning in my mind, I didn't want to call anypony that ever again! Seeing the look on my face, Protégé only sighed.

"I know after all you've told me that you don't like it, Murk. Think of it just as a disguise if you really want to. It's just to keep them off your back. You *are* my assistant, there is a lot of emphasis put on rank within this place, and in these times ponies are more insistent about who lies where than ever."

His face turned somewhat more serious.

"If you fail to do so, I will have to reprimand you about it. This is my world in here, I cannot be seen to be weak or losing my authority."

I sighed. "Okay..."

"Okay, what?"

I almost stamped the ground in frustration. "We're not even there!"

"Yet there are, I count, eight overseers to our immediate right resting outside that old wagon park station. What if one overheard? That word can spread, Murk. *Every* ounce of perception matters these days, and I don't have many neutral parties in my favour as it is. You *will* address me by the title, Murk."

We had actually stopped, staring at each other briefly, a conflict of identity already starting to form. He'd given me a chance to get away from Shackles, only to turn around and request that I call him my master now around anypony else? Make them think I was some slave all over again? It was like he didn't even *care* how I felt now!

Unfortunately, he was always going to win a stare-down of willpower. I knew Protégé was right, if anything it would help me, too. Be the grey pony, don't stand out and become a centre of attention. That could aid me as much as annoy me...

"Okay, master..." I muttered from the side of my mouth.

"Better, Murk. I cannot afford any problems today. There is a power gap to be filled, those of higher rank are to nominate the candidates to fall in line behind Stern in the seniority of Fillydelphia. The mare who holds it currently is soon to pass away. The moment that happens, nominations go down for the replacement. This is a crucial moment in Fillydelphian politics."

"Wouldn't Red Eye put you in?" I saw his eye glance at me. "Master..."

"Master Red Eye cannot dictate everything, Murk. Slavers need some outlet, some source of control on their lives. They are not ponies who like being simply subservient, rather the

other way around. If they feel they can rise in seniority or affect who does, it helps placate them. Make no mistake though, it's hardly as democratic as it sounds. From Master Red Eye to Stern to whoever tends to be the strongest among them usually. This will be the first time the system has been tested since its inception, I'll explain more to you later on how it works. Now come on, we're almost there."

The trot up to the FunBarn caught me by surprise. I expected us to go in through the main door or even the side entrance I'd once used myself. Instead, Protégé took us around the side of the gigantic pink building (Just smile...) to the somewhat less highly decorated rear. I'd never seen this side of the FunFarm before, the way it stretched out with hastily constructed materials to form a corridor linking into a nearby warehouse. Red Eye clearly had at some point outgrown the FunBarn's limited space and connected it to the nearest building he could to better house all the organising required for such a vast operation. The link between them was heavily guarded and sectioned off, as though this warehouse behind it was part of the FunBarn itself rather than just a handily positioned expansion outside the FunFarm's fence.

"This, Murk, is the logistics hub for Fillydelphia." Protégé indicated the warehouse. "The FunBarn's big, but it gets mostly used for scientific study and data these days. The logistical demand long outgrew it and we now use this for all the incoming and outgoing food, water, medicine, ammo, and materials checking and distribution organising."

A huge chunk on the side of it had been roughly cut away, acting as a massive open door. Inside it, I could see scaffold formed into shelves that slaves wandered between, their errands following designated letters or numbers mounted on the sides and glancing at sheets of paper. Behind them lay stacks of crates in a perpetual state of movement. Some were being dropped off, others filled by the slaves trawling the shelves for items, a few were being emptied and packaged into smaller boxes upon carts, and other larger boxes planted onto armoured wagons.

"Everything you see here is either being directed to where in Fillydelphia needs it, or addressed to where out in the wastes requires it. Those workers are filling in any missing items or removing extras for stockpiling. We can't waste *anything* by risking over or under supply in this city, Murk. Not that it doesn't still happen..."

We trotted through the organised chaos of the warehouse floor. True to his usual manner, I could see no whips lashing or canes beating. Most of the slavers stood around barking orders at the very most. Judging by what I knew, I could see the slaves in here were, if anything, rather content compared to what else they could be doing in Fillydelphia. One even hummed to himself without being told off while he wandered the shelves and looked for something amongst empty ammo boxes.

The little part of me that took glee in 'acquiring' things for myself was rather beside himself with imagining running riot here taking things for our effort. Or just taking some of this stuff in general. They had everything! I could see glue sticks, tools, light bulbs, empty bottles, cutlery, clothes hangers, and even stacks of freshly printed paper from the Ministry of Image's presses!

"Sir, I've got what you requested."

A shadow falling across me as the female voice spoke led me to turn and find Ragini having bounded over upon our entrance. Casting a glance to me, she handed a clipboard to Protégé.

"How you doing, flightless?"

The name felt like an old habit she simply spurted out without thinking of her own situation. Struggling to not dare move my wings and indeed to keep my eyes from her own mangled appendages, I just coughed and shrugged.

"All right, I suppose..."

"Try not to bring any of your calamity into here. The workers just spent all last night clearing up after a feral ghouel somehow got into the stock room." She almost grinned. "Knowing your reputation for trouble I almost would prefer a horde of them to whatever events seem to follow in your wake."

"I... h-huh?" I had a reputation?

"Don't tease him, Ragini." I could almost see Protégé grinning as he read from the clipboard and waved us both over to a large office filled with slavers and workers around a low and wide table.

Ragini simply grinned and winked at me before I followed them in, not knowing quite what else to do. Why were griffons so weird? Yesterday she hated me, but today she was just joking with me. Was this some sort of coping mechanism, or did she perhaps see me as someone who could even vaguely understand what she was going through, despite what she'd said? I kept an eye on her as I entered the bustling room, noticing the way she paced on her talons. Like she was ready to spring any time. Even without her wings, I knew she would be an agile and lethal combatant.

Very quickly, I lost track of what was really going on with this meeting. Protégé bent over the table, seeing the swathes of files laid out over it. Massive maps were pinned to the walls, showing all of Equestria. I tried to flex my new knowledge from last night and read some of the locations but at most I got a couple of the earlier letters. Somewhere with an 'f' had lots of lines coming out of it, likely Fillydelphia, given it was probably the hub.

Protégé, Ragini, and the slavers chatted repeatedly over timetables and supplies. I heard them talk of tons of food, daily munitions productions, and caravan pricing. It almost seemed more important than working in the Mall, but it was easy to see there was no true value here. Protégé had been reduced to merely a supervisor of keeping things running than any real position of power. A thankless job. Maybe that was why he wanted this nomination thing so badly...

"Krrzzztch... stupid thing on?"

"Yeah, I—kzzztch... out right now. Need to—kzzztch—as I can, dark room below."

I blinked a few times, looking down at my PipBuck. I'd had it left on near silent to hear any news updates with my ears without disturbing anypony else, but other voices crackled through it. Tapping the buttons a couple of times I tried adjusting to another station (Pinkie, really, you don't creep me out as much now but your music station still drives me to insanity) but the voices remained. After a few seconds they clipped out. Probably just a wayward frequency, it wouldn't be the first time I'd heard such a thing.

Something else caught my attention though.

"What about the attrition rates?"

"They've gone up, sir. With the salvage teams resuming their work and the extra power needed from the materials in the crater, the personnel's been burning fast."

That caught my ear. Sitting up from the side of the room, I trotted to his side and found myself standing around a fierce debate of how to best allocate ponies as resources around Fillydelphia. Protégé argued for safer tasks until they could build numbers again, whilst others pushed for greater exertion in light of 'coming threats from above.' Really, it was all

over my head, but I glanced at the files below my nose with some interest. I had to hold my stomach as I saw some photos among them. The corpse pits I'd once hid in, a brutalised team exiting a Stable bearing technical prizes, a new machine in a factory driven by wasted ponies...

"Sacrifice must be made, but I will not send another fifty workers onto that deathtrap of a journey to Everfree until we can afford enough hired guns to get at least thirty five of them there, Mudball!" Protégé's voice cut in sharply, directed at a dull brown slaver across the table. After a few moments of silence, I saw him nod and back down. Protégé had won this exchange.

"Yes, sir. I'll see if the Hoof Beater's are willing to take a cheaper contract..."

"Good. The rest of you, start lining up the supply train for the journey and organise the distribution of food. We'll need to reduce rations until they can break into that processing plant's vault. The FunFarm workers have the most right now. I hate to take it from them, but it's the best we can do."

"Sir."

They all backed off from the table and took their notes. Gradually, they left one by one, leaving only a half dozen slaves in here carefully checking the lines between settlements on the maps along with the three of us. Sitting down with a sigh, Protégé wiped his brow.

"Every meeting is like a struggle for power now, they're all looking to get one over you every step of the way."

Ragini nodded curtly. "I caught Mudball openly dissenting against you being assigned here when I arrived. I think he believes he should have been made supervisor instead. I could get him in the locker room and remind him to—"

"No, no Ragini..." Protégé actually chuckled. "That won't be necessary. Now, we have work to do, Murk? I want you to... Murk?"

He had seen the look on my face. I'd been waiting for my chance to speak, standing looking at him with a more than a little distaste.

"Reducing rations to the FunFarm?" As much as I could, I tried to sound angry. "I know how little they get and it barely kept us alive as it was. How can you reduce that?"

I honestly felt disappointed in him. I'd just listened to them debate how best to *exploit* us slaves for their industry's end. It was Fillydelphia in a nutshell and everything I hated about it! Ragini shot me a stern look but Protégé only turned to the table, tapping it.

"Sometimes sacrifices need be made in Fillydelphia, Murk. There simply isn't the supply to go around. It's—"

"Horrible!" I moved up to the table, drawing the pictures across. "How can this all be justified? How can you just pick and choose who gets what and always put your own things before the slaves? I don't see *slavers* eating worse! Why don't they get rations cut? Why always us? I... I mean, look at all of this, it doesn't make sense!"

I expected a reprimand, I expected him to shut me down or Ragini to simply slap my mouth shut. Other slaves around us turned to look, as did some slavers from outside. Seeing them looking, Protégé waved them to keep working and turned back, looking genuinely interested.

"How does it not make sense?" Protégé motioned with a hoof for me to continue. "Go on, say your piece."

Oh... oh I had been *waiting* to do this. Taking a few breaths to let my tight throat open up and get some air, I stood and faced him.

"Everything about how this is run! It could be much better. I... I mean I know Fillydelphia isn't a nice place but... why not feed us better? If we got better food and... and rewards and less abuse maybe we might work better too? Red Eye spends thousands of caps to buy slaves, he paid five times my market value to get me! If... if they were healthy wouldn't that save him lots of money with them not dying all the time? Look at it!"

I shoved the picture of the corpse pit toward him.

"We're dying every day! Fillydelphia's making me choke on my own blood every few hours without treatment, and there are others who won't last past tonight! Why did you have to force us? If you offered security in here, better food, and maybe even used the money saved on paying us wouldn't some of us *want* to work here and build better things without just working us till we die? I've... I've never seen it from this side, of slavers debating around a table over how best to do all this. I never realised how *stupid* all of this really was! How horrible and brutal and merciless!"

"You feel there's a better way then, Murk?" Protégé's voice was measured and calm. He hadn't moved.

"Yes! How many slaves die every day? This can't last long, there's only so many ponies in the wasteland and if we die so fast how can we really help? Why doesn't Red Eye just... like... make everypony healthier and let us want to help make better things nicely? Why doesn't he get nice ponies to lead them instead of evil ones? *Why doesn't he put safety railings on anything?* It might be a bit slower but... but we'd not have to do all this..."

To my great surprise, Ragini watched and listened almost respectfully. Protégé did the same, before smiling to me and patting my shoulder.

"You and I think the same, Murk. We're idealists at heart. Unfortunately, reality doesn't work that way. I need to check some things, but I'll explain as we go."

He began to lead me around the room. Checking things on his clipboard and the walls he still spoke to me as I followed beside him.

"The first issue that causes this is simply that of how the wasteland works, Murk. Ponies are tough, weathered, and independent survivors by this point, save perhaps Tenpony Tower. Loyalty matters little against simply making the next day, I think your time in here has made you think of it as some sort of paradise out there. It's not."

He tapped the map, checking the lines of transit even as he pointed out vast areas of blank wilderness.

"For ponies out there, it's a day to day struggle without anypony to bring them food. They have to do it all for themselves by themselves for the most part. That breeds a kind of pony over a few generations, Murk. They don't *like* working for somepony else. They only think about themselves. If we were to simply rely on volunteers, we would never get enough bodies to make a difference in Fillydelphia. They simply would not come. Many places have tried that approach, and every time the wasteland decides it would rather take care of itself than give up anything. Why would somepony come from Tenpony to here?"

He indicated through a window over the stock yards outside where wagons were being filled. Behind it I could see the vast red haze and brutal landscape of Fillydelphia.

"If... if Fillydelphia was nicer and less smoggy, m-maybe they would—"

"It's not, Murk. Fillydelphia was like this long before Master Red Eye came here. Yet it is the only source of major industry left in Equestria now. How would we get enough volunteers to work of their own choice for years on end in such a hell, Murk? We even tried it a few times; offering better care for those who decided to come. Very few did."

"Then what about all the slavers? They're the worst thing here!"

Protégé hesitated a second, seeing the others around and guided me out of the office that we could trot alongside the warehouse floor, far from any prying ears.

"Slavers are a unique breed. Remember what I said about them needing an outlet of their own authority? That's only one aspect. Slavers are not a nice group of ponies, Murk. But they have skills we need to control a workforce, and unfortunately, the idea of a 'nice' slaver is a *very* rare one in the wasteland. There is no practical way to reform them all. That's the crux of all this, Murk. It's simply not *practical* to make all this good and nice for everypony."

"But it's not practical to burn through us this fast either! This can't last..."

"It won't. This is not intended to go forever. Indeed, you are perhaps among the last generation of... workers, to be in here. After Unity and after we have reached a certain level of infrastructure, the children of Master Red Eye will emerge from their learning to take over a pre-built city ready to accept their more advanced skills. *Then* we can focus on something greater. You see, Murk, this is all but an unfortunate means to a greater end. The most any of us can do is try to be what we can from the inside. Masters like myself, Old Grizzly, and List Seeker... we just try to protect who we can, knowing that the reality is that this was always going to hurt somepony."

Rounding on him, I actually felt myself scowl.

"Somepony? Try *hundreds*. Thousands maybe!"

There was a silence between us. Ragini had followed on, staying silent away from our argument. We passed by slaves pulling small carts full of oatmeal urns to the exit for distribution. I'd seen that cart before. It was the FunFarm's, now only half full.

"Why couldn't it just take longer? Do it a small thing at a time rather than launching for the whole thing and needing it to be horrible along the way? Spend longer finding nice ponies and working together to rebuild in peace over a much longer period? Why all the sacrifice to rush it?"

Protégé took a long time in responding, clearly thinking deeply. I saw him look at that clipboard, bearing the exact numbers upon it no doubt of precisely how horrible this city was.

"Industry can't be created in small scale, Murk. By the time we solved one issue, we would not be able to protect it as we moved on. We need this large scale to invest, protect, and create a real nationwide infrastructure. Equestria cannot linger in squalor forever, Murk. How many ponies die to the wasteland if we take our time? We could see a restored Equestria within our lifetime! Unity will be soon, and the opportunity will have been missed if we are not ready for it. Perhaps this is simply where perceptions of what sacrifice is worthwhile must agree to disagree."

He paused, looking up from the clipboard.

"Perhaps I was wrong. Maybe I am something of a realist with loftier goals, rather than a true idealist like yourself."

He returned his eyes down, turning away from me. It dawned that we really were looking at this from opposite sides despite his own experiences as a slave in Fillydelphia. I was looking at it from an individual pony's viewpoint and morality wishing for things to be right, while he saw it from the view of statistics and large scale practicality while wishing for a better end goal. Like master like pupil...

"But, you've seen all this too." I trotted a little closer. "You know how much it hurts us. The very things you support *still* want to hurt you, look what happened to you! Then you

come back and just say it all again? How is that worth it?"

I pointed my hoof to the window beside us. Outside, framed in the dusty window, I had caught in the corner of my eye while speaking a slave by the side of the road being unhooked from a cart and falling to the floor. Limp. Dead.

Above him, a slaver tucked his whip away again before simply hoofing the body into the ditch by the side of the road.

Protégé glared at it. For a second I thought he would launch into a tirade, all the practicalities and all the realistic reasons that I knew made sense. I just didn't like them. Instead, he took rather more time than I had ever known him to.

"I... I don't like it." He spoke quietly. "It... just is. Sacrifices... must be made. That's what he taught me. I will see a new Equestria."

That was that. He trotted off away from me into the main warehouse area again.

Ragini, having kept quiet, glared at me with an odd look. A small smile creaked across her beak.

"Not bad, flightless."

She moved off herself as well. The idea was very strange, that she simply judged people by their confidence or ability to stick up for themselves. Was that how griffons worked? Or just her? Why couldn't they just be like ponies and be easy to understand?

I watched her disappear around the corner, leaving me alone in the supply area with an odd feeling of bittersweet 'victory' over the argument. I'd never seen him look that unsure of himself before in all the time I'd known him.

Then it hit me. For all the curiosity about that strange pony, he had left me alone in the supply area.

Left me *alone* in the *supply area*.

Hehehe!

I quickly cast my eyes around to the shelves, backing off out of sight from the rest. I was right against the wall of the huge complex, at the last shelves before the windows and very nicely hidden from sight. I didn't waste time and started scouring the shelves with my eyes, looking for anything that could be handy! Whipping my saddlebag open, I dropped in a set of matches for Coral's newly purchased lantern, a little monocular, several washers and nuts for Glimmer's modifications and even stretched right up to lift down two sets of glue. I could only imagine how handy they might be for odd tasks. Grinning madly, I even found a tattered old revolver. Lacking a barrel or grip, it was pretty much just the drum in the middle that was still intact, no doubt ready to be sent back to the manufacturing bays. I helped myself to that too, Glimmer would find a use.

Other things I mentally noted down to pick up later were the large swathes of cloth nearby that Coral and I could sew weather cloaks out of. There were also some larger saddlebags and plates of metal taken out of body armour. I'd never get them hidden right now but I wasn't in any rush. I would be here all day after all. My eyes fell upon a rather lovely looking row of spark batteries that glowed slightly, though. Maybe I could—

"Murk!"

I froze, dropping down and hastily attaching my saddlebag shut again as I heard the hoofsteps coming closer! Protégé stuck his head around the shelf corner and motioned with a hoof.

"Come on, I've got a job for you."

"Y-yes, master!" I hastily coughed into my hoof and trotted after him. No worries, that

was a good haul for now. This place was a gold mine! We had tools, food, drink, a container for my RadAway, a map on my PipBuck, some explosive lockpicks made from brass casings, a lantern and now a monocular, matches, and tons of scrap between it all! Not to mention my very own battle saddle I was being allowed to keep for now. Oh yes, I could see this starting to come together!

Protégé waited for me beside a small cart, holding a sheet of paper in his magic.

"This will be a good chance for you to practice what you've learned, Murk. These files need sorted alphabetically on the shelves. They're near the back of the warehouse, under the gantry, all labelled. It's just my logs of what I've been organising; a little monotonous, but just the sort of thing it's helpful to have you for."

"I'll, um, try..."

I saw him raise an eyebrow and sighed.

"...master." I muttered it. He nodded and moved away.

Behind me I saw Mudball casting eyes at Protégé's back even as he left, being watched carefully by Ragini. After a moment of matching eyes with the griffon, he looked back down and they left me to work.

"This is 'Food' so that's, hmm... this one?"

I muttered to myself, crouching beside the cart with my eyes tracking over the document in front of me. I hadn't exactly made fast progress here other than the ones starting with 'M' after Protégé had taught me to spell my own name. Only now I was trapped between these little squiggly lines, one with a small line through it and the other without. Annoyingly, while this file was clearly about food, (it held a picture of a tantalising-looking pie) I couldn't remember what that looked like in word form.

Urgh. Protégé's records method wasn't exactly easy for the borderline illiterate.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much worth taking from where I was, and I wasn't exactly sure how wary the overseers were in here. Following on from my gatherings before, I didn't want to push my luck. Besides, I *did* want to learn to read.

Pulling a few folders out from the shelf, I skimmed them for anything similar to help me figure it out. I *knew* that 'f' had a squiggly line but did it have the extra little line or was it the snake? Everything felt so confusing. Protégé had told me to watch for letters called something specific; towels, if I remembered, but so far that wasn't helping. Especially when towels also meant the rugs you dried yourself with. Who designed words that way?

Eventually, I located another file about food. So it did have the little line! 'F' was a little line through a squiggle. Ok! I began shifting through all the ones on the cart looking for any other ones about food and threw each of them in at the end of the 'F' section. As it turned out, that was the vast majority. I umm'ed and aah'ed my way through most of the pile, likely knowing I got something wrong now and again. (Why was it 'double you' when the letter was clearly two 'V' letters?) But eventually I whittled it down and felt rather proud of myself as I did so.

The last one utterly stumped me though.

It outright told me what I was to look for. It held a straight line then a circle beside it at the top. I didn't remember *that* in the alphabet. I even tried to cheat and compare it to others on the shelf, but found none at all that matched.

Sighing, I eventually trotted over to the nearest slave.

"Um, excuse me... miss?" I shrunk back slightly as the scrawny mare looked down at me without much care. "Where does this go?"

Her magic lifted it, casting her eyes for a few seconds across the top.

"Ah, this? Exception form, goes in the little room under the gantry down there. See? Number ten at the top, if it's a number it's in there."

"Oh!" What a *cheat*. A *number*. "Th-thank you, miss!"

"Eh, whatever." She simply shrugged, returning to the heavy crates she was trying to pry open. I didn't expect much from her, if you got a safe job in slavery, you tended to just try and not attract any attention to try and *keep* it.

Meanwhile, feeling happier than I really should at having recognised a few letters for the first time in my life alone, I began to trot toward the indicated room with the form tucked under one wing. I was learning to read, we were getting stuff together to escape, I wasn't with Shackles, and I could move my wings! All things considered, life was pretty good by my standards.

The room's door creaked open, ahead of me, the room was almost entirely in darkness. I could see the vague shape of shelves and the numbers listed on little stamped bits of paper along with some old filing cabinets and desks on the dusty floor, but the lights had long ceased to work. I could see the number I was after, the line and circle right at the bottom of the room if I squinted, the light from out here casting inside.

Slowly, I trotted in. Hard concrete tapped under my hooves and without really knowing why, I softened my trotting to not make any noise. The further I walked in, the more the warehouse behind me dulled in sound. Past the first three shelves, then the fifth...

Then the door slammed shut and cast the room into utter darkness.

Squeaking as I blinked and let my natural sight adjust to the change, I made to gallop before stopping. No... no, the door had just been on springs, it was okay... it was okay...

All the same, I couldn't help but feel a rising tension in the air. A sense of something watching me as I went further in. I felt myself speed up, moving to a canter and pacing quickly with little whimpers. I didn't want to look behind me. The darkness seemed to gather in corners, shadows within the black itself. My neck tingled with sweat and I felt my breathing get quicker.

"Kzzztch—there?"

"Shut up you—kzzztch..."

I knew this feeling. I'd felt it in nightmares, and I'd felt it in the Stable. Like being chased by a ghost. Now as I heard that same frequency go off, I realised it sounded like somepony on a radio. Wait, hadn't it mentioned a dark room?

Was... was something behind me?

No, not waiting. Move. Move *now*. I didn't like this, somepony felt like they were right behind me no matter where I turned!

Before I knew it, I was almost galloping toward the last shelf and threw the folder into it hastily. Cringing, whining and hopping from hoof to hoof nervously to turn around, I fled immediately for the door, not daring to imagine what that *presence* was I felt in the darkness. It felt like something was *right behind my tail*.

Without hesitation, I flung the door open and dove outside, slammed it shut and spun to run further away from the dark room. I stopped on the spot as I collided with something.

Oh, wait... somepony.

I heard him grunt more in shock than pain. It wasn't like my little body was going to hurt anypony. Staggering away from each other, I felt like throwing my hoof in my mouth when I saw who it was.

"Murk..." Protégé rubbed his side with a hoof. "I can't exactly say you're not making a habit of literally running into me when I'm looking for you."

"S-sorry! I... the dark in there... just... um..." I caught my breath. "Sorry, master."

No need to sound foolish by talking about being scared of the dark. Even so, I figured he got the message and nodded.

"Well, your familiarity with the dark and sneaking around is what I need you for now, Murk."

"H-huh?"

Protégé's eyes narrowed.

"The Great Game continues. We've had a break in."

He took me up the gantry to a suspended level above the warehouse floor. A series of thin-walled offices atop the catwalk were occupied by banks of terminals or specialist sorting rooms attended to by slaves and slavers alike. Trotting to the furthest office away, Protégé unlocked the door to wander inside. I followed him, glancing around at the recently moved-in office.

"What do you mean a break in?"

"Someone infiltrated my office, Murk." Protégé shut the door behind me with a flash of his horn. "While I was out, somepony has stolen their way in here."

"What did they take?" Looking around it all seemed very sturdy and bare with smoothed plaster on the walls that had clearly once born a different colour, and held glossy wooden boards on its corners and bottom rim. He had brought the items I had lifted here up with him and dumped them by his desk and the remainder held a smattering of reading materials and organisation documents. On a rack at the back were a few changes of clothes with a low bed next to the window. It was a definite downgrade from the padded office in the Mall.

"Nothing."

"Then... how do you know someone broke in?"

Waving me forward, he lightly opened a drawer.

"Simple tricks, Murk. Anyone seeking ways to ensure things in here keeps careful watch on who is doing what. A simple thin thread stuck to the drawer where I keep more valuable information. One that would be snapped by anyone looking through it without even realising. I keep this drawer locked, the door secured and the only other way in is a window with a thirty foot drop, also locked. There's an attic above us, but it doesn't lead anywhere."

"Maybe it just got broken? If nothings been taken..."

"More than that. Specific organisation of how I leave my things. Scattered and untidy or not, I know where I leave them. I take measures to ensure I remember where each thing in my desk drawers is in relation to each other. It's been moved."

I couldn't much help but store these ideas away to watch out for in future from the perspective of somepony who often *did* the sneaking.

"So what were they after?"

"Information, Murk. Likely trying to find out what I knew, what my schedule was or

anything else. Detail is key these days, Murk. They likely sought simply to dig up dirt or simply test the waters of whether I would notice.”

I wandered about the room, looking at each part of the sparse furniture and out of the window. How would I have gotten in here? I couldn’t lockpick, so the best place for me would be to try and grapple my way to the roof.

“Is the attic’s roof, um, solid?”

“The section above this room, yes. The interesting thing is, I keep another length of thin string by the door. It was unbroken.”

I stood and stared at the attic door up a small flight of stairs at the back of the office. There wasn’t anything to say they couldn’t lockpick themselves, and if they’d gotten into the drawer they must have, but they clearly hadn’t entered through the door. I saw Protégé sit down, tenderly rubbing his bandaged neck with a slight grimace.

“Are... are you all right?” It occurred to me I’d never once asked that yet.

“Yes, Murk. Thank you. Nothing worse than what I imagine you are feeling. It has not been an easy time for us and there will still be many dangers ahead for either you or me I would wager.”

“I’m sorry you lost what you wanted...”

I didn’t really hear his response, nothing other than general politeness that I let slip from actually listening to, for I heard my PipBuck pick up again.

“Kzzztch—right up there, you all right?”

“Yes, it’s fine. Sooner I can leave from up here the —kzzztch...”

It faded off into static with unintelligible noises.

I could hear Protégé asking what I was looking at, but I didn’t answer. I simply held up a hoof for him to be quiet and slowly trotted forward. Somepony’s radio hitting my PipBuck’s receiver from before...

They’d mentioned a dark room, then told somepony to shut up while I’d been *in* a dark room, then asking if they were fine ‘up there.’

I felt a very cold chill run over me as I leaned close to Protégé’s ear.

“Did you check the attic?”

“Not yet. I haven’t been up there in some time.”

“Then I know how they got out... they didn’t.”

I held the PipBuck up, close enough that he could hear. Occasional lines asking if they had ‘gotten anything’ or ‘when they could leave.’ They weren’t stealing into the room... they were always here, checking it and feeding information through a radio every time he left!

Very carefully, I saw Protégé lift his revolver from the pile beside his desk and get off his seat. He spoke quietly, soft enough to let me hear.

“E.F.S. can’t see them, but there are ways to block it. The stairs creak, they’ll hear us coming. This needs to be quick.”

“Kzzztch—just lemme know when they go and I’ll tail em.”

“Hold your hooves, Dirk. Least you get to stretch your legs.”

I knew that name. It was one of Barb’s shades! They must have been trying to help Shackles to feed him information on what Protégé was up to! My mind briefly wondered why they didn’t just go for the kill even as Protégé placed a hoof on the steps and readied his telekinesis around the latch of the attic door.

I saw him nod to me. Shaking, I nodded back. At least he was with me for this.

A couple of breaths... and then he pulled the door open and galloped up. I followed,

unwilling to let him face those dark terrors alone again. Ahead of me, he burst into the room!

I heard somepony from above shout, a scrambling of hooves and Protégé shouting for them to ‘put it down.’ My ears split right as I ran in from a loud gunshot in such close proximity and fell to the side when the stairwell splintered and blasted wood into my face. He was shooting at us!

Protégé’s revolver fired back, I couldn’t see what was going on, cramped in the little stairwell before actually entering. Wood cracked and the sound of galloping hooves gave way to two more shots from Protégé’s revolver, snapping and echoing around the room. Dragging myself up, I pulled myself into the attic, saddle mouthpiece drawn for... some reason. The attic was large and surprisingly well lit around the wooden beams. Protégé was galloping forward to dive behind an old water tank.

“Murk, get down!”

He shouted it even as another round of buckshot blasted the beam beside me into tinder. Squealing, I fell to the side between two beams and onto the soft roof padding that I half buried myself in from the exchange of gunfire above me. I could hear screams from the warehouse below at the sounds. Daring to poke my head up, I finally saw our assailant at the far end. A shadowy figure visible only from the glint of a sawn off shotgun magically floating as it reloaded. Behind them, a newly cut trapdoor opened to the roof, designed to look exactly like a *part* of the roof itself. No wonder Protégé had assumed they hadn’t got in there from here!

Keeping my head low beneath the beams of wood that traversed the attic at this side I heard their shotgun blast into the water tank Protégé hid behind. Dropping back, away from the buckshot, Protégé blind fired around the corner before reloading his own revolver from a pocket full of rounds.

“You think I can’t hear that? Eat this!” The Shade pointed the shotgun and pulled the trigger. Protégé huddled behind cover as best he could, keeping his limbs hidden.

The raider’s weapon simply clicked.

“Ah *shit*.” Daring to glance up, I saw the shotgun floating up to his eye after the jam before the Shade clambered out of the trapdoor.

“He’s running!” I cried out to Protégé, who simply holstered his weapon and got up to make chase. Following him, we both ran onto the more solid wooden floor where the Shade had been residing. I saw a strange piece of arcane technology humming away on the floor. Protégé looked at it with surprise.

“Grab that, Murk!”

Throwing it in my saddlebag, Protégé and I ran to the trap door and glanced out. In the red light of Fillydelphia even a Shade could be seen galloping across the walkways of the warehouse roof. We both clambered out, dropping six feet to the metal catwalks and tore off after them. Protégé took an easy lead with his longer legs, weaving around the air ducts upon the roof to close the distance.

The Shade moved like water over anything barring the way! I saw him glide over railings and slide between thin gaps in a cage fence around a generator without so much as slowing down. Protégé vaulted the same railing and shot out the lock of the fence door to run through, with me following as close as I could after simply running under the first rail.

“Come on!”

He could shout, but I’d never be able to keep up here! Ducking and diving I kept my

little hooves moving to keep sight on the Shade that fled across a mass of pipes, aiming to turn right toward a fire escape! Protégé put his head down and sprinted, smartly taking the direct route rather than the one the Shade had taken. Even when the Shade got near the fire escape, Protégé's shots slammed on its top level railings, making him leap back.

"Just get to fuck, you little weasel!" Growling, having had to jump back into cover, the Shade didn't have a choice but to abandon it now that we were close enough to catch him if he tried to go down the steep stairs. Even a Shade couldn't trot down them quickly!

My legs were aching under me though, I wouldn't be in this chase much longer. I could see Protégé was flagging too, his neck no doubt severely hampering him. I had to get smart... think, Murky, think!

The Shade ducked behind a massive air conditioning unit, disappearing from sight. I knew what I had to do.

Stopping, I ran backwards and spun around in the same direction, taking a route around the same unit to catch him if he doubled back. It's what I would have done! Dropping to my side and sliding on my momentum below the pipe, I whipped my saddle's mouthpiece back out and pointed it up the adjoining route through this maze atop the roof.

Sure enough, the Shade was running right toward me. Taking only brief aim, I bit hard on the mouthpiece and shot the hook right at him even while still sliding from my dive.

"Whoa, where did yo—!" Ducking to the side, the Shade simply threw himself at the ground, not having enough time to realise it was only a grapple and not a proper gun before choosing to dodge. Slamming into the other side of the thin gap between the air unit and pipes I at least made him pause and let Protégé loop around further ahead to come up behind the raider. We had him trapped!

"Don't move I said *don't*! Who was it that sent you? Shackles? Grindstone?"

The Shade, half blurring at the edges into the shades below each part of the roof, spun from me to face Protégé and snarled.

"Shades don't squeal, mister teacher's pet! Especially not to bastards who killed Barb! Didn't even need payment to take up work to fuck up your life when we got the offer!"

"You lot are assassins, why didn't you just kill me when I slept in that room? What information were you after?"

The Shade grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know? Goodbye..."

Neither of us had seen it but that blurriness had hid his horn casting a spell! Only when I saw the growing darkness did I realise it before he melted away through a space so thin even I couldn't squeeze through! A blink spell! Racing up, I saw him reform on the other side, grin at me through the gap and run off.

"Murk! Boost up!"

Before I even realised how silly an idea this was, I put my back to the gap and held my hooves together to boost Protégé atop the gap we couldn't fit through. Feeling my front legs burn with the effort of lifting even a lighter pony like Protégé I gasped and staggered when I felt him reach the top. Catching a breath, I used my grapple to get over myself.

From atop the unit I saw the Shade sprinting for the edge of the building, pursued by Protégé. Hopping from unit to unit, I knew I would never catch up to this chase again so I simply tried to keep an eye on what was going on.

"See you later, upstart!"

The Shade shouted over his shoulder before leaping off the building's edge! I actually stopped and saw him hang in the air from the abnormally long jump as he stretched out...

and landing on the building just over from here.

Behind him, Protégé clenched his teeth and increased his speed. I saw his horn glow, spreading around himself as he charged up and leapt! He was trying to lighten himself! I ran forward, aiming to grapple over.

He made it.

Barely.

Slamming into the side of the building, I heard him cry out in pain from his injuries at the impact. His hooves just grasped the ledge, leaving his hind section kicking in thin air below. Feeling horror in my gut, I sprinted up and fired my grapple to the other building, putting away my fear of falling to zip right across. Landing heavily from such a shallow swing, I scrambled across the pebbled roof and thrust my hooves out to grab Protégé, hauling him onto the roof.

We simply lay there for a few seconds. Exhausted and sore. The Shade kept sprinting even after our stamina had gone. Barb's disciples that still lurked Fillydelphia were very athletic raiders, and we were just a pair of small ponies recently out of hospital with still bandaged injuries. We'd never catch up now.

"Thank... phew... thank you, Murk. It seems I made the right choice in having you around..."

I didn't even reply. The long sprint was catching up to me and I just lay on my side, hooves limp as I struggled to get air. My throat was feeling sore and tight, leading me to rasp each time. With hooves that felt like lead, I took a long gulp from my RadAway canteen and coughed down the horrible mixture. The rampant thumping in my chest gradually died down, the taint growth slowing for now.

"He..." I stammered, having to swallow back the metallic tang left over in my mouth. "He got away..."

"Yes, yes he did." Protégé struggled to his hooves and stretched back and forth, checking his bandages. "That's a new move afoot, that my enemies amongst the slavers have recruited Barb's survivors out of their hatred for me. We shall have to tread softly and keep a wary ear out. Good thing I have you for that, hmm?"

He tried to offer a smile, likely happy to simply be alive after that jump.

"Um... yes?"

"Just from now on, I think I'll leave the telekinesis tricks to the Dweller. I'd heard she was good with them. Who said only you were inspired to ideas from her? Problem is, I don't seem to be very *good* at them."

Patting my back, he helped me up as we both tiredly limped to the nearest fire escape. His magic lifted the odd object from my saddlebag. Part of me felt a little odd, he could have *asked* first... damn slavers...

"This isn't common, it's an E.F.S. blocker. I wasn't aware we even *had* any in Fillydelphia that still functioned. Somepony is supplying them with advanced equipment to indirectly aid their interests."

"Shackles and Grindstone?"

"Well, that in itself is obvious. They've as much as told us before, but this makes me worry where they are *getting* this stuff. Now, we've got to go to the Alpha-Omega, Old Grizzly wants to see me with a drop of information somewhere where there will be less curious ears."

He smirked as we got onto the fire escape.

"Besides, I hear there's a couple of little fillies who are eager to see you."

"I just don't understand."

"Understand what?"

Protégé glanced down to me as I asked my question. We were trotting back the way we had come, around the FunBarn to the Alpha-Omega Hotel. Briefly, Protégé had met with a furious Ragini. She had tried to find us, but our chase had been on such an unknown direction upon the rooftop that she hadn't been able to locate her charge in time.

Couple that with losing a chance to take a shot at the Shades, and the griffon had not been pleased. She had been left to guard his office, in case anypony returned with a sneaky subversion. I'd heard her swearing and punching a wall even as we'd left, keeping her rage out of sight of her charge.

"I just don't understand why we can't go to Red Eye right now and tell him about all this. That they were happy to try and kill you when you found us yesterday. That they're stealing and that they betrayed you in the Mall!"

Protégé glanced toward the upper floors of the FunBarn. Likely where Red Eye was right now.

"My Master is exceptionally busy, Murk. Unity is near, and he has greater things than my life to worry himself about at this very moment. Even I cannot simply request an audience or walk in."

"You didn't see him after you almost died? Didn't he come to visit you?"

There was that pause again, before he simply smiled.

"He didn't have to, I hear he looked in on me before I woke up, but after that I reported to him from my bed. I will see him soon enough however, once Unity's preparations are finished in Fillydelphia. Rest assured, I will have a full report for him."

He seemed to grin a little to himself. Whether over imagining the satisfaction of Red Eye's sweeping authority dealing with this or that love of precise writing and reports I knew he had, I wasn't sure. Briefly, I pitied Red Eye having to read whatever extensive thing he'd wrote. (Knowing Protégé, it likely had *graphs*.)

"As you might have seen based on what you told me of bringing Lilac here, an act I cannot thank you for enough, security has had something of an upgrade in this place since Littlepip essentially trotted right in."

Ahead of us, the Alpha-Omega Hotel's gates were secured with great measure. The fence ahead of the lit building thrummed with magic power and two small towers held griffon snipers watching our every move. Protégé was permitted entry without a word though. They allowed him (and apparently, his 'assistant') in on sight. I took the fanatical glance from Red Eye's guard very seriously. He bore the mark of the fanatical elite core of Red Eye's army upon his combat armour's breast after all.

No. No trouble or hijinks here. In other places, if caught, I'd be punished. Here I'd be executed on the spot without a warning.

What awaited me just as we went inside was beyond what I could have imagined, however.

Fresh new carpets lined the main hallway of the hotel. That classic design of Fillydelphia to have a grand staircase just beyond the front doors and reception was lit and of a

temperature that felt like a refreshing comfort after the stuffy outside. They had working air conditioning! With the doors closed and blocking the sound I could have imagined I was simply back in Old Equestria all over again.

"This is the seat of Equestria's future, Murk. We have done all we could to ensure a safe and happy place for them to grow, learn and dream. This main hall is mostly just for guards and exchanges, but above us in the old rooms they have their dorms while the grand ballroom has been converted to a place of learning."

We trotted in, me feeling distinctly out of place with my filthy fleece and matted coat. On a guard's insistence, I even had to scrape my hooves on a little mat before I was allowed to wander further into the hotel itself and view the long hallways of thick red and burnished gold fittings. I could hear them, children playing, laughing, and scampering around on little hooves in adjoining rooms and floors.

I couldn't help but make contrast to the empty orphanage I'd so recently seen.

After we dropped in our equipment and weapons (My battle saddle was a weapon. In my mind) to the reception, we were finally allowed to continue in. Protégé led me upstairs, making assurances to the robed staff that I was with him and having to hide his smirk as I hopped on each of the thickly carpeted stairs. What? It was designed for a time when ponies were bigger than me! No wonder the foals didn't come down here much.

Quite simply, I couldn't quite get over the sort of place I was seeing. It was clean! Those cabinets on the landing between stairs were actually polished and held growing flowers! The bannisters were all intact with recut wood! At the top of the stairs, the large square room bore clear tables, huge doors with intricate stained glass and beyond that a dining room where cooks hurriedly set out a meal upon the serving tables. Clearly, their lunch was soon.

Even from here, I could smell the warm cooking. Tasting the sweet scent of sugar and thick fumes of gravy or soup wafting from between the doorways... oh please, say we can have lunch here, Protégé? My stomach was actually *growling* at me with the need and temptation.

"Not even I or Master Red Eye are permitted to this food, Murk. He would not dare feast on this while workers do not. Sacrifice must come from all."

Clearly he'd seen me poking my nose against the glass and slightly steaming it up. Blinking, I blushed and stepped back from it.

"S-sorry... warm food and... um..."

"I know, Murk. I know. We'll get something soon enough. But please, come here. While we wait for Old Grizzly I think you might like to see how the foals are living? It might offer you a better perspective on this entire endeavour."

"Um, please. Yes." I nodded, feeling my hooves unwilling to leave behind the dining room. The chef was serving *mashed potatoes* out to the tables! I'd only ever dreamed of them! Yet I forced myself to move along and follow Protégé as he trotted down the adjoining hall. It was rather wide, definitely not just a corridor and arced around a massive curved wing of the hotel. Then as we trotted, I began to see the truth of this place.

Behind clear glass doors, I saw the foals. They were sitting inside the grand hall, dozens of them! Upon cushions resting over an old dance floor they sat and stared as an elderly stallion taught them something on a blackboard. They scribbled in little jotters, some bored and some avidly taking it up. Behind them I could hear another little group singing songs while a third was constructing little wooden models on basic workbenches. Across the grand hall where ponies must have once danced, Red Eye had created a full *school*.

Glancing in, I felt a little spike of envy at seeing them all having fun together as they learned the skills of life. All those foals, sometimes less than half my age, were likely more intelligent than I'd ever be.

Protégé rounded off and saw me staring through the window. One little foal turned and saw me there, waving with a smile. They were so idealistic and willing. Waving back, I felt Protégé's hoof on my shoulder, beckoning me onward to not disturb them in class.

"Don't worry, Murk. We'll get you up to speed. I promise."

The smile was genuine, I couldn't help but sniff and nod back with a little grin. Of all things, I was thankful that he was willing to help me with this, be it ten years too late or not.

Passing around the hallway that encircled the large ballroom, Protégé led me through to a series of common rooms and even a library that had been redesigned out of a music room. I could still see the piano there. Still *hear* the piano as a little colt tentatively plucked out a few chords upon it. The noise of children flooded into my ears as I discovered this was their place to play and do as they willed.

"Foals need time to discover their own likes, Murk. We don't drill them."

"Protégé!"

The squeaking shout went out and before I knew it a small crowd of them had followed the shout and surged across the ground to us. Allegedly, he was rather popular with the foals.

"Are you here to tell us another story?"

"I really want to hear the one with Daring Do again!"

Rather swamped along with all these foals, I stepped back a little, grinning at him. The thought of Protégé sitting and reading a book to them was, frankly, *hilarious* to me. That serious buck having to tell a tale would be something all right. He shook his head and talked to them, speaking to them all by name and asking how they were doing. I took a step to the side and looked around the room, not daring to leave it for fear of being considered an intruder without Protégé. I could see other rooms attached that led back to the school or on to the dining room while others clearly were large lines of dorms that foals came and went from.

They were healthy. Happy. Bright and with a delighted glint in their eye I'd never known from anypony other than a drunken Glimmer!

"...Murky? Is that you?"

Stopping on the spot, I heard the little rasping female tone and turned with all the hope in my heart.

Both Starshine Melody and Lilac Rose were stood right there. Clad in body covering robes other than their faces, the two little ghouls widened their eyes to see it was me. A sweet little smell came off them, emerging from necklaces that swung around their necks to disguise the stench that being a ghoul brought.

"Starshine! Lilac!"

Trying my best to smile widely for them, I knelt down before them. The pair offered small smiles, and shuffled forward, both hugging me at the same time. Really I hadn't thought about how they saw me, but I'd been the one to save both of them.

"Are you two doing okay?"

"Mhm." Starshine murmured a little quietly when she stepped back. "They gave me medicine to help the pain go away..."

The poor thing, she must have been coping with the reality of being a ghou! now, her experience had been far more traumatic than Lilac's. I didn't understand how becoming one worked, but in such a short and horrible way the idea of there being pain involved seemed all too likely.

"We help each other." Lilac stood rather adamantly beside Starshine. "We're best friends now. Star got them to let me play and not be scared of me."

"Good girl." I tried to remember how Coral spoke and emulate it as best I could.

"Are you here because it's time to go find Miss Coral again?" Lilac seemed hopeful. "Because... um... Star wanted to know if she could come too..."

I could feel things getting ever more complicated again, not to mention a bit of a horrible decision of what to say here. Yes, I'd be more than fine to help her get out, but I knew I was speaking for Coral here.

"Well... you can both certainly come with us, is that... fine?"

"Yes!" Both spoke at the same time, Lilac turning and nodding to Starshine as though saying "Told you it'd be fine!"

"But it's not right now. I'm just... um... on a really secret mission to get in and speak to you right now!"

Oh, my imagination. Here we went... I could see their eyes light up and hustle close to hear secrets. I could see Protégé still talking to many of the other foals and hearing what they had been learning.

"Listen close, we've got a plan coming together but I need to know how to get you two out of here along with Coral's son, Chirpy Sum."

"He's not here right now!" Lilac piped up.

"Yes, um..." Starshine was clearly the less confident of the two. "They said he got to go to 'advanced studies' somewhere else with one of the leaders cos' he's so smart with maths. I can't even do all my times tables but he can do really really complex stuff like square roots and... and triangle things."

Well now, depending on circumstances, that might make things easier to get him back, I'd have to pass that information on and try to find out where. Maybe Protégé knew.

"Good work girls." I patted each of their heads, remembering how I had seen my friend do it. "But Star, how did you get out last time? Could you do that again?"

"Uh huh. They never found my hole. It's near the drain pipe outside at the fence. I used to sneak down the old servant's staircase to get out to look around from it."

"I used that too at the orphanage!" Lilac beamed at her new friend and the pair laughed together. I joined in lightly, feeling impolite not to. It really was wonderful to see Lilac having found a place she could be with other foals.

"Right, I'm sure I could find it. Check the drainpipe every so often, Star. I'll... um... I'll leave a note there once we know what's going on. Okay?"

"Okay, Mister Murky!" Starshine lit up. "Lilac's told me about Miss Coral, and I told her about the really *really* big pony that carried you off when you got sick! You all sound nice and... and I kinda miss my own mummy and daddy since I came here. They're nice but... I want to go home..."

Straining harder than I ever had to stop my traitorous eyes from dampening, I embraced her lightly.

"We'll all make it. I... I promise."

"R-really?"

“Yeah...”

I felt like I'd made a mistake saying that. Promises set false hope. But she was just a foal, what else could I say? If there was one thing I knew I cared about helping, it was children. It always had been a thing to me, now that I could see my own life for what it was, helping them escape even these bright and shining chains that sought to turn them into Red Eye's personal little population seemed important. I felt sure Coral wouldn't mind.

“Murk.” Protégé's voice picked up from behind me.

Blinking fast, I smiled a goodbye to the girls and stood up. “Y-yes?”

“Old Grizzly's here, we have to go.”

“Well, Murk. I'm glad to see you have survived your ordeal.”

Old Grizzly broke that stern face of his for at least a small smile when we entered the small room. It was rather out of the way, quiet and hidden.

“Th-thank you... sir.” Better to be cautious.

“Now do me a favour, kid. Keep those ears out for anypony for us, will you? This has to remain quiet.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

The thickset earth pony sat upon the bed, casting a dubious glance as to whether the wooden chairs would support his weight. Raising one hairy hoof he shook off a thick brown weather cloak that almost seemed to match the colour of his coat and mane precisely, were it not for the grey hairs forming.

Protégé sat upon a chair. After a moment of wondering, I eased onto one as well until I was sure they weren't going to order me to the floor.

“Sir, you said you had something for me?” Protégé leaned on the table, his eyepiece sat beside him.

“Yes, Protégé. I apologise I could not come to see you directly but there are eyes and ears everywhere now.”

“I know. Murk and I chased one of them off just this morning. Ragini has her hands full just keeping the warehouse from going off schedule. It was a Shade, Grizzly. One of Barb's students that slipped away from the Mall riot. They've thrown in their lot with somepony to work against me.”

Old Grizzly grunted and lay back with his head on the wall.

“That bastard keeps it up even from the grave. Most raiders don't have that sort of loyalty. Strange that one known for backstabbing carried such an inner core.”

“It's... um...” I spoke up, then realised I'd done so possibly out of turn until I saw Protégé smile and gesture for me to continue. “It's how Brimstone's clan worked. He told me they were loyal to each other and that's what helped them do better than most raider gangs. That's why they hate him... because he turned traitor and left. They were the ones that threw me in the Pit with Wildcard because I killed Barb.”

“Makes sense, then.” Grizzly nodded. “You working with Protégé here, with Brimstone helping both of you out at times and already not liking you to begin with my boy. Must have one hell of a hate boner on for you all.”

I saw Protégé squint at the use of language. Clearly he hadn't inherited one of his teacher's traits over Red Eye's.

"I think it's safe to assume they are working with Shackles and Grindstone."

"They are, sir. Murk here reported that he saw Wildcard in league with them at a hidden meeting. I've heard Wildcard's been around the Mall sometimes, too. It seems they have—"

"Made an alliance, yes." Grizzly cut in before sighing. "That's what I'm here to tell you. The nominations for who becomes Stern's successor in the chain of command, it's not looking good. There's a lot of back room intrigue, as there always is, but I've been tasked with keeping track of preliminary nominations."

A lot of this was feeling beyond my station, but I couldn't help but notice a sudden change in atmosphere. Grizzly spoke with wary eyes while Protégé narrowed his darkly.

"Sir... you are not meant to tell anypony that, for fear of bias or blackmail and—"

"I know, boy, I know. That's why I needed you here. I've *seen* where a lot of the votes are going and it's not looking good. I'm risking all to break the rules and give you this information because in this 'great game' as they're calling it now... I don't want to see Shackles win out. Right now, he *is*."

Oh...

Grizzly continued, his voice low. "Naturally, most slavers vote for themselves. Shackles has done so, but Grindstone and many of the others have done so for him as well. Slit put in one for him so we can only assume he paid her a visit too. He has *sway*, Protégé. They're crafting a majority here. He's a nomination for sure and there's nopony else with enough votes to act as a competitor."

Blinking, I tried to keep up with all this.

"So... so if he's got a majority... doesn't that mean he wins?"

My voice felt weak beside Grizzly's deep bass and Protégé's strong tone, but it was both of them looking at me that made me realise just how stupid it was to speak. Both of them knew how this worked, I didn't really factor in. All the same, Protégé nodded to Grizzly and turned back to me.

"This isn't a vote to see who wins, Murk. This is simply a case of finding out which leaders are considered highly enough to be put in for a future vote on who becomes the actual successor. In essence, this nomination process is about finding out who the future nominees would be. But if there's only one significant majority vote at the hosting today, they win by default."

"Precisely." Grizzly stomped his two front hooves together. "If they found out I'm telling you this my head would be on a pike within the hour. Desperate times, Protégé. You know I've always opposed his style of rule, it's why I'm going to transfer my vote to you."

"To me?" Protégé seemed genuinely shocked. "But... but sir, you are the senior, I should be the one putting my nomination to you! You have far more respect among the leaders and —"

"Protégé, no." He cut him off. "I have much respect but I have hid away in the FunBarn for years now other than a small group nearby in the bumper plough pit. I'm not exactly going to be around for long anyway... there's a reason they call me old. It's sodding *true*. But there's a bigger reason..."

He took a breath, leaning closer.

"Protégé, Red Eye has cast his vote for *you*."

I didn't think I'd ever manage to see Protégé look so genuinely open mouthed and speechless ever again with that poised figure broken into a stunned student.

"He..."

"Yes, he did. That changes things. As we know, Stern will follow Red Eye's lead no matter what he does, which has led to her putting in for you as well. With my own and your vote that already puts you in the running to have a chance at being a worthy challenger to Shackles' influence. You have the rest of today, Protégé. *Find* those that you can count on to cast a vote to you. I recommend you start with List Seeker, his nomination has yet to come through but I heard he had been visited by Shackles' aid Wormtail this morning."

Protégé was clearly still trying to compose himself internally a little. If the discussion weren't so deadly serious I might have found it a little funny. Like if I'd been told the DJ had given me a named shout out on the radio or something.

"Yes..." He eventually spoke quietly, coughed and sat up straight. "Yes, I'll do that..."

"It's all backroom politics and intrigue now, Protégé. Be careful out there, they clearly know you stand a chance and I'm not going to make the assumption that they haven't stolen their way into my office to read who's winning too. They *know* you stand a chance, I'll bet. So you—"

"Ssh!"

I held up a hoof and Grizzly stopped talking immediately. I'd heard something. Hooves trotting lightly, as though they were sneaking. We sat in silence as I sneaked over to the door and held my ear against it. Behind me, I could see Protégé unclasp his revolver holster lock.

The hooves stopped.

I could feel sweat running down my forehead. If this was a Shade... or Wildcard...

"Ready or not, here I come!" A child's voice squeaked out, laughed and came stomping down the hallway. The set of hooves just outside took off, quickly followed by another.

Breathing out, I slid down against the door and shook my head. False alarm. All these waving lines of allegiance were beginning to set me on edge. The slavers were all meant to be together! Now I was finding ever more that this wasn't as much the case as I'd believed.

Of course, this wasn't helped in that I was working behind Protégé's back myself to my own ends. There were more sides than just "us and them" going on here.

Grizzly sighed and stood. "I should get going, they will miss me before long. Protégé, think about what you will say tonight at the hearing for future nomination. If we get you in there to stop Shackles whitewashing this and gaining more power, then you'll need to start making an impact. You're the poetic sort, think on that. Even one more solid nomination might sway it enough to put you in with a chance."

"Yes, sir. I... thank you sir. This all feels like it's coming apart, plotting behind doors and having to break rules to protect those same rules..."

Grizzly just snorted and headed to the door.

"Welcome to politics."

Closing the door behind him, I was left in the small hotel room with Protégé. Slowly, I saw him lean forward, head in his hooves. This must have felt huge to him.

"I knew I was considered a potential runner, but to go up against a majority group..." Closing his eyes, I saw him sigh. "Some days I wished we could all just work together, Murk. Maybe what you told me earlier is what I should have tried for more, right now with even leader working against leader I'm not sure what to think."

Biting my lip, I trotted back across.

"But... maybe if you win this, you could make things better in the future when Stern goes away? Isn't that worth bending the rules a little to get? To have something better for

everypony?"

Slowly, I saw him open his eyes, rub them and glance across.

"Yes, yes that would be better. I'm just tired, Murk. Tired of these hidden meetings, always having to watch my back and never take any moves in the chain of command for granted. Shackles' play at the Mall was a major point of a power swing in Fillydelphia now that he has presence back. The sooner this is over, the better. The sooner I can speak to Master Red Eye, the sooner we'll solve it. Till then, we have to keep Shackles from rising ever higher, Murk. You up to it?"

He stood up, lifting his eyepiece.

"That is, if you'll help me. I'm not stupid, I know you have your own agendas here."

It somewhat surprised me how fast I thought about it and nodded.

"I... I want out. But I have a better chance of that with you than with anypony else."

"My way or Glimmer's way?"

We both went silent. I knew what this was: a test of trust. To see whether he could count on me at least for the short term.

"Both..."

He clearly thought about what I meant by that, before nodding.

"Then come on. We've got to meet List Seeker and find out what he knows about Shackles if he's had a meeting from Wormtail. Time to go back on the offensive in this game, Murk."

He swept past me, cantering out of the room at a speed that I had to almost gallop to catch up.

Protégé had Red Eye's blessing in vote form behind him. I knew he wasn't going to let this go easily, and Celestia please understand me, I wanted it for him too.

This felt familiar.

List Seeker's munitions forge made my feathers rustle with the sheer heat. I could feel them wanting to spread and bask in the hot fumes that would lift feathers and stretch out all the sore muscles. Truth be told, it was a fight to not give in to the urge, we didn't need to call attention to ourselves.

We had found List Seeker fairly easily, looking over a gantry where he had been shouting to groups of slaves to get an urgent order done on time. Nicer slaver or not, he still had quotas to meet to keep the higher ups pleased and allow him to continue aiding slaves where he could in here. Spying us from his roost, Seeker pulled the wrap from his face and waved, before pointing to his office on the catwalks above.

"I have a feeling I know why you're here. Come on in."

Meeting us at the top of the stairs, I saw him glance with relief to me. It seemed I had more people who cared about me being away from Shackles than I knew. Trotting ahead, he threw open the bare wooden door of his office and knocked it closed again the moment we were through.

"Seeker, I'm here to—"

"I know what you're here for, Protégé. You never visit without purpose and given the event later on today I can only imagine what you are after."

He lay back in his chair, wiping his dirty and sweating brow with a foul looking towel.

"I'm afraid I cannot help you."

Protégé took the immediate refusal in his stride, trotting over to lay a hoof on Seeker's desk.

"This could be crucial, Seeker. I know you hate Shackles as much as I do, that you try to protect your workers here as best you can, just as I do. We're alike, Seeker. If you help me then perhaps we can make something better of this."

"Would that I could. We aren't all willing to buck against those in power or have the ear of the big guy himself. Protégé, please listen to what I said in your mind again. I didn't say I didn't *want* to help you. I said I *cannot* help you."

There was a change in his voice, a vulnerability as he leaned over his desk to meet Protégé's eyes.

"These slaves below here in my factory, they are long term workers. I keep them because I ensure I make every one of them a crucial link. I understand my place, and they understand it, too. Slavers can't often request from me because I can simply tell the quartermasters how losing such a skilled worker would hurt production of munitions. Put simply, I have a good thing going here. I make no enemies in a position just important enough to get by, and the slaves stay safe for as long as I can help them."

Sitting by the edge of the desk, I could see ranks of photos behind him. Each a slave below taken on an old camera sitting in the corner. Each had a little note below them... likely the skill they knew.

"You fear that by taking a side, you would upset the balance?" Protégé spoke quietly. "Or is it perhaps a visit you got this morning?"

"Both, you might say. Unfortunately my hoof has been forced here, Protégé. Wormtail has visited, and he had information that I keep in a safe. I've already been told where to cast my vote to keep my workers safe in here."

"The Shades..." I muttered it just loudly enough that they both turned to me for a second.

"You're being blackmailed." Protégé spoke quietly and Seeker nodded sadly.

"Shackles has ambitions, and I think he knew you might come to me, on account of us thinking alike. My nomination must go to him or things will not turn out well for anypony in here if that information gets out."

"This information, what was it?"

"Nothing important. It was simply a gesture that he could get it. If somepony can get into my safe like that while I'm here then slitting a throat as I sleep should be no problem. They are blackmailing under a threat because they know I care, Protégé. If I die, these slaves shall suffer all over again."

"So we can't even steal it back..." I was muttering to myself as I looked at all the portraits. I recognised a few from my brief temporary stints here. Some had red crosses beside them. I could only guess what it meant.

"Seeker," Protégé sighed and sat before the desk, "this is important. They are playing to your fears. If Shackles gets that nomination from you and *wins* then eventually it will come back to hurt us. He will be elevated above any of us to such a degree he can simply order it. I don't know why Master Red Eye hasn't stepped in yet but you *must* see that we have to fight this! That we have to stand up and resist him attaining power. You know he used to—"

"I know my own city's history, Protégé."

"Then you must realise what is at stake! These workers below you, is short term safety

better when it comes with long term submission? You believe better than this, Seeker. Listen closely, there is a chance that I might be able to challenge him, *if* I get enough nominations. Please, tell me you can do better than this, for all of us? Look what he did to Murky Number Seven here, that *will* happen if we don't take a stand!"

His hoof struck the desk hard enough to make me jump and squeak at the sudden noise. All four hooves leaving the ground, I staggered back and rubbed my ears. When I looked up, I saw List Seeker looking at me, having seen my nervous reaction.

"I... I saw what he did to you, heard about more. I..."

He was tempted. He *wanted* to do it. I could see it in his eyes.

"I swore I would protect those under my responsibility, Protégé. I am sorry. One pony's words and wishes cannot change Fillydelphia for the better. I don't take pleasure in doing this..."

I could see how disappointed Protégé was.

"Please, will you at least remember what I have said? When you come to mark your nomination... just ask yourself if you're doing it out of love to protect or out of the depths of terror. He's controlling you as much as any slave. If Murk here could break free of that and challenge him..."

He left the question unanswered.

"Come on, Murk. We should make tracks to find somepony else."

I saw Seeker sitting at his desk, looking wretched. I recognised the fear in his eyes as he spun his chair slowly to look at the lists of ponies behind him he cared for across the wall.

"Protégé?" He spoke quietly, not turning back around. "How do you know that you are in with a chance? The nominations are kept secret."

Both of us stopped in our trotting, sharing a glance. Before we could answer, Seeker turned his head.

"You know something the rest of us don't. In theory, I could barter that as information. You should be more careful with that. However, in this case I shall not do so, though others might. That said, it helps me to know you have something here. I am under threat and my nomination will be influenced but... I know something that might help you."

Protégé stayed silent, nodding carefully.

"You know of Mister Mosin, the armourer at the Mall. Shackles is trying to force through his elevation to become a lead armourer for Fillydelphia's defence network around the wall. That would then make him eligible to place a further nomination in. Wormtail let that slip when boasting of how easily Shackles would win, so maybe I can't support you... but if those application documents or his nomination slip were delayed..."

"I understand, List Seeker. Thank you."

"Information is key in this game, Protégé. That is all I can give you for now. I am sorry."

Protégé nodded a second time before turning to go, myself beside him. He spoke only briefly.

"Think on what I have said, Seeker. If you feel ready to take a stand, you know what to do."

He left the office. Leaving me to stare back in only briefly to see the gangly slaver meet my eyes.

"If I could have taken you in, I would have, Murk. He's an idealist, but if he says he'll take care of you then you *can* trust him. Good luck."

"Th-thank you, sir..."

"Eh, I'm just somepony trying to help folks survive. Goodbye."

Taking the notice, I closed the door and cantered to catch up with Protégé. We trotted side by side until we were out of the factory with only a few offhoof glances from me at him. Seeker seemed to think I could definitely trust him, but all the same, most of what I was doing was helping a slaver further his own agenda, even if that was Protégé.

I just kept reminding myself, play along and do my best. Take the advantages I could. If it helped slaves in general on the long term... well I guess that was good, right? I'd never have thought I could make a difference before.

"Murk?"

I blinked a few times, feeling a colder wind blow over us coming out of the factory.

"Um... yes?"

"Mister Mosin's documents, do you think you could do something for me?"

A chance to steal and mess over Shackles however, was an even *better* chance to make a difference.

"I think I could make something happen."

"Good, Murk. Good."

We met with a brief smile to one another, plan set in motion. After trotting a bit further, I bit my lip and thought to ask.

"You slammed your hoof to scare me on purpose, to try to convince him, didn't you?"

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about, Murk."

"You're grinning."

"No I'm not."

Huddled and quiet, I lay still near the vent's exit and waited for my chance.

Getting in had been easy, I knew the route well these days. Aside from the blood chilling sound of the ghoul stuck in the vertical vent I had to pass over sensing I was above him, there hadn't been any difficulty in getting to here.

In getting over *his* office.

Despite the fear factor, I knew it would be easier than coming in through the plaza duct. I'd have had to move through open and crowded ground there. If I came out into Shackles' office, I could sneak out the door and through the corridors to Mosin's armoury and his desk inside.

That is, if I could bring my courage to do it. Shackles wasn't even in the Mall, but I could see the familiar sights. The bed I'd made only a few days ago. The cell he'd locked me in. The blood stains on the floor. My blood...

I couldn't delay though. Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves and touching a hoof to the statuette in my pocket, I levered the duct's cover away and dropped out into the room. Landing and huddling to the floor, I closed my eyes and took a good listen.

Nothing. Good.

Creeping forward, I reached for the door knob and gently pulled to find it still open. Excellent, I had back up plans to scour the vents for another way through but it seemed Wormtail wasn't nearly as thorough as his master. Yeah. *His* master. Not mine.

Poking my head out, I glanced from side to side. The Mall was quiet this time of day. No slaves came up here and most of the slavers were likely directing the shift changes right now.

I gently padded out and turned down toward the armoury's direction. Just down the hallway, turn right, up a short stairwell and then double back with it on your left... okay.

At a quiet canter, I moved forward and kept my ears more than my eyes open. Sound travelled far in these corridors as I'd so often discovered to my benefit and hardship in the past. The sound of snoring came from my right, a staff break room converted to a rest area for slavers upon mattresses. The hairy stallion within drooped across one with a bottle of whiskey nearby. The sight of the drink made me flush all over again, I couldn't believe what I'd said... oh dear... Glimmer was no doubt biding her time to bring it up at opportune moments.

The thought of her had been the temptation to take the plaza route. I dearly wished I could see them again during this brief visit, but I knew they wouldn't appreciate me taking extra risk simply to say hello.

"Head high, Murky. You've got to stand on your own sometime." I quietly muttered, and turned back to the safer route.

Shifting up to the corner, I cast my eyes around and saw the way was clear. Holding my breath, I moved on to—

"Just heading to the shitter, mate. Won't be long!"

Stopping dead, I turned and cantered as fast as I dared back around the corner. Hooves upon stairs sounded out behind me. Glancing side to side, I ducked into the same room as the sleeping stallion. *Please* be as knocked out as I was and don't wake up!

The trot of somepony else came down the corridor, passing right passed the room I now hid in. Holding my breath as I heard them stop and turn on the spot, a head poked in the door. Crouched down, I simply held still in the shadow itself and prayed they wouldn't glance side to side.

"Never could handle his drink. Lightweight."

The head disappeared, but not until it had disappeared down the corridor did I dare move again. All this sneaking had been teaching me. They had said they wouldn't be long, implying they would come *back*. But that was no reason to go early and risk them turning around. Wow, I really could do this sneaking thing...

Smiling at the thought, I retraced my steps and headed to the stairwell again. That slaver had spoken to somepony, so there was no doubt a slaver up here. As such, I crouched low to the stairs and instead used my little mirror to see over the lip of the stairwell. Squinting to see on the shiny fragment, I saw movement up ahead. Another buck was already wandering away toward the security station we'd once laid our plans to take down Barb in. Perfect!

Tucking away the mirror, I sneaked up and kept behind the pony as they trotted onward. Watching the ground every half second to avoid loose plates, I bit my lip that they wouldn't turn around until I could reach the left hand turn that would lead me to the armoury. Ten feet... five feet... don't rush it... don't rush it...

The buck up ahead stopped. My heart skipped, but I had to keep going and risk it. If he turned...

One... more... foot...

There!

Creeping as best I could, I slid around the corner he had passed. Ahead of me lay the armoury door! Huge and thick, it nonetheless lay open. I could hear somepony trotting around inside humming to themselves. I couldn't risk hanging around outside, so I made my way to the door and used my mirror to glance in.

Blunderbuck was half skipping between cages and a workbench, humming musically and at times almost dancing even while he worked. Blunderbuck was a good pony, but I couldn't risk *anypony* seeing me. 'No evidence' was what Protégé had said. Seeing him looking away at his workbench and straining with a wrench, I took the chance to slip into the armoury.

Thankfully, it being so crushed in with cages and boxes, hiding or moving unseen in here was simple. Sticking close to the walls, I squeezed myself in behind the weapon cages and stayed completely out of sight as I moved toward the back where Protégé had informed me Mosin kept his desk.

"Hmm... I think you'll look lovely with a four holed flash suppressor won't you? Oh yes, you will! Then we'll take a look and see what sights you need to just *complete* you, honey! Oh! Maybe I can even give you a little paint job, you like a little orange?"

Blunderbuck spoke as though he was dressing up a foal, clearly taking a delight in his work. It became clear why he put up with Mosin if he got to play with the things he loved. Sticking to my route, I slid underneath a table bearing various guns in a state of disrepair and moved behind the primary cage in the centre of the room to reach the massive shelves that formed up the back of the armoury. I could see Mosin's desk at the far end under a flickering lamp, nicely out of sight from Blunderbuck at his workstation. Hoof by hoof, I made my way toward it as the light flickered on again.

I almost screamed as I saw somepony huge standing right there.

Stuffing my hoof into my mouth to stifle it, I staggered back and almost made to run. The colossal figure loomed up ahead of me, held aloft by wires and rope tied around them. It... it was metal.

It was a suit of Steel Ranger armour. Dull eyes stared forever outward from the massive figure while its powered joints looked primed and ready to... to... flex? Was that the word? Even the sight made the back of my neck feel all cold and tingly at the memory of those fire wreathed figures in the Stable chasing us with unimaginable firepower. With a chance to finally see one for what it was, I saw every line of metal, every carefully hoof crafted flourish of design and every thick rivet that stood out upon the plates. More than ever, I reflected on how huge they were, this one seeming even bigger than I remembered. The thought that normal ponies were inside them... wow.

It seemed older than the others though, bearing less machine produced parts and more adornment along the hooves and crest while yet seeming less advanced. Heavier and less refined, it clearly was an earlier model. Maybe even a proto... protowhatever it was. Upon its flank, I saw a single giant green apple.

Wow...

I'd have to draw it later. But for now, I had work to do. Trotting around it to the desk, I set myself behind it and opened my saddlebag. Protégé had provided me with a copy of both application documents and a nomination form to help me compare and identify anything of use to steal. Mosin's desk was filled with notes and schematics of various weapons, along with trinkets like a Hellhound's tooth and a glued together collection of various rifle rounds. Annoyingly, his documents seemed written with worse handwriting than my meagre attempts. Either that or it was just his own language or codewords or something. I still couldn't read anyways. Not that I'd need to.

Shifting through the papers with the copy documents in hoof, I got absolutely nowhere. Nothing seemed even vaguely similar!

"Let's just put you in a place you'll love. I've got an Ironshod over-under that you'll look a

beauty next to! Look at his bayonet, isn't it shiny? Yes it iiiiiis!"

The cage this desk was behind opened and I heard Blunderbuck shifting around inside it. Grabbing a bunch of papers, I ducked down again and kept comparing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing nothing nothing!

"Come on, give me a break..." I muttered quietly and placed the papers back on top, before turning to his drawers. "Just one bit of luck?"

Yanking them open quickly, I had to hop up on my hind legs to see inside, almost leaning my head right into it. My hooves scrambled through it all.

"Come on, come on... aha! Got it!" I grinned to myself.

His nomination form lay in my hooves, with a tick already on it upon who he wanted.

"*Ohoohiet!* I leave you alone for single second and already with the fucking paint! *Ey, parshiviy, syuda idi!*"

Oh no!

"Oh! Hello, sir! I was just—"

"What in fuck have you done to poor rifle? Using pussy plastic shit all over the proud *wood* it was designed for! *Oyobuk!* Get paint thinner before it sinks in and remove anything not ten years old! Is looking like fucking book of comic! You hear that?"

"Hear what?"

I sure didn't hear anything.

"That! Is sound of original designer spinning in grave fast enough to power fucking *country!*"

Feeling sorry for Blunderbuck, I bit my lip and looked up briefly to see their vague shapes through the cage. I liked his designs; he was just having fun trying things, I knew he could make things that worked too. I was *wearing* one. Blunderbuck just got carried away sometimes, that was all...

I heard a wooden hoof hit something and Blunderbuck yelping in pain.

"Fix shit now!"

"Yes, sir!"

"All is *polnyi pizdets...* at least I get to sort out ridiculous children with guns on wall soon."

I heard him trot across the armoury, thankfully not in this direction. Around the edge of the cage, I saw Blunderbuck sigh and reach for a tin of paint thinner and a bucket. The poor buck looked more disappointed in his imagination being stopped than anything else. I still believe in you, Blunderbuck...

Nevertheless, I had a job to do. My concern for him had to come second, if I were caught I was very much beyond help! Casting a glance to his form, I made to simply take it. Let's see him vote with this!

However, the thought eventually came to me. I got a copy of it... what if he could as well? This was a last ditch effort by Protégé and me, but it could still go wrong. I needed something better...

Oooh, thank you Glimmer!

Taking all of it, I trotted to the side and hid behind the cage I'd approached through. Pulling my charcoal out, I leaned down and placed Mosin's form beside my copy. I could see his signature at the bottom, a spiky and harsh kind of writing. With careful ease, I leaned down to the copy and began to copy the shapes. Letters were hard, but I knew curves and shape much better! Gradually, I sketched through it all.

“Assistant! Where is form?”

“No idea, sir! Didn’t you leave it in your drawer?”

Looking up, I saw relocating had been a good idea. Barely ten feet away, Mosin was messing around his desk, apparently uncaring that some things weren’t in the same place. He clearly wasn’t as careful as Protégé. Trying to move slowly, I finished up the signature. Now... the hard bit...

He had no doubt voted Shackles... so that was how his name looked...

Now, ‘p’ was... it was... um... oh dear...

I scanned the form, looking for Protégé’s name. I could do more than just have Mosin not vote!

‘P’ was a... a line with... um... a circle. But there was another that looked so similar with it all flipped, the ‘d’! Which was it? I sat and strained my head, closing my eyes and trying to remember Protégé’s patient tuition on these arcane symbols. I could feel my wings jittering nervously, overacting with their newfound movement. Come on, I was a new pony now! I could do this!

Oh... oh wait.

Looking at all the candidates, there was only one with a line and a circle attached. That *had* to be him! None started with a ‘d’! It was the best I could try, I just hoped I was right. Marking a little tick beside his name, I grinned and folded it back up. Carefully, I tried to copy all the little marks. Good enough!

“Is not here! Tell me you did not scribble your youth fantasies of what you call weapon on again?”

“I didn’t, sir! Here, let me look!”

Behind Mosin’s back, I gently slipped the false one back onto the desk and hid before Blunderbuck came around.

“Um, sir? It’s right here.”

“Wha... what in fuck is... I must be getting old. Assistant, take slip and deliver. I will clean up after mess you leave, *yeban’ko maloletnee! Go!*”

Blunderbuck grabbed the form in his mouth and took off, no doubt glad to be away from Mister Mosin for a while. The stallion turned, his wooden hoof distinct on the floor before collapsing onto his chair.

“Is driving to madness, is this place... too much paper, too little action. Shouting worked much better in Stalliongrad. Authority through volume, yes. Ridiculous mountain trek shit on supply, giving slave winter rifle...”

Overhearing his mutterings, I was already creeping away and almost following Blunderbuck as he went. Stopping only briefly, I leaned onto a shelf and relieved them of a gun repair kit. Glimmerlight had wanted one, after all! Hooking the heavy metal box onto my saddle, I left the armoury and began my journey back to outside.

I just hoped this would make a crucial difference. Protégé *had* to be one of the nominations or Fillydelphia was in for a very bad future indeed.

“Murk! Were you successful?” Protégé got up from the old seat in the high rise we’d once visited, our designated meeting point after my mission.

It hadn’t taken long, really. After stashing the repair kit and some of my new

acquirements outside near our old cell's door, I hadn't waited to get back to him. Now I wandered happily in and nodded.

"You got it?"

"Um... hehe... better, I gave him it back. Just with your name on it."

There was a moment of realisation in his face, before he couldn't hide the genuine look of sudden admiration at the cheeky grin I wore.

"Very good, Murk. I'm glad you're no doubt getting something from your first lesson alone. Now come on, we'll have to get back to the FunFarm, the nominations won't be too long from now and I must be there early."

"Do... do you think this can work?"

"It'll have to, Murk." Protégé seemed unsure for himself. "Shackles can't win here."

He led the way back through the corridors and past the old robot still cleaning up. Along the way, Protégé seemed to ponder on something and looked to me.

"Tell me, Murk. How did you get it back without them spying the difference? You couldn't have made it precise..."

I just smiled and continued trotting with my head held up like a pegasus should.

"Oh, showing just enough to make them fill in the rest themselves is better than showing all."

I quoted Glimmer word-for-word and trotted on proudly. Only after a second did I realise the very odd and confused look he was giving me as his lips silently repeated the words to himself.

"What?"

The trip back was cautious. Travelling through Fillydelphia openly was simply an invitation to anypony who sought a chance to get us alone. As such, we stuck mostly to primary routes to better remain under the watchful eyes of the griffons. Protégé was silent, occasionally moving his lips as though debating something to himself; likely about what Old Grizzly had asked him to do. Only after stopping at the logistics hub to find Ragini and bring her along did we finally move toward the FunBarn itself.

Protégé stopped near to the entrance and turned back to me. He held a dark look to his eye.

"Murk, you are sure you wish to come here with me? You could go back to the logistics depot if you want."

"W-why? Isn't it safer with you?"

He seemed reluctant, as though unsure how to word it. Unfortunately, Ragini decided to just say it for him.

"That bastard Shackles will be in here, feathers. Likely that's what he thinks about. You can go and hide if you want."

She smirked, as though taunting me to do just that. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed like she was daring me to try and be more than that. Protégé cast her a harsh glance for cutting in, but the griffon just shrugged. She certainly cared less about rank than before...

"I... I'll come with you." I gulped. "H-he doesn't own me now. Let's just... um... let's try and not go near him?"

Ragini scoffed and shook her head derisively. Protégé just patted my shoulder and

noddled.

"We'll try. However, Murk, this is the nominations to take place. All higher-ranked slavers eligible will meet in the main presentation hall of the FunBarn for the announcing of it. If you are with me, you *will* see him there. This is it, Murk."

He turned and looked back at the entrance, flanked by heavily armoured guards.

"I just hope that the one trick you pulled is enough, Murk. That or requiring Seeker to pull through for us. Not to mention whatever else they have planned. I don't like those Shades on the loose."

"Bring 'em to me." Ragini murmured to herself and hefted the larger rifle of her pair, the energy one. "Talons and the Shades got a score to settle."

"This isn't about your revenge, Ragini."

"Just saying... if there's a clean shot between me and them, I don't care if Red Eye himself is talking at the time."

She moved on into the FunBarn ahead of us, leaving Protégé looking rather concerned at her back bearing the broken wings. Edging beside him, I coughed a little.

"I'll come in... m-maybe I might hear something needed. You need all the support you can..."

Protégé didn't remove his eyes from the building.

"All right, Murk. Let's just hope this goes how it needs to now. There's one hour till the announcements, but I must prepare first. We have to assume this will work. The moment this is done, I shall attempt to see if I can get an audience with Master Red Eye. He will be interested in what you have to say, Murk."

Following him up to the door, the guards seemed surprised to see it was me. Of course, they'd chased me when I was here with Unity. The interior was much the same, polished wooden or concrete floors alongside cracked pink paint upon the walls until we opened out into the central hub where slaves sat bent over terminals. I had to weave around slavers to follow Protégé as the crowds got thicker. Clearly, this event was of particular importance to any slaver that bore some sort of major responsibility in Fillydelphia. A few I remembered seeing on Red Eye's balcony at the Pit. One I remembered from Shackles and Grindstone's meeting. Some I recognised from shifts, while others were entirely new to me.

There was talk. Oh... there was talk.

Moreso, the moment Protégé had entered the room, I heard conversations change. Trotting behind him, my ears picked out hushed whispers remarking on his stance alongside Red Eye or muttered curses against the slave made slaver. If Protégé heard then he made no notice, simply stepping around the groups and continuing his way to the back stairs.

Fillydelphia was as divided about him as they were about how they treated slaves.

Of course, there were the glances toward me...

"Hey! Since when did his wings work?"

"Wasn't he the one in the Pit?"

"Looks like teacher's pet got himself a toy!"

Huge slavers or nasty looking overseers eyed me up, causing me to weave through the crowds to keep up with Protégé. I tried to keep my wings on my side, tried to not let them see the fear in my eyes that any next face could be *his*. Word would spread, he'd know before long. Oh this maybe wasn't a good idea...

Finally, at last, we reached the stairs and ascended out of the crush. Ragini was waiting on the far end for us.

"I'll keep an eye down here, sir. Get a feel for the ground."

"Good thinking, Ragini. I won't be long before I come back down." He turned to me as we continued on, Ragini taking up post by the stairs. "My apologies, Murk. It's just best to keep quiet and move on. Don't worry, it'll be quieter up here."

"Th-thank you..."

We emerged to the same line of offices I'd once seen before with Unity. To my surprise, Protégé moved into the same one we had once visited, belonging to Old Grizzly. With the window overlooking the side of the FunBarn and the rollercoaster, the red light of Fillydelphia lit up the desk and the massed Pinkie Pie birthday cards that Grizzly had apparently never bothered to get rid of.

Only, it wasn't unoccupied. Grizzly was there.

As was a foal.

A little colt sat at the desk wearing the black and red attire of Red Eye's students, but he bore an almost comically oversized, floppy hat that barely even fitted his head. I stopped in the doorway and stared. I'd seen him before in a memory!

The colt looked up, as did Grizzly.

"Mister Protégé!" The colt's voice was high pitched and excitable. He leapt off the raised chair to charge around the desk and barrel into the unicorn. Smiling, Protégé patted his head and gently stepped back from the tiny figure's embrace around his neck.

"How are you doing, Chirpy?"

Chirpy Sum!

It was him!

Coral Eve's son.

"You'll never believe it, Protégé!" Chirpy was, if anything, a colt who lived up to his name. "Mister Grizzly let me work on the procurement documents because somepony messed up all the numbers! I got to work with tons of decimal points and he even let me do it on the terminal and send it off! I did it for real!"

The little earth pony was bouncing on all four hooves with a huge grin on his face. His two tone blue mane and tail bounced about from his hopping, headed up by a massive white grin below huge rounded and bright eyes of turquoise. Unlike Coral's light grey, he seemed to have a soft and sandy brown as a coat instead.

"Very good, Chirpy. I knew allowing you to get more practical experience would be what you needed. I am very glad to hear you're enjoying it."

"Enjoying it? He's faster than I ever was." Old Grizzly chuckled while he trotted over and patted a big hoof onto the very proud looking colt's head. "Quick little learner, that's for sure."

"Uh huh! Mister Grizzly said I could come work in your place cos it's got lots and lots of stuff needing done too and was still technically a bit of the FunBarn! That's still within Daddy Red Eye's area!"

My heart almost stopped. Was that Daddy he'd said?

Already, I dreaded Coral having to find that out.

"So Mister Grizzly said I could come! Can I? He said I could!"

"Did he now?"

I saw the look they gave each other. *Somepony* had just been elected childminder without being asked. If I weren't so concentrated in the idea that Chirpy was right here, I might have laughed. What was I supposed to do? Did I tell him I knew his mother? Would it upset him? Did I try to get a message to him? I just didn't know what to say here, for the effect of Red Eye's influence as a teacher upon Chirpy was evident. Being present through the foal's development had set him into an important figure in the same way I saw Glimmer as a sister.

"I really *really* want to work with you, Mister Protégé! Cause you're real smart and stuff!"

"I'm sure we can arrange it, Chirpy. Sir, would you mind passing on the request form for out of hotel training for Chirpy?"

"Mind? Hah, it's already done."

"I... see." There was that look again, although Protégé seemed to take it on the chest and smiled to the colt. "I'll be glad to have you around. But come, where are my manners? Here's my current assistant for you to meet, Chirpy. This is Murk."

I lifted a hoof and waved lightly. "Um... hi?"

My hoof was suddenly shaken hard, the foal using both of his own to do so. Chirpy Sum skipped around me a few times. Hopping up, he landed in front of me and pushed his face up to mine, those impossibly large pupils in his eyes bright with glee.

"Oh! Hiya, Mister Murk! You're Mister Protégé's assistant? Wow, you're lucky! I've heard about you from Starshine and Lilac! They're two really good friends of mine! They said you knew my mo—"

"I believe we should perhaps get down to business, Protégé." Grizzly cut in. "Chirpy? Go next door to see Overseer Comet, he'll take you back to the Hotel for dinner and get your papers organised to maybe visit the logistics hub later today, alright?"

"Okay, Mister Grizzly!" Chirpy turned and saluted up with a hoof with a big grin. He jumped up on the spot and spun to face the other way to trot out.

"I hope we get to talk soon, Mister Murk! I... um... Lilac said—"

"Chirpy." Old Grizzly's voice dropped just a little.

The colt cut off and gulped. Nodding, he left the room. Old Grizzly and Protégé both seemed to glare at me.

"While I appreciate you bringing a new foal to us, Murk, reminding them of their parents they can't see again is not a wise idea." Grizzly didn't seem to enjoy the fact of saying it, as though reading off a mental script. "Don't mention Coral Eve to him."

"Yes, sir."

I could grin inside my head. I was lying through my teeth to say that. Protégé stared closely, maybe he knew that I was lying. He'd always been good at that, but he stayed silent.

"Now, Protégé. We should prepare for what will emerge, should you win out. We have forty minutes. Go over what you will say to me, I trust you to turn it into a speech to rival Shackles' call for union and results, but I want to ensure you say what they need to hear by my estimate."

"Sir, there are things Master Red Eye must know. You know this, but Murk has some information of his own we didn't have time to talk about about before regarding their plans to take to the mountains outside Fillydelphia and—"

"One thing at a time, Protégé. One thing at a time. We need to win you a nomination first. Then we'll talk about what needs to be done for the future. Now sit down, let me hear what you have. If you could move to the corridor and keep a watch I'd be very pleased,

Murk.”

“Yes, sir...”

Passing a last glance with Protégé as I left him with one of his old teachers, I moved to sit outside the door and await him. Even as I slumped back, a door beside me opened and an overseer trotted out with Chirpy in tow.

The little colt saw me and smiled, but didn't say a word. He just nodded.

Smiling thinly, I nodded back.

Smart kid, Coral had raised him well. He knew the score here. We would wait to get a better chance to speak.

The time passed slowly. For once lately, I found myself simply sitting with nothing to do but think. Occasionally I heard Protégé speaking through the doorway, muffled lines and test segments of speech quickly tempered by Grizzly's deeper tone. But on the whole, I was left to myself simply to act as a watchdog. Despite understanding the purpose, I couldn't help but feel detached from the entire thing.

I hadn't quite realised how important this was to him until now. It had just been taking time to help him at first. But feeling the time mounting and the clock ticking down to this moment, the realisation of just how important this nomination was began to sink in. This wasn't just keeping Shackles out, this was something truly meaningful to Protégé and his continued life. A chance for him to perhaps make some real change here.

The next few hours would be crucial.

So I simply sat and waited. The waiting was always the worst. I spent it drawing my friends or myself with my wings again, with the DJ in my ear. Eventually however, the urge to draw began to fade as ideas began to falter. After putting the finishing strokes to an image of Pinkie Pie cracking up with laughter and surrounded by sprite bots, I simply lay my head back against the wall. The thought that she had given me such clues and indications was almost like a dream unto itself. Really, I wished I could get another of Sundial's messages to play soon. If I was lucky, it might even contain further clues on what to expect down there; but truly I was just curious to hear what had happened next after Pinkie had set him to this task.

“We’ve not much news on the Stable Dweller’s little excursion other than a rumour passing by me that she was spotted heading away from Canterlot and toward Maripony itself. Now, my little ponies, we can only guess what she’s up to now, but don’t think this won’t be something beneficial. Just keep believing and keep fighting that good fight, wastelanders. We can all stand up for something now and again. I know I tell folks to keep your head down, but sometimes you just gotta put it up high and take the chance. Put yourself in the firing line to do what’s right. In the end, somepony’s gotta stand up tall. Here’s something to boost those fightin’ spirits...”

My PipBuck clicked and switched over to a wartime number by Sweetie Belle, intended to lift the mood of soldiers listening in the field and get them willing to defend their country. The DJ had mentioned all that before, but as I listened now I simply sighed and hoped that I could muster that same spirit when the time truly came.

Behind me, I heard the voices stop. Hooves trotted up and toward the door. Perking up, I tucked away my journal and hopped up. With a click, the door unlocked and opened for

Old Grizzly to step out.

Behind him came Protégé. I'd never seen him looking so serious; so drawn and on edge as though desperately memorising things he needed.

"You will accompany us, Murk. You are my assistant and you should be in attendance."

"Of course, I'll come and—"

"Yes will suffice, Murk. Do not forget to address me by rank."

His voice was terse. Taken aback from the harsher look he gave me, I got a sense of just how seriously he had to take this. All the same, I couldn't help but feel myself rebel against that side of him. The slaver.

"Yes, *master*."

"Better. Now come on."

The FunBarn was all filtering toward one room. Amongst the crowds, we were afforded a decent space. Protégé and Grizzly led, followed by Ragini and myself. Despite myself, I stuck close to her amongst the harsh gazes of those who had once worked me to the bone. Once too close, as I felt her talon clip the side of my head to back off.

That one room they moved toward now opened before me. A room for Ministry of Morale trials.

A courtroom.

Everypony seemed to know where to go. Old Grizzly split off and shifted through the seating to where a judge might once have sat, taking his place at the seat of power itself. Of course, he'd been put in charge of the nominations. I just hoped nopony had got wind of the information he had 'leaked' to Protégé. Beside him I saw various officials from Red Eye's staff take their seats. Everypony else filed into the viewing areas by the sides and front of the room. In the middle, there lay two enclosed sections with one chair each, no doubt for victim and criminal in times gone past. Was that how it worked? I didn't really know. Before the primary seat, between those two areas was one more line of chairs, likely where somepony having to face the wrath of the Ministry would sit to hear their sentence.

The entire thing was somewhat thrown off by the party balloons painted on the curtains all around the edges. Oh Pinkie...

"Well... well... *well*..."

All the sound in the room disappeared from my ears but for that one voice behind me. Everything in my mind, rebellious nature and optimism collided with fear and loathing. To turn or to flee. He wasn't my master... he wasn't my master...

"Look what turned up here."

I turned.

Ahead of me, standing in the aisle with his enormous bulk, was Chainlink Shackles. Every muscle in my body was tensing painfully, my eyes trying not to cringe in terror. Huge, harsh, and bearing a wide grin, Chainlink Shackles trotted toward me. Only after my first glance did I see he was badly limping, one front leg stood up with a wooden aid and various body supports on his torso and neck. A tube ran from his nose to a small whirring machine clasped to his armour. Brimstone had truly messed him up; but even with that, the atmosphere he cast over me was impossibly strong.

"Come to return yourself to me, eh? Come back to your **Master?**"

Moment of truth, Murky. Do it. Do it for your friends.

“N-no.”

He stopped on the spot, ten feet away from me. His eyes narrowed. Slavers passed either side of him, but we were left to face one another amidst the crowd. I couldn't see where Protégé was. I was alone with him.

“I... I'm with Prot—”

“That isn't a choice you can make, Number Seven.” He resumed stepping forward, myself moving backwards and stumbling. “You are mine and after this is over you will return with me, understand?”

“No! I'm not yours, I'm—argh!”

I tripped back from moving without looking. Falling on my rump, he loomed over me and began to reach a hoof forward.

“Never your choice, slave. You're destined to be with me. You can run to the upstart, but he can't protect you. The longer you remain away the longer I shall make your punishment for defiance. You don't even get to *die* until I tell you. By your mark, by my will you survived by fate to be mine and—”

“NO!”

He could scare me. He could make me sweat and shiver. I could have nightmares about being his and fear the collar that still hung at his side. *But I knew why I survived and that was not it!*

“My *friends* brought me back, Shackles! My mark is to be free! I'm not yours! I... I never w-will be any more!”

“**Insolent worm, shut up!**”

His hoof struck me across the face hard. I hadn't expected him to move as quick. Feeling my jaw wrench I fell to the floor. Around me, slavers had stopped to watch. I saw some looking confused at my presence at all. Others grinned with satisfaction at the unruly slave being put in his place. Most just seemed annoyed at the disturbance I'd made by shouting.

“You've got some ridiculous ideas in your head to believe that, Number Seven. You're coming with me. In your collar, you shall be the icon of how I shall move forward in my city. Of unswerving obedience. Now hold still.”

I made to get up, to turn and simply flee, but slavers were all around us. I could hear Protégé far off! They had all heard my protest, they saw this as *right*. I wanted to shout, but the words didn't come.

“Back off, Shackles! He's not yours now.”

The collar stopped coming toward me, before Shackles stood back up and glanced angrily to the side. Ragini stood grimly with her eyes locked on him.

“Murky Number Seven belongs by his will to Master Protégé by stint of voluntary assistance rules. Unless Murk chooses to be yours again, he *isn't*.”

“You're playing a dangerous game, ‘flightless.’ Look around you... these are those who support my vision. The runt will be mine in time.”

I saw Ragini's talon loosely grip around her rifle's trigger guard.

“Rules are rules in this city. I only enforce them. Even if the dodo's an annoying brat, he's Protégé's annoying brat. You can take the issue up with Grizzly if you want. He's senior in this room.”

“Hehe... Old Grizzly is nothing but an appointed favourite for his tone. He is no slaver for time to remember. You wonder why he's never been anything but a senior advisor and

small time master? You can keep the runt for now... but he'll come back to me eventually. After all..."

He narrowed his eyes, reaching forward and almost lovingly stroking my chin.

"Blood is thicker than water, runt. You'll come crying to me eventually. Especially when you imagine what your friends are going through."

"They... they're strong..."

"Perhaps. Slaves only last so long in the metro though..."

He grinned at the shocked look across my face. He'd put them in the *metro*! In the mines! Please... *please* be all right! I felt the temptation to give in now, just to try and bargain for them to be out of there, but I knew I had nothing to bargain *with*. Shackles cackled and turned to trot down toward the front of the courtroom with his supporters in tow. He knew the worry he'd instilled in my heart. The thought of that pony I'd seen with the infected wounds... then seeing Glimmer's face on hers and... no!

"Get up, kid. Don't dare move anywhere you're not supposed to. It's unusual you're here at all." Ragini muttered down to me as she nearly dragged me into the back rows.

"I won't... I just... th-thank you..."

"Shut up."

I hunched into my chair, trying to fight back the tears of anguish as I imagined my friends down there. I wanted to get rid of the images in my head. To stop seeing the worst. In an attempt to stay sane and even somewhat controlled to myself, I glanced around.

Protégé, Shackles, Grindstone, and various other slavers I'd seen hold higher authority sat near the front. I could see Slit off to one side near to Mosin. List Seeker was on the opposite side, looking grim and forgone. More filtered in, taking their positions.

I could see Shackles glancing back at me, eye to eye. I tried to hold the stare, I really did. But his mouth moved and I heard quiet words only for my ears whisper across the room.

"I can see you shaking, Number Seven. See the fear in your eyes..."

Squinting and pulling my gaze away, I only heard him chuckle and turn back around.

"This event shall begin now!" Grizzly had stood up, clapping a hoof on the wooden table before him. "Quiet down. This should not take long and you can all be on your way. The order of the day shall be the final announcement of the nomination votes as counted in the last hour. There were some late entries from newer promotions but the results now sit before me. In the event of a single majority, we shall hold a hearing from the winner and officially recognise them as Stern's successor in the future."

"Hold up! Hold up!" A voice cried out from near the front. "Where *is* Stern? For that matter where is Red Eye himself?"

"Hear! We cannot proceed with this in the absence of the leader!"

"Red Eye is currently tasked with the preparations for Unity itself with Stern's tactical aid." Grizzly spoke over them. "The timing is unfortunate, but he or she will not be joining us. They have cast their votes and Red Eye has given his goodwill to the restoration of democratic representation from those considered of a level to understand the elements involved."

He stopped, as though offering a space for somepony to talk. Nopony did.

"As said, in the event of a single noticeable nomination we shall declare a winner. However in the event of more than one leader with numerous votes, we shall enter into a formal path of election and hear from each nominee with their personal elements for the city as a whole to vote between them rather than having freedom of voting for anypony."

"What if one pony has a much bigger majority?" That was Slit, she sat looking rather bored and eager to try and point out any loopholes. I knew her as the kind to do that.

"No change. All that matters here is identifying those who have some degree of support."

"But if somepony is bigger on votes then surely they win!" Slit carried her protest, before being shouted up by many of Shackles' supporters. They clearly knew their route here.

"Because most of you all vote for yourself!" Grizzly shouted over the noise. "A secondary election will then force you all to pick a candidate and get a true majority! That is Red Eye's will! That is how this will be done!"

"Sounds like double voting for me! A chance to screw them over!" Another Shackles supporter.

To my surprise, it was Protégé that stood this time.

"Master Red Eye has decreed this! It is by his neutral opinion that this be designed to allow a better system rather than a simple popularity contest!"

Didn't he sound different! I'd never heard him so harsh in argument, but I figured this was the place for it.

"Neutral position? Says the teacher's pet and 'prodigy' himself?"

Wormtail was making his presence known, I hadn't even noticed him slipping in.

"Master Red Eye knows how to do this, *Wormtail*." Protégé turned to glare up at him. "This is, by simple mathematics, a fairer system."

"Then why does it allow bias in the room for decisions and support of speeches, hmm? Never think of that, upstart?" Wormtail was taking from Shackles' vocabulary again. "They bar slavers of greater knowledge yet allow you to bring a *mercenary* and a *slave* in here to support you?"

That got a good cheer, I could hear Grizzly attempting to gather some sort of 'order' over it all.

"Especially as one of them is a known *mutant* that could overhear sensitive details and pass it on to you! Who knows? That PipBuck of his could send messages to your little gift from Red Eye!"

"This is ridiculous!" Protégé shouted up, a hoof stomping on the seating panel. "The system *works*, you are simply trying to confuse it under your own bias!"

"Now who's accusing who?" Grindstone stood beside Protégé. "Perhaps if you wish to prove this 'unbiased way' of Red Eye in such a good system you should remove those two from this room? Or do you have any objection to *that*? By rule they shouldn't even be here if other slavers are not here instead."

There was a silence. I was sure Ragini, Grizzly, and Protégé could see what just happened. That was a planned argument. Slowly, I saw Protégé look up at us and slowly turn to Grizzly. The old pony knew it, they were forced into an argumentative corner.

"The masters are right, Protégé," he spoke slowly, carefully, "technically Ragini and Murky Number Seven should not be present if they are not permitted to bring their own aids and assistants in as support."

He was being forced to allow their wishes. Everypony knew it made no difference, they just wanted to force him to concede to something. If he didn't, the entire process was likely to fall apart in argument that I was sure Shackles would take advantage of. Slowly, Protégé nodded and sat down again. Grizzly looked up to us.

"Ragini and Murk, if you would return to your place of work. The hearing is being broadcast on the frequency of Red Eye's secondary channel should you wish to listen in

still.”

That was that. We hadn't a choice but to up and leave. I passed a smugly grinning Wormtail on the way out. Looking back, I saw Protégé sitting alone at the front, surrounded by those who would seek to bring him down. I hated to leave him like that, but really... I had no choice now.

We were led away and escorted from the FunBarn, a few of Grindstone's slavers ensuring to not let up on our tail until Ragini and I were outside. Really, I was glad she was still there at the very least. Without her I'd be easy prey.

“S-so what now?” I looked up (and further up) at the taller griffon.

She just snorted derisively. “You go back to the warehouse. I've just been given a bit of free time to go about my own business. Now where did you last see that Shade?”

I told her, pointing out the building across from the warehouse behind the FunBarn. Ragini lightly unslung her rifle and loosened off her neck.

“I'll be back soon. Just going to go hunting...”

“They're probably gone. They are really good at sneaking and, um...”

“I caught *you* didn't I? Those raiders aren't going to get away. They took my fucking wings, I'm going to repay the favour to them before they die. *Talons. Don't. Forget.*”

She stalked off, clicking her head around to the rooftops as she went. That griffon sure was intense. I remembered her breaking necks with her talons alone in the Mall, with any luck she might find the Shades. Much as I hated killing in general, it would be a weight off my mind if they were gone.

Unfortunately, it left me rather alone. Not wanting to take risks, I galloped off back to the warehouse instead. The guards let me through without incident, allowing me into the main store room. Within, I could see some of the slavers surrounding a radio, listening to the hearing themselves. The thought to take the time and lift some more things occurred to me, but seeing Mudball staring and seeming to grin at me being kicked out of the hearing, I really just wanted to go someplace safe. Taking the catwalks, I instead went to Protégé's office and clicked the lock shut behind me. After a second of seeing only *his* chair and *his* bed, I instead trotted to the stairs and wearily climbed them into the attic. It felt safer. More hidden.

Besides, I hoped the height up here might eventually set off a message I was dying to hear.

The Shade's kit was still lying around. Some discarded tins of food and notepads to take details on. Even a camera rested on one side, presumably to take pictures of Protégé's files without having to conspicuously steal them. Aside from that, the attic was mostly empty, just a set of dusty chairs and cabinets under the wooden beams and the bullet hole ridden water tank. An old roll of wallpaper about ten feet wide lay nearby too, but that was about that. The attic had long been stripped clean of anything that wasn't junk wooden furniture too heavy to lift, or cobwebs. How boring.

Fiddling with my PipBuck, I wound the frequency dial around until at last I heard Grizzly's commanding voice shouting over as much of an argument as when I'd left. I heard Grindstone protesting about the precise ranks involved. Protégé argued the case by definition. Most fell into a blank noise.

"This process is to build a better future! One where might does not simply make right, Grindstone! One we might be able to transfer away from these dark days to past Unity and the new generation!" Protégé argued passionately but sternly.

"Fillydelphia was built upon leadership! You would seek to remove strong leadership to instead permit vote gathering and politics to muddy that which should be counted upon! Red Eye has always led us well, why should this not continue?"

"He has already made his choice, this was his idea! This isn't about changing the boon of leadership, but simply finding the best way to ensure a continuation of that leadership. This is not an election of a new leader for us all."

"He has been wrong before and changed plans based upon our feedback, Protégé! Long before you came here, we helped him shape this. Why risk a fracture? I know it's not replacing Red Eye, but this could set a precedent for the future."

Briefly, I wondered why Grindstone was seeking so hard to overrule the entire process. Didn't he want Shackles to use it to win? Maybe they were getting wind that it was less of a sure thing now and didn't like the idea that Protégé could seek a victory based upon him and Shackles in competition?

This was all far over my head. Either that or he wished it to avoid this process to simply see Shackles' majority as the only clear path. They were trying to shut Protégé out, rather than allow Shackles in.

"The process is decided." Grizzly cut into the argument. *"Red Eye gave his order to carry it through, if you wish to object upon it, you can see him afterwards. But for now we will do as commanded and count the nominations. Much of it has already been drafted from early submissions."*

"Then reveal them already!" I heard Wormtail shout that, followed by most of the arguing slavers present. *"Who voted for who?"*

"We will not be revealing names, anonymity is assured, that is why I have my position. However, even as I see them before me here, there is one clear majority."

Oh no.

"One clear majority and one smaller spike in votes for a second party. These being for Chainlink Shackles and Protégé."

The courtroom burst into opposition and support. Most of the older slavers called for the simple clear majority to simply take it and win. That was no doubt the crux of Shackles and Grindstone's plan, to use the theory of 'most wins.' Now I saw it, they knew he would get the most and simply wanted to, well, simplify it all. Push it on through with 'popular' support. Protégé had to try and argue for it to be an ongoing process without looking like he was simply defending his own chances now.

I didn't envy him that awkward position one bit.

"The process is clear, we have two noted candidates nominated for future vote and—"

"Bullshit!" Slit interrupted Grizzly. *"Look at the numbers! Master Shackles has more than twice the nominations! That's clear as glass!"*

It all fell into more and more argument. Passive aggressive threats mixed with debates of logic and individual meanings of words. It all dragged onto an almost pathetic level, a struggle for power where nopony was truly allowed to say what they honestly wanted to. The whole idea of having to work that way made my head hurt. Leader and follower was all I'd really known until lately too.

"They can—"

Beep!

The signal cut. Replaced instead by the familiar chirpy of my PipBuck. Sitting up, I held it before me and eagerly leaned toward the screen.

Beep!

Try as I might, the excitement of hearing him again went deep, even if it had interrupted the hearing. Alone in the attic, I grasped the PipBuck and waited impatiently while staring at our combined cutie marks upon the device itself.

Beep!

Click.

“So... um... I, I really don't know what to say to begin this again. After the last one, I just... I'm sorry if I scared anypony. I know it scared me. Things have happened. Things have changed. I don't think my life is ever going to go back to the way it was. Whether that's good or not I... I just don't know.”

I could hear a roaring wind behind him. Perhaps he'd gone somewhere alone and high to talk. I'd certainly do the same. That's why I'd come up here.

“See, they got me. The Ministry of Morale. I won't go over all the details but... I thought that was it. That they'd memory strip me until I wasn't me anymore! They put me in a cell and I... I admit it, I just lay down and kept crying because I was afraid I wouldn't see anypony I knew again. No pony told me what was going on! Not until she came. Pinkie Pie herself...”

His voice was still shaking. It couldn't have been long after for him.

“Sh-she came and told me not to worry. That I'd been 'naughty' but that she wanted to help fix it all. I just spilled, told her everything. Told her why I'd done it. That I'd been so worried and-and driven to my wits end by constant Stable drills and test megaspell sirens that I would do anything to get Sky a ticket! Pinkie, she... she just hugged me and told me that she understood what it was like to go a little crazy when you were worried about losing your friends.”

He stopped briefly. Holding my ear close, I could hear him sniffing a little in the background. The wind kept whipping around, stronger than before. Where even was he?

“So she offered me a deal to make up for it. To go into the zebras as a double agent. That she would provide me with some secret plans they'd long given up using to act as a way to smooth myself into them again. I was to find out what was going on then get back to her. If I managed it, she'd get me a ticket for Sky. 'Better to do good for Equestria if you're that bouncy to help your luvy duvy marefriend out' she said. She's right. I accepted.”

Try as I might, I couldn't help but see something oddly familiar in this. Just as he was to help Pinkie in her task to achieve what he wanted, I was now working with Protégé. Pinkie had been right, he and I were pretty similar.

“Well, long story short, it's worked. The zebras found me within hours of me getting out. I thought they might kill me, but the plans worked. I don't know what she did to make them believe I'd escaped, but whatever it was it worked. They told me that I couldn't do it like before though. If I wanted to keep helping them it'd be as a worker in their plans. I... I've to go where I'm suspecting those missing Wartime Ministry workers are going, to do the same job. They told me to wait here, outside the city and... and...”

He stopped. I heard him shuffling and looking around as the wind picked up again and blasted white noise into the recording.

"They're taking me somewhere. I don't know where. I've heard them talk about somewhere underground or a-a mountain or something. I don't know which one they are taking me to. I don't know what they want me to do there. I... I'm scared... this is so out of my depth. I just hope I get to see Sky again."

I clutched the PipBuck close. I couldn't comfort the past, but I sure anything could try my best.

"Just go with them. Do what they want. Find out what's going on, and then get back to the Ministry in a week's time when Pinkie returns to Filly. Just one week. That's all I need to do. One week and all will be fine. One... week..."

He went silent, then took a sudden breath.

"I... I think they're coming. I can hear them nearby. This is it. I don't know why my life suddenly became important but... I'm going to try. For Sky. W-wish me luck I guess? Here we go..."

Click.

"Good luck..." I half muttered to myself, clutching my hooves around my own body through just imagining the fear. I'd been through scary things myself but I knew all too well how he felt.

Settling back against a wooden beam, I sat with my head in my hooves, trying to make sense of it all.

My friends had been thrown into the hellish pit of the metro, mining for Aurora's secrets.

Protégé was alone at the centre of a desperate conspiracy net to try and prove his place.

Shackles and Grindstone were making their moves for power.

Pinkie Pie had revealed to me we were on the right track but that a veil of mystery had descended on our route out.

Sundial was a potential guide on his own journey. The plans of the zebras.

I know the pieces. I could see them moving across the game board.

I just didn't know why or for what.

As I sat, all the little things started coming together in my mind. All the things I'd heard. That I'd seen. There had to be some solution! Something that told me what it all was! A growing urge within me to just *know* began to build. I'd been in the dark too long! What was it all?

That urge became action. I wasn't a cohesive thinker. I wasn't somepony who could deduct and make educated guesses.

But I could draw.

Surging to my hooves, I grabbed the wallpaper roll and tugged, drawing the massive sheet out across the attic floor. The very ground would be my canvas! Digging for a charcoal stick, I let my mind drop into the past and of everything in Fillydelphia I now knew. Beneath the dull light of the attic I scampered to and fro, adding lines here, curves there, shapes between them and letting it all emerge.

I drew everything, letting it all flow out. I drew three zebras, then Sundial near them. I drew what I imagined Ministry Station would look like with its abandoned platforms. I drew memory orbs, spell orbs, and the machine that I had seen in the Ministry of Arcane Science that let ponies see the past without being a unicorn. I drew Magister Heartcare and his cult like ghouls of the zebra belief. I drew refugees looking lonely and scared as they were taken somewhere across the bottom of the canvas, a full six feet long. I drew Wartime workers who had participated in Sundial's area, the ones he'd said had disappeared from

arcane projects. I drew the lab in the Stable where they had been researching ponies learning things through memory orbs for education.

Lines... lines! They were what mattered! I was sweating with the effort, the movement to bound and jump from image to image haphazardly with no real order. But only now did I circle and connect them all in a great spider web of elements drawn into one! A star shape...

I drew Pinkie Pie toward the side, making her mane as huge and poofy as it truly was. Shackles and Grindstone went on the top left. I circled them and connected both to the Ministry Station. They wanted it. That then connected to a new sketch of Aurora Star! Which in turn connected to the memory research! Which went to the spell orbs!

Again and again, even as I heard the hearing argue in the background over projects and authorities, I dared to simply ignore it and focus what I needed to. Over and over the lines went, crossing and connecting! Beneath me, a huge floor of the past and future connecting unveiled!

There it was...

I fell back, exhausted and staggering. Looking down and letting the charcoal fall from my mouth, I gazed upon my work.

A huge lattice of connected sketches, with the centre blank but for the dozens of lines that crossed over. The one gap that connected everything. That which this was *all* about.

Memory research to help ponies learn, it had worked with spell orbs. Aurora had wanted that, and had possibly even continued her research without being allowed to in the underground Ministry Station, and in some mountain range outside the city; Grindstone had mentioned that was hers! The zebras had mentioned 'underground' and 'mountain' to Sundial. Those had to be the same places, so she *had* to be in league with them! A traitor of the highest level!

Aurora Star had places to work and zebras who were bringing in refugees and skilled workers through bribery or threat. All together into... something. Something that Shackles and Grindstone now wanted. Something they had protected so much as to make it a secret that not even Red Eye had found. A secret that would also hold a way out of this city for us, no matter what horrors lurked in there.

Pinkie had said Heartcare had been disappearing, too... he'd certainly been in league with zebras, based on his cult. What if those ghouls with him were the refugees? Why had they all been so fanatical? Had he been allied to Shackles and Grindstone? He had been preparing for a battle after all.

My colossal drawing finally brought it all to reality though. Find out what Aurora was doing, and you find the Ministry Station.

Find the Ministry Station, and you find the way out of Fillydelphia.

We could *do* this. I'd said that line a hundred times the last few days. Only now did I really begin to *feel* it. Whatever she'd been doing was long dead. Pinkie had said it wasn't as important as other things, so it likely wasn't a rogue megaspell or a huge hidden army or something. Aurora Star was all about memory... something to do with memory... teaching zebras to fight better?

I would follow Protégé. He would want to find this out to stop Shackles. We would want to find this out to escape.

I just hoped he'd understand and not try to stand in our way at the last moment...

"The nominations are final! That is enough, Slit and Wormtail!"

Grizzly voice came through so hard my PipBuck crackled with static and shook my mind

from its thoughts.

"As demanded by Red Eye we shall hear from both the nominations and end this hearing until a future vote is organised with Red Eye's own authorisation and acknowledgement! Chainlink Shackles, would you care to start?"

The hairs on my neck bristled as I heard the clanking and stomping in the background of the signal. Whoever was holding the broadcast equipment clearly had to move quickly.

"We can see where the opinion of Fillydelphia lies."

Warped by the bad quality, his voice sounded more rough and unsettled than ever. I could hear him having to wheeze between sentences, a lingering hurt.

"We can see where those have cast their feelings. Fillydelphia is a strong city, the one that truly rose upon the backs of hard work and proper authority. Power shifts... power changes... but always there is master and slave."

I wondered if Red Eye was listening to this. He knew what Shackles had been before. He deposed him in the first place, after all. I had always wondered why Shackles hadn't reacted worse to that.

"Out there, we build. We grow. We lead. We rise above. You all in here know that in the future, when our dear leader and his second eventually are brought low by time as always happens, Fillydelphia will still need its master. The wasteland can bring anybody to their knees. Remove anybody from life. Would you have somepony who does not understand the history of this city taken to authority?"

A loud cry from the ranks of those involved forced the signal into static. Shackles was brutal and at times even incredibly thin natured, but he wasn't stupid. He knew what to say.

"Fillydelphia grew on power and strength to hold those slaves into their work! You know who would offer this! You know who has done this! You know who is master!"

How could Red Eye know he was here and not stop this? Shackles would undo much of what he tried!

"Fillydelphia can rise further. A superpower of the wastes, one who is not restricted. Red Eye's vision is clear to us all. To create through sacrifice. Oh... I agree."

Like hell you did! I heard the stomping of hooves as he stepped down. Were they voting out of alliance or out of fear? How many other slavers had been threatened like List Seeker? Protégé had to talk to Red Eye soon. This had to stop!

"That is our first nomination, Chainlink Shackles. Bear in mind, this is for Stern's successor. So think to your future, those assembled. Hear both before deciding and—"

"Are you biased, Old Grizzly?"

Grindstone's voice cut in, leading to another retort and gradual argument. Struggling to hear, I pressed my ear to the PipBuck, sitting atop my massive drawing.

"I am... kzzztch... ot biased here. This is a mere reminder that others may have alternative elements to—kzzzztch—"

The PipBuck's sound warped.

"Kzztch! Dirk? Dirk? You there?"

My eyes widened. That was the Shades! The broadcast lingered off, changing back to Grizzly.

"Kzzztch—please come to the stand for his opposing message to the assembled slavers of Fillydelphia. Protégé, if you woul—kzzzztch"

Another drop!

"Kzztch—here, mate. Don't worry, it's all done. Seems somepony fucked with the votes,

he got in by one single fucking slip. Plan B's all ready though."

"Kzzzz—you, Grizzly. To those who nominated me." Protégé's voice, before it dropped right back to Dirk again.

"Come and give us a hand if we need it in the escape afterwards. This is going to be public."

"Really?"

"R—kzzzztch—lly. They still think it's just Barb fucking with Protégé from the grave. They ain't wrong, either. Means we can get away with it. Little fucker's going down the moment he finishes that speech, right in front of everypony. Dramatic, right? Same way they fucked Barb before us. Shades don't forgive."

My hooves trembled on the floor. Around me I saw Shackles and Grindstone drawn with circles surrounding them connected to the mountain and Ministry Station. Connected to a sketch of Protégé I'd done. One that settled right below the image of my friends... one that was connected to Ministry Station itself as an escape...

They had been waiting to make their move. To destroy him just as he tried to change Fillydelphia. To prove him wrong that ponies weren't better.

"Kzzzztch—let's go. Grab the rifle with the E.F.S. sight Mosin left us as you come and —kzzzztch!"

Protégé's voice took over the signal.

"This shall not be a speech for the attempt of changing the minds of those who support slavery at its core. This is a message to those who are, within Fillydelphia, the leaders. Those at their heart whom are not slavers. A message that shall, as my chance to speak to you all, bring with it the crux of my belief. The record that should hopefully remain in those very minds even if I were to fade away. The record that Fillydelphia is not just a place. It is potential. One that we can shape, for good or ill."

No! They were going to outright assassinate him! I paced on the spot and in circled, treading on my massive work. Ragini was out there somewhere... she... she was meant to stop it! But I didn't know where she would be! I didn't have my friends. I... I couldn't fight Shades alone!

What could I do? I was just one little sla...

"A potential that stretches longer than all of our wills here today. A potential born of sacrifice and generosity not just of the body, but of our individual wishes to create a greater shared dream. To give up, that others may have."

No. Little, maybe. Afraid, certainly. Helpless?

No I wasn't. Not now.

I turned, grabbing everything I owned along with stopping to throw something else that had been left behind into my saddlebag. My saddle wrapped around me as I spun and wriggled into it. I had to do this. No pony else was going to stop it! Buckling my PipBuck back on, I turned and galloped for the door, leaving the entire star shape of threads and imagery behind me.

Down the stairs. Across the office. Out onto the catwalk.

"I dream of Master Red Eye's vision. We all know it, like this world, isn't perfect. But we could do so much more if we were to put these arguments and this greed behind us, to finally let us change this ethos. What could Fillydelphia achieve then? On this very single day I have met those who would help others, at their own risk, because they believed it right. On this day, I have met those who would put their own life on the line

to help protect a future. Yet on this very day I have seen the shadows that seek to strike and draw us back into the wasteland. What could we make without them there?"

I clattered down the gantry, drawing stunned looks from those around me. Almost falling, panting, and desperation lit in my eyes, I galloped for the exit! Slaves stopped and watched as I leapt carts and ducked below empty shelving. Careening outside, I swung to charge toward the FunBarn, passing the Alpha-Omega Hotel on the right.

"Look to the foals we care for. That we protect and so nurture to make them into a greater generation than us. They move on, they improve who they are, despite the hurt. Yes, they are not without hurt; they have each been taken from their parents. Parents I have seen suffer. Yet they make friends. They smile. They push themselves to be better."

The mud clung to me that I bounded and hampered through. Looking around, I tried to watch for any Shades. None appeared, but the back of the FunBarn was coated in deep shadow. How was I even to get into it? They had it locked down! The Shades were likely already inside!

"If they, a generation of children, can improve and change, why not us in turn by their brave little example? Why can we not change for the better and move past the black history that stains this city and forces our hands to be partnered to brutality?"

I saw guards at the entrances. They stood with readied battle saddles. All around the sky above I saw griffons patrolling. There wasn't a way! How could... how could I...

My eyes found the way I'd left before. The very same unrepaired hole that my grapplehook had been found in before! Sprinting forward, I heard a guard shout and give chase. Above, at least one griffon swivelled to drop. There was no way to hide and still keep moving, so I simply galloped for it in plain sight!

"Look around you all. How many of you have been coerced into how you feel? How many simply see no way out? How many of us are but slaves to our own slavery? When we creep in shadows and carefully lock our doors out of fear of one another, what have we become? Do you not wish for something better in the end? Something to let us stop being the monsters? When I look into the eyes of those who are simply afraid to try... I recognise the way they look back at me. I feel the same way..."

Slipping down the slope into the grounds of the FunBarn, I swerved and rolled underneath a slaver's charging tackle. Springing to my hooves, ignoring the pain in my neck, I pointed my grapple gun upwards and flexed my leg. Blunderbuck's aim pointer swung out with the mouthpiece and I laid it upon the hole near the top floors. With a deep bite, I fired and swung up to the wall. Grasping for purchase, I hurriedly began climbing vertically away from them with my hooves against the sheer wooden face of the tall building, almost like I were running very unsteadily upwards.

"Yet, I have been shown that we are the cowards here. The ones afraid to stand up. For I have seen even the weakest of ponies show a strength that anypony amongst us has lacked. One that comes not from power or ability but from somewhere deep down that we in this bleak world have forgotten. A will to endlessly strive and above all... hope. A pony who is more than he will ever realise."

Gunshots slammed into the wood beside me. Shrieking at the splinters firing into me and the growing pains on my recovering body, I tried to sway and bounce side to side as I neared the hole above! Throwing my front hooves up, I dragged myself in and retracted the hook. Under fire, I rushed into the FunBarn. I was in!

"If a slave we have battered into the ground can look to himself and be more than he

ever was... where has that left us? Is it not us with the power that have fallen behind Master Red Eye's dream? Who have failed to do as he would wish? We are the monsters. The ones who sit idle while those we teach and those who serve us have shown us what being a pony means."

"Hey you! Stop!" A guard shouted at me as his hooves wrapped around me.

I had no time to argue with the slaver who grabbed me. My back hoof lashed out hard and he reared rather silent, collapsing against the wall trying to scream with an open mouth for somepony else to stop me as I galloped on! Skidding around a corner, I passed through the medical bay and headed into the offices we'd been in before! I could hear the griffons behind me coming in through the hole I'd entered.

"Intruder in the FunBarn! Fan out! Stop him! He's got a saddlebag loaded up with something!"

I was trying to *save* somepony! Leaping down the stairs, I yelped and fell to the side, against the wall. Dazed, I looked up to see the main terminal hall before me. Not far!

"Thus, to end this... I will ask one thing of you all. Is there not a better way than these shadows and fear beneath the lashes? Master Red Eye would if he could, so I merely ask... is such a dream is truly outwith our power?"

He was finishing! No!

I reared up, firing my grapple above me to hit the old lighting systems above the slaves clattering on keyboards. Clenching my teeth on the trigger, I leapt from the stairs and swung over the terminal floor entirely, shocking many of the slavers so much they just stared.

Yet even as I dropped and hit the floor, they were on me. Three slavers rushed me and piled atop. I squirmed and I fought. I bit, I used the hooks of my hook and my legs bucked out. I'd never beat them, but the little jabbing attacks bought me room to wriggle free. Reaching into my saddlebag, I threw the bag of nails I'd stolen earlier behind me and ran on. An old trick, but it gave me just a space I needed!

The doors were ahead!

"I leave this decision to you all now. Thank you."

There wasn't much applause or stomping, perhaps only one of two wary ones. Ahead of me I saw the doors! I felt a wound open somewhere below a bandage, and felt my throat choking up and drawing air away from me. My vision blurred from exhaustion. I leapt forward, crashing through the doors.

Dozens of heads turned to me, not in the least Protégé from the stage. I didn't even hesitate, sighting with my eyepiece and biting down hard on the trigger again.

The hook rocketed out, the compressed air blowing my tired body from it's hooves.

It made a much louder sound than normal, so loud my ears rung and ached and forced me to close my eyes and shrink to the ground. The echo of a huge calibre round set off in close quarters somewhere above us all in the rafters.

Ponies leapt to their feet, crying out and swarming for the doors. Crowds kicked up, those not used to combat rushing away while others drew weapons and backed off more carefully. They rushed past me, almost keeping me from pressing through to... to...

...to see.

Upon the stage, I saw Protégé simply lying on his side.

Behind him, Old Grizzly pulled a confused guard's rifle from him, and unleashed the full magazine into the rafters. I heard the sound of something metal dropping up there, before

being bowled over by Wormtail sprinting with a panicked look on his face. Grizzly reloaded, spraying fire into the assassin's area, while I sprinted to Protégé.

I heard him groan in pain, before stirring and sitting up.

The relief that came through me as I saw him mostly unhurt but for a bleeding wound on his cheek where my grapple hook had struck his face and knocked him out of the line of fire.

"Murk? What are... I just..."

He was dazed, confused.

"*Get out of the room!*" Old Grizzly screamed at us, firing again before being tossed backward into the table, a rifle round spearing into his shoulder. Other guards were joining as they got past the surging crowds.

Keeping low, I grabbed Protégé and helped support him as we ducked behind Grizzly's seat and away to the side. Protégé recovered quickly from the stunning blow, outstripping me as we got out of the courtroom and into a small preparation room that the judge had likely used in times gone past. Even so, behind us the fighting died down. I heard Grizzly say something about them slipping away.

I turned back to Protégé, finding him sitting loading his revolver.

"I... I heard them on the radio, saying they were going to—"

"I can gather. Now come on. Those Shades will just try again in a less dramatic way next time, I don't intend to give them the chance."

He bucked open a door leading to a very thin set of stairs, the age old Fillydelphia style for staff that I'd seen in the orphanage. A couple of smaller bucks had no trouble as we raced up them toward, I presumed, the rafters.

"I should say, thank you, Murk! It seems you've helped ensure my life's continuation once again."

Long way to say it. "I... uh... I couldn't just wait there..."

"I appreciate it. Now let's end Barb's last attack from the grave."

The door ahead of us burst open toward the rafters. Immediately somepony swore and fired a rifle. Those below us took cover at the new sounds from above. Galloping right out onto the thin rafter walkways, Protégé fired back into the darkness. Blinking, I tried to let my eyes watch for dancing shadows, but instead saw the door at the opposite end open and close.

"They've run away!"

"Come on!" Protégé didn't wait for me to reply, charging out across the rafters himself, shouting for them to hold fire below and to seal off the main exits. I followed still, as we crashed through the door after the Shade.

"Kzzzztch—after me, Dirk! He's got that fucking E.F.S!"

"Get down to the maintenance chambers! They're empty!"

"The maintenance chambers, Protégé!" I almost felt proud at my PipBuck doing its job still and them not figuring it out yet from their radios. Ahead of me, I saw him swerve down the next set of stairs. The Shade was fast ahead of us, long gone, but we knew where he was going.

Both of us arrived into the maintenance area at once, and immediately dove for cover.

We had been chasing them well, but they were the ones who thought to lay an ambush. Shotgun shells and pistol rounds flew across the open workshop toward us! Outside, I could see Fillydelphia itself through a large open door. Had all the guards run inside to secure it?

Where were the outside ones?

Hugging behind a thick metal workbench, I finally got a chance to see the area. We were both on a raised section of benches and tool cupboards, but the fire was coming from behind crates in a lower garage like portion near two wagons near the exit. A silenced weapon cracked alongside the throaty roar of the shotgun from earlier today.

Protégé was in that age old problem. He only had one gun against their two and maybe even three. He could hardly outflank them. Already, I could hear somepony moving to the side, seeking to get around us. The thought of one advancing and mercilessly firing with no way to hide was sickeningly haunting.

Thankfully, Protégé was not going to wait for that.

Looking above them, he aimed to the roof and fired twice. An already wrecked air duct pinged free from its rusted housings, dropping directly on top of their position. Under a deafening crash it obliterated the crate they hid behind and forced two blurry shapes out in the open.

Protégé was waiting.

Charging out, he galloped forward and shot at the first as they landed from their dodge. The shots went wide or warped around the frantically blurring and shifting shadow magic user. The tell tale click sounded. Protégé was out of rounds!

“Game over, colt cuddler!”

“Really?”

I only saw his horn glow for a second from my hiding spot, before screaming myself as a deafening bang assaulted my ears and drove me into blindness from a flare of white light. Falling to the ground, I held my ears and whimpered as my eyes blinked away the assault of my senses. I heard the raiders screaming too, before one cried aloud when I heard Protégé reload and fire once again.

Still dazed, I could see him and the second raider exchanging new fire. The Shade struggling to see clearly just as I was. The sound of padding hooves came from my right, and I ran forward to avoid being caught out. Sticking to the far side of the room, I dove in beside Protégé again, screaming as rounds from the Shade that had flanked behind us opened fire from the shadows.

“Are you all right!?” Protégé dragged me into cover, hearing me shouting.

“I... I’m... not shot...” Why had I come into this firefight? “I... I didn’t know you could do a spell like that!”

“Stun Flare spell. You get a lot of time to read when you’re in bed for as long as I was...” He tried to grin a little, but it was still tinged with worry. We’d *really* bitten off more than we could chew here. At least two other Shades were creeping around our cover and I knew Protégé had to be running low on ammo after the chase this morning as well.

“I was rather hoping the guards would have caught up by now. Can’t help but feel Shackles is up to something again,” Protégé muttered, firing off a shot to drive one moving shadow back into cover.

“I... I can help... I think...”

“Right now, Murk... I don’t think you have a choice. They won’t let us run. I saw one of them carrying an E.F.S. scope though, you can’t sneak around them.”

“Um... yes I can.” I opened my saddlebag, revealing the little E.F.S. blocker device I’d lifted from the attic. Nervously grinning, I nodded. I’d try to help.

“Good thinking, just don’t try to run out of cover.”

He was right. If we tried to flee, they'd only gun us down as we went. I'd have to play my part here. Willing myself to stay strong, I took comfort in knowing that Sundial managed to do it, I could too.

"All right..."

I took a breath, looked up to gauge where they were and slipped back under the raised section. I started creeping into a small trench that was obviously once used to repair rollercoaster cars from below and made my way across the floor. If I could get behind them, maybe I could cause enough of a distraction or make them get out of cover so Protégé could end it!

Unfortunately, it seemed they were even more intent to close down on Protégé than before. Above me, I heard their hooves tapping lightly on the ground moving forward. They weren't Barb... I could out hear them. Maybe even out sneak one!

Creeping around their position, I watched the pair of them firing at the increasingly devastated cover Protégé kept himself behind. Just a pity I didn't have *Rarity's Grace* with me.

"Go, Dirk! He's pinned, you've got time!"

One of the Shades rushed out of cover. I could hear Protégé struggling to reload his revolver in time! Only six rounds was a huge disadvantage compared to the weapons they had! Dirk galloped forward, that shotgun raised to point over and try to kill Protégé!

Biting hard on my mouthpiece, the grapple hook shot across the ground in front of Dirk. Swearing loudly, the raider tripped over it, slamming into the ground. Protégé leapt up, his revolver pumping shots into the stricken Shade, who only had time for one howl of pain before the third shot slapped into his face and sprayed me with red droplets. Squirming away from the mess, I almost fell into the trench as my grapple hook ground its way across the floor to retract.

Then it stopped.

Looking up, I saw the third and final Shade had stepped on it, holding the wire taunt and stopping it retracting while his magic aimed the silenced pistol toward Protégé.

"Too eager, study boy. You're good, but you're not *that* good."

I started forward, maybe I could—

The pistol swung and pointed at me for just a second enough to make me stop, before catching Protégé again as he made to re-aim his own weapon.

"Ah... ah... aaaah... you've killed enough of us now, colt cuddler. You harmed us, harmed our leader. Now you're going to die screaming, lacking all that pride you like to think you have."

"Oh yes. That you *are*."

The female voice came from above, before a much larger shape dropped directly down onto the Shade. I saw feathers fly and talons glint in the dull light as Ragini landed right on top of him. A squelch of punctured flesh popped into my ears.

"You and your little gang, I've been trying to track you down all afternoon!"

"Fuck you, bird!"

Ragini twisted, her claws on those hind legs digging in. I could see she was holding him down by the neck, one of her hind legs pressing right down upon it while her talons grasped her hard shot rifle.

"Fuck *you*, raider! You took my wings! Stripped me of flying with my brothers and sisters forever!"

"Ergh... and ain't we proud to hear it fucking *hurts*, huh? Argh!"

The butt of her gun struck his forehead.

"Oh, you get to hear me say that because I want you to know it!"

"Go on, fucking kill me then!"

"No."

Beside me, Protégé trotted across rather breathlessly and nursing a small wound to his front leg. His neck bandages seemed to be bleeding too. The two of us were a wreck, really.

"Ragini," he spoke, "just end it."

"He doesn't fucking deserve a simple death!"

Below her leg pinning him, I could see the Shade's magic flaring and bubbling over his outline, clearly trying to build up power for a blink spell again.

"You think your magic will save you? That's all you have going for you, you cowards! I'll bet those spells are pretty much permanent when you activate them, a part of you! Something that matters more than anything, something to let you weaklings sneak and steal. Ever wonder what happens if that were to be stripped from you?"

Her rifle barrel shifted upwards away from between the Shade's dark eyes. I saw his gang like pride beginning to waver. It was pointing at his horn.

"You want to *feel* the pain you put me in? To know you'll never be able to do it again?"

"N-no! KILL ME! JUST KILL ME YOU WINGLESS COWARD!"

Her rifle cracked.

Never... *never* in my life... had I heard a pony scream in that way. I actually felt faint, staggering to the side to throw up and cover my ears. I heard a static spark of magic, like whenever Coral's failed. Only this was sharper and more painful, like a conduit overloading. I heard somepony wriggling in agony. The *sound* he made...

"*Ragini!*" Protégé grimaced moving up behind her. "End this! This isn't how we work!"

"It isn't how *you* work! An eye for an eye with the Talons! He can bleed to death through that capillary and trauma in his horn for what he did to me!"

She had spun off the Shade, who rolled, squealing on the ground and trying to hold his hooves over a malfunctioning, shattered and bleeding horn that I couldn't even see... nor wanted to. Ragini stood with her talons balled up into fists between him and Protégé.

"Revenge is revenge. It isn't pretty, but that's how it just fucking works! He's getting what he deserves, I saw him laughing at me when that hammer fell! Just leave him."

Ragini walked past Protégé. I watched her go, with a grim look on her face. She didn't look satisfied, just black and void of emotion.

A few seconds after, I heard Protégé's revolver fire, and finally the screams silenced. She spun, facing him eye to eye. They said nothing for a few seconds, but I could see the conflict there. Her revenge against his morals.

"I watched you kill a pony in cold blood for betraying somepony you care about, *sir*."

"I wasn't causing them suffering for savage revenge, Ragini."

"He was unarmed. So what makes you any better than what you preach?"

"Because now I believe we can all do *better* than the mistakes we've made!" Protégé bit back, leaning toward her. "I am not the same pony I was then!!"

"You're just falling back into that naïve little shell of a pony you once were, only with power to actually think you can make a difference now."

Protégé's glare was like ice. "That your professional opinion to your charge?"

Ragini, however, was flippant. "Just the one that watches you make enemies with fancy

speeches that then try to kill you.”

A third voice broke in.

“Only because Protégé is more of an idealist to the ideals I taught him than I think he truly knows.”

The arguing pair fell silent, as did my own thoughts. I’d hung by the wayside, not party to this debate of position and test of trust beyond contract. The voice came from behind me, from outside the FunBarn’s main exit with an easy grace and dominant power within it.

I turned with the others and saw him simply standing there as though it was nothing in the world. Red Eye angled his head as though in slight greeting before trotting into the maintenance area. Yet even as I watched him, his movements seemed a little more sluggish than normal. I could see a heavy darkness under his one organic eye.

“I highly encourage debate amongst my leaders, but I must say this has been a rather extreme set of circumstances...” Red Eye almost seemed to smirk at the whole situation as he carefully trotted around one of the Shade’s corpses from earlier. “I had hoped this would resolve itself without my needing to be here. My my...”

Ragini backed off, falling silent and bowing her head with a talon clenched over the same symbol on her armour. I simply stood shivering, and trying not to attract his gaze. Where had he even come from? By his side I could see that cybernetic canine, Winter, prowling around and glaring at me as though I were some sort of squeak toy.

Protégé meanwhile, quickly cantered forward on shaking legs.

“Master Red Eye! I have much to tell you! If you would give me one hour to discuss with you and—”

Red Eye held up a hoof. “There is much work to be done, my dear student. Unity nears and my presence is required soon. I cannot stop for matters, I am afraid. Not even for sleep...”

He bid us forward, moving out of the bay and away from the corpses. Upon a bandstand of the FunFarm next to the barn he stopped and sat upon one of the older wooden benches. Then he did something I never thought I would see in the authoritative figure that controlled this city and my life.

He sighed and held his head in one hoof, rubbing his eye with weariness. Sitting down across from him, I saw Protégé move forward in concern.

“I am tired, Protégé.” Red Eye lifted his head back up, smiling to his student. “It’s been three days since I have last slept and yet there is more to do before I can truly rest. The wasteland is changing and I must move with it, lest we fall behind and be caught unprepared. It had been my hope this election might conduct itself independently but I would imagine there is more to this than simply the revenge of raiders. Tell me quickly, what happened?”

Protégé looked ready to say a dozen words at once, but gradually caught his breath, stood before his master and spoke at length of the Mall and of the things I had passed on to him.

“However, Master, it is more than a simple petty squabble. They have been seeking to acquire secrets from the past. Murk here has confirmed this to me from eavesdropping on their meetings. Aurora Star’s work, from the Ministry? They seek her underground station and her mountain retreat. The Shades were working for *them* to attempt to ensure Shackles has power!”

Red Eye listened carefully as Protégé told him more of what had happened in greater detail. I couldn’t help but notice Ragini had slunk off during the talk. I sat nearby on the

bench, trying to edge further away from Winter who seemed intent on nuzzling my side curiously. I *hated* dogs.

"I can see that they clearly are." Red Eye nodded, turning to me and beckoning me forward with a lazily waved hoof. I simply hopped up and trotted forward to find him looking at the E.F.S. blocker sticking out of my saddlebag.

"This sort of technology is not common, indeed we only have one in Fillydelphia left in Grindstone's care within that Ministry, and it is non-functional. This is indeed proof they are harvesting things already more advanced than what we know we have. I can't say I didn't expect this eventually from Chainlink Shackles, but he could not have picked a worse time. Better the devil you know, they say. Keep your enemies close. It has worked until now."

"Then we must throw him down from his rank, Master!" Protégé knocked his hooves together. "Fillydelphia must be rearranged to remove their betrayal! If they got this device working then they must have found something! Murk has spoken of them uncovering artefacts in the metro and—"

"No."

The look on Protégé's face was the picture perfect form of astonishment. Red Eye grunted and rose to his hooves again. It was so strange seeing him anything less than perfectly formed.

"The Enclave draw near, my student. Unity approaches and I need Fillydelphia strong, not split in civil wars of loyalties. We cannot risk a schism at this point, or the Enclave will destroy Fillydelphia and the very industry we tried to create! I have known of this divide between idealism and power for some time"

"But what about their efforts, Master? We can't just let them go with nothing! The technology they find might shift the balance and—"

"I understand, Protégé. If they feel they have enough power from whatever they find then they might attempt their own coup upon Stern. I cannot have that, the wasteland cannot have that."

Protégé gulped, licking his lips to try and get some momentum going after that surprise task.

"Indeed, we can't. Aurora Star has some projects that were important enough that they were taken into a Stable and protected even against its inhabitants, Master. Murk has confirmed this. If they were to use this in some sort of arms race for power... it would undo what Fillydelphia has become."

"Yes, it would." Red Eye nodded, an odd look in his eyes. Far off and pained. He had seen what Filly was before his changes. "This is awkward timing. We cannot face them directly for fear of a schism, yet we must face them in the shadows to prevent one."

"Then you must help end this, Master! It threatens everything you've done, for all the hurt its brought, if it comes to nothing because of them, all the suffering for nothing? You will do something now we have proof?"

Red Eye looked up from resting his head on his hoof.

"Oh... I'm not going to do anything." He smiled. "Because that's what I want you to do. I can trust you, my faithful student. You must go forth. Strive to seek them out, to find what they search for and never to yield to them. After all, you already have a companion to be proud of, with dear Murky here. I give you my blessing for this, Protégé. Do this quietly."

I felt myself oddly blush at a compliment from Red Eye himself as he looked across.

Protégé, however, was stunned. Taking off his eyepiece, he stared in abject shock.

“Me?”

“If they go to the mountains then you must go there too. Find whatever secrets lie there and bring them home to Stern. I have every faith in you, Protégé. This is, in a way, what I have taught you to eventually do. To be my extension. To be somepony I trust the opinion and morals of.”

He smirked.

“In a way, this is an appropriate journey to mark what I’d always hoped for you. To hope that you become the successor behind Stern for this city. The foals need somepony young to lead them.”

Protégé was agape. His mouth was hung slightly open, with wide eyes. Yet even amongst the sheer pride and astonishment in his eyes, something clearly came to his mind first.

“Then you’re not coming, Master? You speak like you are not to return...”

Red Eye hesitated, then slowly shook his head. Overhead, I heard several alicorns before they gracefully landed alongside a griffon pulled chariot off the side of the bandstand. Slavers piling into the area to secure it after the event were giving us all a very wide berth.

“I depart Fillydelphia for the Cathedral and Unity this very hour. Protégé... one way or the other, I shall not be returning as I am now. It... it does fill me with regret that this is likely the last I shall see of you in this time.”

Protégé couldn’t quite hide the crushing feeling on his face. “I... I knew it was soon, but...”

“Do not fear. You have been every inch the student I could have wished for since that day I helped pull you from the muddy pits of slavery. It has been a worthy pleasure to watch you grow, learn, and become the stallion you are today. Look forward with pride.”

“Th... thank you, Master...” Protégé was clearly having to struggle a little, I knew he saw Red Eye as a father more than a leader in many ways. To him this was a parent leaving. He trotted behind Red Eye on his way to the chariot, as though trying to lengthen the time spent with him. Somehow, I couldn’t shake the feeling of how I was taken from my mother in my head.

“Remember our dream, Protégé. Follow it. You aren’t the student any more. Go forth as who you are and what I have taught you to believe in. Unity, and a new Equestria.”

“A new world for all of us. I will, Master. I will...”

“Good luck, then. And goodbye.”

The griffons took the command from a sharp rap on the chariot’s edge. The intimidating alicorns beat their wings, rising up alongside it. Protégé stood watching his master disappear into the sky, disappearing to lands beyond across the wastes.

He stood there for some time.

Eventually, I approached him.

“P-Protégé?”

“I am... al... alright, Murk...”

He didn’t sound it. I saw him have to wipe his eyes before turning. Respectfully, I avoided looking directly to his face. Just because people were used to seeing me do it didn’t mean I had to make it seem so in return.

“If we’d had but one more day. How I wish we did. Yet Master Red Eye has trusted me to do this in his absence. For *him*.”

He turned and looked out over Fillydelphia, toward the mountain ranges that could be

seen over the hill. They rose up, peaked with oddly glistening snow with some even going past the clouds...

"I cannot do this alone, Murk. These days, I know few ponies I can trust, and fewer still who would follow. My foes have sworn guards, multiple masters, an armoury, and official backing with an expedition to those mountains. What have I? A few rounds left for my revolver and an E.F.S. eyepiece..."

Gulping, I stepped forward. "Y-you have me..."

Protégé actually smirked. "Of course. I knew I could count on you, but we may need a larger group than just us two to go against them, Murk."

I bit my lip, before thinking and biting my lip.

"Well... um... there are some who would follow us. My friends..."

I saw the smile spread across his face.

"You know where they are?"

"Yes... in the metro. Down where, um, they're trying to find the Station."

Protégé nodded slowly, then clapped my back gently.

"Then let us creaky injured bucks go get a few healing potions, a few hours recovery and something to eat at last. After that..."

He glanced out over Fillydelphia, seeing the lines of Masters and Overseers trotting out. I could see those recognisable figures within leading their supporting mass away.

"...we're going back into the shadows. If I have to break free workers to help stop him I will. I will not break this trust in me. We're going to rescue your friends, Murk."

He smiled and turned to canter at speed back to the logistics hub. I followed, casting only a brief glance back to those slavers again and seeing the back of Shackles' head moving toward the metro.

Just hold on down there, my friends. *We're coming!*

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Low Hoof (Rank 2!) – Just when they thought it couldn't get worse, you're turning a nasty little cheap shot into an acquired skill that you actively turn to and try to be good at with an idea on precisely where to strike hard. Instead of stunning, your chance to critical hit will now paralyse the target for a brief time. Ouch!

Just Downstairs

“One simple survival instinct. If you smell rotten mint... gallop away as fast as you can and do not look back. Do not stop and do not try to hide. Just gallop. Gallop... and pray.”

“What was it like having such a, well, *bizarre* idea on what to do?”

To be working with my ‘master’ on a mission from Red Eye, or to be on a journey pointed out by a hyperactive pink pony from the past?

“I guess you could say both.”

Well, Pinkie’s one... I dunno really. It didn’t hit me as hard as anypony might have thought it would. That sort of stuff messes with your head if you think about it too hard. A pony seeing the future, leaving messages in precisely the right places that she needed to and all. Maybe I took it a little at face value, but given it wasn’t actively trying to hurt me, could you blame me for taking the chance?

“It sounded like she told you precisely what you knew anyway.”

Yeah, that’s true. But there’s a difference between having a plan and knowing it’s the right one, y’know? Glimmer and I figured out a plan that gave us a bit of hope, but Pinkie’s message helped give me the confidence I needed to really try again.

I guess you could say she just helped me to learn to smile.

“You do have a beautiful smile. Glimmerlight wasn’t wrong when she said that.”

Heh... I, ah, thanks. Hehe! Well, um, I guess what I mean is that I was free to concentrate on other things without worrying about whether we were heading to the right place. Now that I was with Protégé, I had a mission. To get my friends.

“But Protégé wanted to go to the mountain afterwards?”

Yes, he did. The first thought in my mind was pretty simple. If my friends were in the metro, I could get them there, and we could make a break for it that very day! We could get Sunny, use the safer inner tunnels as a hideaway, look for Unity and start thinking about how to get the foals out! Starshine seemed to know a way, but that was the real problem.

Protégé was with me. He wouldn't allow that, and he had direct orders that went against our wishes. There was a confrontation coming if I didn't find some new thing that would allow us to leave. Well...

"Well?"

There... there is the fact, I guess, that...

"You're taking an awful long time to say it."

Well, I just guess I hadn't quite given up on him coming with us. He was a better pony inside than I had thought. He understood slavery the way I did. Yet, we had different objectives, different mindsets, different inspirations. How could all that come to a head? In the end, it was never going to be as simple as us just slipping away then and there. There were obstacles in front of us, still. Ones that would take a bit more effort to get around.

"You seem to be skipping ahead a little, Murky."

Sorry, I know. It's just that this was when it started to accelerate. The moment when I felt my life speed up and start careening forward in ways I hadn't known since that first day in the Pit. We were about to learn about what this 'way out' exactly consisted of. The remnants of the past would be a lot clearer in how they tied together in this race for information, one that Protégé wanted to win and one that mattered to us just as much. We had to share in his quest while all the time hoping that in the end we wouldn't have to fight *him*.

The metro held secrets in the dark below the city.

"The way out is just downstairs," Pinkie had said.

That wasn't all that was down there...

I had a tough decision to make.

Protégé and I sought to find, release, and steal away my friends from under Shackles' nose to bring them into the fold and beat him in the race for Aurora's secrets. Really, I just wanted them back and safe without thinking much about what would come after. The trouble was, I held a key to this little quest succeeding, and I wasn't sure if I should use it or not.

I had retreated to Protégé's attic above his logistics hub office while he took care of business prior to our departure. Having even a little space to myself helped me to think. That, and it gave me time to add to my vast drawing upon the ground. Details sprang into life from the much larger canvas. Just being able to doodle and let thoughts wander helped me think so much better.

I could get us into the metro without being seen. I knew a way. It was the same one that I'd exited through before, the one that the ghouls below had told me about. A safe and sneaky way in that would work for sure.

Unfortunately, it was also the same one we were to use to eventually escape. I'd have to reveal a portion of our hoof and a potential vulnerability to Protégé if I wanted to use it. Could I risk it? Was it *worth* that risk? Perhaps I could try and act like I'd just spotted it in the distance. Not that I imagined I could fool Protégé for long. He seemed to have a knack for knowing when I was lying.

A sharp rap on the door in the empty office below perked up my ears and pulled me from my pondering. Charcoal in mouth, I raised my head up and looked at the stairs heading downward when the knocking came again. Protégé wasn't in; but it had to be someone for

him.

I sat and wondered if I should open it or not, before eventually sighing and getting up to trot downstairs. The knocking on the door came again and then once more quickly afterward even when I pressed my ear against it. I couldn't see anypony through the warped glass, but they could have just been standing off to the side.

Biting my lip, I reached out to unlock it. Pulling the door back slightly, I peeked through and stood ready to leap back.

"Hiya, Mister Murky!"

Jolting my head back a little and wincing as the high-pitched voice squeaked right into my ears, I looked down to find Chirpy Sum standing upright and grinning wildly with that big, floppy hat of his right before me. He looked rather impossibly happy.

"Ch-Chirpy?"

"Uh-huh!" He nodded rapidly. "Is Mister Protégé here? I want to see if he'll check my work before I go back home to the Hotel! I like getting him to check them, he always leaves really cool and tidy corrections and examples that are so fun to—"

"He's, um..." I interrupted him before he *really* got going. "He's not here right now."

Gathering my surprised thoughts, I glanced around before turning a more serious face to Chirpy and motioning him into the room.

"Come in though, you can, um, wait for him. I need to talk to you."

"Oh yes! You were going to tell me about my—"

"Shhh!" I held my hoof to my mouth desperately, as though pleading him to just *be quiet* for a second! "It has to be a... a secret! Yes, a real secret! Come on."

Chirpy's eyebrows rose before he put on a downright conspiratorial grin and over-exaggerated a sneaky look around before creeping inside. Rolling my eyes, I shut the door behind us and turned.

"I can keep real good secrets, Mister Murky! Please, is my mom out there? I like Daddy Red Eye, and Mister Protégé is really cool and all, but I do want to see her..."

His big round eyes widened out as he looked up to me. I felt distinctly unqualified to handle this level of childlike endearment and wishful thinking. Biting my lip and rubbing my head, I sat down and tried to explain things.

"Well, Chirpy, you see. Yes, she is here and—"

"She is!? Can we go to see her? Can she come visit? Aww, I can't wait to see her again and show her my cutie mark!"

The pang of sadness I felt from merely seeing him and hearing about 'Daddy Red Eye' only doubled as he proudly showed off a mark of four symbols Protégé had explained before in our lesson. Coral had missed her own son gaining his cutie mark.

"See? One for adding, one for subtracting, and then one's for multiplying and—"

I had to look away briefly to take a breath as he went on a ramble about how he'd gotten it in a lesson where he'd told the teacher they were wrong.

"Chirpy..." I coughed, covering the urge to snifle at the thought of just how broken Coral's family had become to miss so much. "Coral, your mom. She's here but, um, see it's not easy. You know she's a slave, right?"

"A worker? Mister Protégé said—"

"Mister Protégé says a lot of things, Chirpy." I regretted realizing this myself. "Your mom isn't as safe as they say, but she is coming. We're all coming. You're going home, Chirpy. This is all going to be over. We're going to get you back to her, and then we're *all* going to take

you back home where you belong!"

He stopped his talking, for once, as he opened his mouth wide and let those eyes expand with quivering pupils. "H-home?"

"Y-yeah."

I willed him not to cry or react loudly, but the young foal just looked confused and uncertain, scuffing his little hooves on the glossed wooden floor.

"I... I am home, but like my second home and I like two cos it's higher than one and-and-but I can... wow! Will it be like, a real adventure or something? They told me coming here would be an adventure, but then I had to stay in that hotel for months and months! I like it, but I wanna go out there again but they say they can't let me, and they—"

"You will, Chirpy." I couldn't help but find his interest somewhat endearing. "It'll be a big adventure with, um, lots of running and hiding and exploring."

"Awesome! Lilac and Starshine both said that they had an adventure to go on and told me that my mom might be there! Now I can have one too! Can we go now?"

Chirpy galloped forward, making me yelp as he launched himself at me and thumped his two front hooves onto my chest. Fighting back the rancid cough as my lungs complained at the impact, I found his face looking right up at me, mouth held open, ready for the answer he wanted. At the very least, he wanted to go. That was one big thing out of the way.

"N-not right now..."

"Aww..."

"Sorry, Chirpy. We need to get your mother first... and a few other friends of mine. You stay with Lilac and Starshine. They'll be the ones who get in contact with us. Okay?"

"Yes, sir, Mister Murky, sir! Wasteland Adventurer Chirpy Sum is on the job! I'm gonna make a big cape to wear and stay warm like the ones Mom used to sew for me! Like my hat!"

He fidgeted with the huge, floppy wool hat. It seemed a habit of his to have to push the big drooping thing back up again, like it had been sewn for somepony twice his size. He rushed off and leapt onto Protégé's chair, holding a hoof up and spinning to address, presumably, the walls.

"I'm gonna go swishing out of here on an adventure! Gonna see things with my mom and catch up, and then I'm gonna bring her back to show her the cool things Daddy Red Eye taught me to do once we get allowed to work in the big places in Fillydelphia! I can't wait! You can come too, Mister Murky, I like you! You're really cool!"

He stopped.

"Mister Murky?"

He must have seen my face.

"Mister Murky, what's wrong? What's wrong? Did you forget something? You look—"

"I'm all right, Chirpy!" I moved away. Gritting my teeth, I tried to push away the thoughts that had landed *harsh* upon my heart. While she wasn't here, I found myself wishing for her, 'Coral Eve, I'm so so *so* sorry. I don't know how you're going to cope...'

He was adorable, yes; but Red Eye had his hooks in deep with the poor colt.

"Just-just watch out, okay, Chirpy?"

Coral's son wandered across, hopping up with his hooves on my shoulder in curiosity to why I wasn't really looking back.

"Your mom loves you, Chirpy. More than anything else. Just... just remember that above *everything*, okay?"

I turned and pulled him a little close, hoping to myself that Coral Eve would have the strength in her long-enduring body and mind to handle how her son had changed.

"I will, Mister Murky."

"Good boy." Coral had spoke like that before, just copy her Murky! "Now you should, um, go, I think? You're safer in the hotel. Don't stop for anything, okay?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You, um, don't need to call me sir, Chirpy, and I'm a bit young for 'Mister' yet I think."

"Okie dokie, um, Assistant Murky?"

My ears perked up as he tried a few different titles in his politeness. Outside, I heard a familiar voice. Protégé was in the warehouse. I heard hooves on the gantry.

"Okay, you should go, right now! Don't speak of this to anypony else, okay? Your mother will be with you. She won't stop till she finds you."

I took him to the door, letting him gallop out in front of me even as Protégé could be seen approaching the end of the catwalk about twenty feet away.

"I'll not say anything, Mister!"

"Good, good. I'll try and get a message to you all soon. Protégé and I just have to go get a few friends and your mom. She's alright. She's a strong mare, and I know she'll be fine."

"Wasteland Adventurer Chirpy Sum rogers that and is on his way! I do hope to see her again!"

He skipped on the spot, turned, and galloped flat out the door, running right into Protégé. My heart skipped a beat as I saw him *much* closer than I'd thought. He threw me a curious glance that set me sweating with worry as to what he'd perhaps heard at the end there.

"HI MISTAH PROTÉGÉ! I wanted to meet you! I was just talking to your number one assistant Murky when I was coming to see you!"

"Good afternoon, Chirpy. You do seem in a rush. Are you late in getting back?"

"I'm on an adventure now I've got free playtime!"

Protégé stepped aside to let the rushing colt past. "Good for you. Well, I do hope it's for a better Equestria."

Chirpy stopped briefly, hooves pacing on the spot as he clearly wracked his mind for something.

"It's, uh, yeah it's a quest for the best Sparkle-Cola in the *world*! It's being held by the evil King, um... um, Stinky! He's *bad*!"

I couldn't help but slap my hoof to my forehead, but Protégé didn't let it faze him as he lifted the colt's work in his magic and allowed Chirpy to go tearing out of the warehouse to meet his escort guards.

"The fun of foals sometimes. Quite a group, Murk. Quite a group."

"Um, y-yeah?" I didn't know what to really say as Protégé bid me to follow him down the catwalk, apparently having just been coming to fetch me.

"Very impressionable. Open-minded. This way a second, Murk. We just need to get supplies. Was Chirpy doing well?"

I followed close behind, feeling excitement rise. We were going to go on the rescue now! Our own little adventure! For real. Heh, maybe Chirpy wasn't the only one who could get worked up. At the very least, Protégé didn't seem to have heard anything I didn't want him to.

"Y-yes! He was, um... chirpy."

We walked behind a set of shelves into an unused line of the warehouse.

"Yes, he tends to be."

Without warning, Protégé spun and grabbed me by the collar, pulling me off balance before forcibly pushing me against the shelves. Crying out in shock, I almost lashed out until I saw the fierce look in his eyes, one just visible below the eyepiece.

"So, 'I do hope to see her again?' I don't know how much you told him, but let me get one thing straight *right* here and *right* now with you."

His voice was harsh, spiky, and tinged with aggressive passion. Lowering his eyes, he leaned closer.

"You have your own little wishes and dreams, and I'd be a fool to think Coral Eve would ever agree to help you without wanting her son to come with her. I'm content to let you and your friends seek a better life, and so help me that's something I'm half tempted to let go under my nose without raising a problem. But *this*..."

"P-Proté—"

He leaned right into my face, eyes locking to mine with a protective anger I'd *never* seen.

"If you *ever* endanger any of these foals, I won't hesitate to put a stop to this, understand? You can run around and do what you feel you need to, but keep them *out* of it, or you'll find me a much less allowing master, Murk! They are the *core* of what shall save this world. Do *not* make this tougher by reminding them of a past they have already left!"

"Like leaving his *mother*?" I tried to pull his hooves off, but he let go of his own accord and dropped me back down. His glare was no less fierce as he invaded my personal space to keep me on the back hoof.

"We all make sacrifices, Murk. Coral can work for her freedom and join us to see him again if she wants; the choice is there! I will *not* let you put any of those foals in danger, Murk! Is that very clear?"

His hoof slammed into the shelf beside my head on the last word. I'd never seen him like this. I felt awkward, robbed of any argument momentum by shock at him treating *me* like this.

"Y-yes."

"Yes, *what*?"

"Yes... master" I muttered the word, moving my eyes away from his own stern gaze. I was screaming at myself to be defiant, to just stay quiet or say it with anger, but the truth was his sudden harshness had shocked me deeply.

I had been too easily forgetting where his true loyalties were.

"I give you a great amount of freedom, Murk." He trotted toward the warehouse exit. "But do *not* cross me on that which I truly believe. Stay *away* from those foals. Now come on. We have work to do, and I'm sure you don't want to wait any longer."

Picking myself up, I placed a shaking hoof to my throat. The pressure had irritated it, leading me to hunch over and cough horribly. Shivering, I took a glug from my quarter-full canteen of RadAway and brought myself back up to see Red Eye's prodigy moving away to the exit.

Taking a few breaths to clear the shock and calm my nerves, I began to follow, staying a good bit farther behind him than I ever normally would.

I'm not sure why I told him about the way down. Perhaps I was driven by thoughts of saving my friends by using every method I could just to make that happen. I had always been a little short-sighted, after all.

Now, I sat at the bottom of the hole, having rappelled down on my grapple line past the drifting dust and growing darkness of the metro. Red light beamed through the distant hole above me as I struggled to get the saddle off me. I'd considered acting like I'd just spotted it, but Protégé was too smart for that. In the end, I'd just admitted that I'd found it while looking for a hiding spot. That seemed to have done the trick.

Wedging the mouthpiece's lever to retract the wire in, the battle saddle whirled out of my grasp and pulled itself back up without me, allowing Protégé to strap it around himself for his own descent. Glancing up as it disappeared, I squinted from the light and instead turned to the dark.

I'd known I'd have to come back here at least once; back to this underground nightmare. Last time had shown the reality of a world where Shackles had full control, and now I'd have to enter it again. The images of a mare with a distended stomach full of pus or a stallion lacking much of his skin from some unknown punishment kept forcing their unwelcome horrors into my mind. My friends had only been here a day or two now, and I doubted they would be badly hurt yet, but the thought still assailed me.

The service door out onto the inner metro line's tracks lay slightly ajar from where I'd been unable to close it last time. Beyond it, I could hear the slow *clink* of pickaxes and murmurs of ponies wafting down the tunnel itself.

With a thump, Protégé landed behind me, staggering to the side as he untangled himself from the wire.

"I dread to think what drew you down here last time," he muttered, trying his best to get the small saddle buckles undone.

"I just wanted somewhere really far away from anypony who would hurt me. I didn't realise that he was down here." It didn't take long to help him out of the battle saddle. Nor to put the saddle back on and adjust the straps to my size again. Thank Blunderbuck for his forethought of adjustable sizes!

Protégé advanced to the door, slowly slipping his eyepiece off to hide its blinking red light. We hadn't exchanged many words since the confrontation at the logistics hub. He had been professional, curt, and polite, but there was still tension in the air. He knew my intentions to some extent, and they didn't sit well with him, yet he needed my help and my friends if he was going to achieve his aims as well. I almost wished for the days when we both knew where we stood on things.

"Which way?" He apparently couldn't hear the sounds as I could.

"To the left. I... I think it's about two hundred metres down the metro line. We'll start to see them if they are still in the same work teams."

Together, we crept out into the thick darkness, with myself taking the lead; after all, I could see and hear better than he did, and knew the way. Slowly, sticking to the sides of the arched tunnel, I began to advance. The metro was always distinct to look at. Smooth stone over metal track with old, surprisingly elaborate lights hanging from the ceiling, and fuse boxes littering carved out inlays in the rock. All mass produced and 'modern' by Equestrian standards, of course, but surrounding an architecture too grand to be wartime. If I squinted, I could see lights sometimes in the distance. Two hundred metres really wasn't very far at all for that to travel.

“Protégé?”

“Yes, Murk?”

“Why are we doing this alone? Why not bring Ragini? Doesn’t she obey you?”

It was a question that had bothered me for a while. An extra gun could have been handy. Turning back to Protégé, I saw him look distinctly unsure.

“Ragini isn’t in the best of minds right now. As I said before, her loss of flight hasn’t put her in a good mood. You saw what she did in the FunBarn, Murk. Frankly, I am unsure of her stability right now, and this expedition requires a subtler touch.”

He looked as though he were about to say something else. Hearing a shout of a slaver around the far off corner, I stopped for a second and decided to push my luck.

“Is that it?”

“Her contract is to Master Red Eye, and he has told her to report to me. How she would interpret this, I am... unsure. Despite what my Master has told me. I don’t like uncertain things when dealing in this type of work. Keep moving, Murk.”

I nodded quickly, taking the hint that he wasn’t happy to pause down here. Stepping over the rails, I shifted closer to the inner wall of the long curving corner and hugged closely in its shadows. A sharp scream sounded after the snap of a whip. I heard chains moving, drills whining, and the rumble of something on the rails.

Cautiously, slowly, with nerve wracking care, I led us behind a small outcrop of supplies, tools, and fabric to gain sight of it all.

Stepping out, shrouded in darkness, we now stood before a part of the mining operation I had once seen before. I took a heavy, strained breath before turning to Protégé.

“You’re a slave too; well here’s what you’ve forgotten. This is what Fillydelphia is to many of us.”

Clustered around a changing lane between a service lane and the inner metro, we saw the lines of ponies chained together in eternal labour. We saw those lying upon the rock floor trying in vain to rest between shifts at their very workplace. We saw the huge forms of Shackles’ personal slavers ruthlessly beating them awake to continue. We even saw the empty look in their eyes and the paleness of skin below fallen hair, mangy and coated with blood, sweat, and infected fluids. In the corner lay a morbid pile of ponies being loaded onto a low rail wagon while among them were ghouls lacking pieces of themselves. Worked to the very bone of their immortal lives in an all too horrifyingly literal sense. Their lack of needs abused to the full.

Like before, I saw the shift patterns coming in and out with an almost orchestrated routine. I could see ponies wobbling on legs with very little body fat left at all. Many were blindfolded, set only to do the task and not even look around.

There were so many. So many shapes that barely resembled ponies any more thrust into the hellish end of their lives to be nothing more than organic tools for a master whose presence was more symbolic than physical in their minds. A legion being forced to think the way I once had.

Inefficient.

Pointless.

Brutal.

Shackles’ own brand of slavery. Control for the sake of control. Only his own wishes mattering in the end with no care to the cost.

I could never have possibly described the look to be seen upon my companion’s face.

Protégé simply stood and gaped, his eyes focused on a wide arc of the ghastly sight. Hundreds of ponies were being driven to death in service of a goal they likely did not even know or understand, and I saw him have to fight to accept it.

His mouth fell open to try and speak many times as he witnessed one pony simply fall, twitch, and then lie still, his body giving out. Just another forgotten soul not even recorded as a statistic to history.

“Sacrifice... sacrifice is needed, Murk and...”

“This is what happens to ponies in Fillydelphia! This is what happens every day behind closed doors that ponies like you no longer see!” I turned to him. If only I could make him really see here that what he wanted was a lost cause! “This is where he sent Sunny! Where he sent my friends! Where he wanted *me!*”

“We didn’t... no.”

Protégé took more than a moment to try and compose himself, shaking with what I hoped was anger. He struck the wall with a hoof.

“There were always going to be acceptable losses in having some slavers here and... and...”

“This is *acceptable?*”

A hoof went to his face, resting between his eyes. I wasn’t sure if I saw it wipe something or just slide away. His body shivered, and I couldn’t be sure if I saw anger or fear in his eyes. He turned to me

“We need... we need to do what we came here for, Murk. We shall press on.”

His voice was cold. I knew he was looking past me at those slaves. I could *see* his hoof gently rubbing his sides where I knew laash scars like my own lay beneath those clothes. I wish I knew what to say to finally get through to him.

In a way, I pitied him. I saw only a pony in the same place as I was once, just with a shinier collar. Or eyepiece.

I heard the slow, steady march of hooves coming this way. Perking up, I hurried over to the tools we had hidden behind and pulled some of the fabrics free. Seeing my haste, Protégé tore his eyes away and joined me as we hid ourselves.

“Station number four needs this shift change ahead of schedule again, eh?”

“Bloody right. I told ’em to keep it to twelve hour shifts with two small breaks, but that stupid bugger’s had ’em working all last night to try and get the big guy to grin!”

The slavers leading the shift were heading down the tunnel we’d come from! Had they expanded their operations again? Were my friends part of some new line of slaves? The thought of them being marched into the mouth of those doors to the metro station behind us, into Shackles’ personal den, was beyond thought. Many times I’d been imagining what horrors really lay beyond that barrier only a few hundred metres further in.

The slaves trooped past, as much pulled by one another as they were by the slavers. If anypony fell, they were simply dragged. Twice I saw them being drawn over the rails as their legs failed them. I couldn’t resist peeking out; if only I could have seen my friends, this would have been easy! Yet down here, ponies of all colours were horribly hard to tell apart. The filthy rags, stained injuries, and boils turned them into a group too terrified to do anything other than obey.

Exactly what Shackles wanted.

However, as they passed, I *did* recognise one pony. Or to be more precise, one ghoul.

I whispered for Protégé to stay where he was and dared to sneak out. Keeping low, I

shifted along the lines of the miners further into the junction. Slaves wandered past me; each time I simply huddled into the lines of workers to try and hide from slavers. I could see him up ahead. Baton Round was sluggishly chipping away at the concrete, trying to break through the reinforced walls in their hunt for Ministry Station. As I neared, I saw Nurse Bedlay Broom behind him, her blind face not even looking in a particular direction as she scraped the rubble into the middle of the tunnel for disposal.

They did not look good.

Before, they had been falling apart, but here I saw a lethargy like no other. Baton Round's flimsy muzzle was visibly swaying on each impact of his pick. His body looked loose and drooped, like what remained of him was close to slipping right off. I became very glad that I hadn't eaten much lately, for once.

"Baton!" I whispered near to him, but the ghoul just kept digging. "Baton!"

No notice. His eyes were blank, simply given to the job.

"Baton!"

"Little Murky Number Seven?"

Bedlay Broom looked around, her one remaining ear perked up. Clearly in her blindness, other senses had taken over.

"Is that you, child? The little pony? Baton, look who it is for me?"

He heard her voice. Twitching and blinking, he turned to her and then to me. With a quick check to see that the guards were not looking, Baton Round slowly shifted to face me and drew Bedlay Broom closer.

"Murky Number Seven. It... it is you. You came back. Is it... time to go?"

I could see Protégé anxiously watching me. I was rather exposed.

"Not yet, but we're almost there! We need your help, though!"

"I am... I am not sure I..." He staggered and dropped to all four knees. I heard the distinctive click of bones slipping out of place. A small glow of magic across his body from the nurse seemed to help him regain the strength to speak.

"We are failing, Murky Number Seven. The shifts are increasing. What do you need?"

Before I could speak, a slaver further back let loose an air horn into the cramped tunnels. I screamed and covered my ears.

"Shift's up! You lot get back to Shackles' den for food! Ghouls? Get in your fucking hole to regenerate!"

The movement shifted up slowly around me. Slaves began to move in sluggish and clearly predetermined lines. The fluid of blood and other unthinkable things was left behind at the rock face as the new ones came in to pick up the tools. I fell in with the ghouls as they headed back to the store room, then waved at Protégé to join us.

"Baton, some of the friends we need to make our escape happen are down here. I need to know if you've seen them!"

"Maybe... maybe Nurse Splint has, they had her on the way in yesterday. But so many... oh so many, so young too to look like they do. They... they've been moved to—arrrgggh..."

A slow and quiet cry of pain came from him as we moved into the supply cupboard and he dropped to the ground. Behind me, Protégé and the blind nurse Bedlay shifted in. I recognised the smaller figure of Windtail Breeze behind them. Nurse Splint was ahead of us. The four ghouls were all on their last legs. Most of them in here were, and all dropped to the floor on wobbling hooves.

"They've been moved to where?"

Baton round blinked a few times.

“Ministry Station.”

Behind me, the door slammed shut.

“They found it.”

It took a few minutes for the nurses to give aid to their ghoul comrades. Protégé and I sat unsettled together near the door, as the ghouls around us carried out their self ‘maintenance.’ They took it in turns to bathe under a small pipe, the one I had been reminded last time was highly radioactive.

Eventually, Baton Round limped toward us.

“My apologies, little Murky Number Seven. They have worked us hard since last time. We can recover here, but every shift brings us closer. We lost three more last night and two last week fell to the feral while on the line. Old friends from the Fillydelphia Post Office. We had to watch the slavers put them out of their misery after they launched at one of the slaves unfortunately chained to them.”

“I’m sorry, Baton...”

“We’re losing friends fast. Ever since they discovered that station, we’ve had to do more. Dig more. Find more.”

Protégé narrowed his eyes. “If they found this ‘Ministry Station,’ why do you still mine here?”

The question hung in the air for some time.

“Materials? Rebar? Old rooms? Who knows?” Windtail spoke quietly in his higher pitched voice. “Everything we mine gets taken off. Somepony once said to fill a gap. Must have been a big gap. Remember that old sinkhole?”

“Mm.”

“Yes. Held up traffic for a full hour. I missed the game because of that.”

I shared a glance with Protégé. I didn’t know how much experience he had with ghouls, but these ones were prone to nostalgia as much as I was prone to tears.

This wasn’t good. Shackles and Grindstone had Ministry Station. They were one piece ahead of us now. We *had* to get my friends and beat them to whatever that mountain held now! Whatever it was that connected them...

“They took the slaves there, the new ones,” Baton Round spoke out suddenly, “I remember now, they said ‘all the new ones.’ The new ones, yes. If your friends got in recently, they went there.”

“Then we would have to enter through Shackles’ own hidden den to get there then? Or through their mineworks?” Protégé leaned forward.

“Oh...” Nurse Splint looked up. The gruesome sight of four white ribs below her chest made me have to look above her head to not feel my stomach turn. “That wouldn’t be easy. The guards there... they don’t even let their own kind through, and no shifts ever came out in the days since they found it. You need to go through their very holdings, through the doors in that station down the line. The ones you passed before, little one.”

So we would have to go into Shackles’ own place. It seemed inevitable. It seemed *impossible*, was more like it.

“We can’t do that.” I looked to Protégé. “They know us too well now. I... I saw it from

the outside. It's crammed with his slavers and supporters! Whatever's in there, it'll be like a slaver's paradise or—"

"Don't let your imagination go, Murk." Protégé chided sternly. "However, you may be right. We cannot break in through a single fortified entrance and sneak ponies out. Not to mention Brimstone."

I heard a raspy cough beside me. Baton round held up a shaky looking hoof.

"There may be one other way."

That got our attention. We trotted over, but Nurse Split placed a hoof on Baton's shoulder.

"No, Baton. They are our friends and saviours for an escape. We cannot—"

"Nurse, I..." He paused and coughed violently. Foul-coloured blood splattered before him. "I cannot but let them decide. There is another way. A way that helped them find where Ministry Station was recently. Farther back the way you came, they broke into new tunnels five days ago. I thought it nothing but hearsay."

A shivering hoof clutched at his throat as he hacked and coughed again, worse than any I had ever done. Behind him, the ghouls lay out soundlessly. They were dying. Some I could see would likely never move again after today.

"They found new tunnels. It was the outer metro."

A chill ran through the air. I saw it among the ghouls but more so than anypony on Protégé. He visibly stiffened up.

"Master Red Eye cut off access to there. It was a place nopony could make safe. There were things—"

"They did not care. They sent in teams of slaves. It seemed to be working, they said that whatever had once been in the outer metro had died out. They even got a powered train down there to move and search. They said that it had been cut off on either end, away from the greater ring around the city, by collapsing tunnels. So they judged that it was safe."

He leaned forward.

"They moved in and they found Ministry Station. A back entrance, a way that should not have been there. Something that didn't make sense. They sent more slaves in to start connecting it up to these tunnels more easily. They said it was safe."

His whole body trembled.

"It wasn't. We heard the screams echoing down through the outer metro into the inner. Their radios went wild with shrieks and cries about something... a... a smell or sounds. Grindstone ordered them to close up the tunnel. He just *left* them in there! Sealed them in with whatever it was, to prevent it getting out."

"You say this is the only other way in?" Protégé seemed cautious.

"Yes. We moved freely in there for at least a day before anything emerged from the depths. So, if you *must* do it? A couple of small ponies might be able to—"

"No!" Nurse Splint pushed in. "Dozens died down there, Baton! The outer metro is not for ponies to ever walk within again! They never even got to see what it was, they just got the same warning that we all used to know before Red Eye! That if you smell mint on the wind, you die!"

They broke into argument. Protégé and I merely looked at each other. I could see he was shaking, just as I was. A decision lay here. We had a way to save my friends, but it involved going to the deepest, darkest, and most dangerous place in the entirety of Fillydelphia.

I gulped. Protégé seemed to be wordlessly asking me something. I knew what.

The words seemed impossible, but I still forced myself to turn and said them to Baton Round.

“T-t-take us there.”

They went silent.

“If it w-were me, they would have done the same to get me out.”

For all our arguing today, I felt Protégé’s hoof on my shoulder, to try and calm me.

“Tell us where to go.”

It wasn’t easy to leave them behind. I could see how bad Baton Round’s health was getting, alongside all of Weathervane’s other old friends. He had trotted us out as far as his chain would allow, pointing down the tunnel and directing us back the way we’d came, to follow the slaves that had passed us.

Watching the ghouls shuffling away, grunting in pain and seeping from horrid injuries, I could only resolve to ensure we would come back for them. For their sake. For Weathervane’s sake. He needed somepony he really knew to help him stay away from ‘the feral,’ as they called it, as much as they needed him to save their rapidly failing lives.

“We’ll get them, Murk. Don’t worry.” Protégé trotted beside me in the quiet tunnels with a stern face. “They’ve survived however many years, they will survive another few days until we can cleanse this place.”

I sighed. “How can we do that? This is such a big operation and Shackles has a lot of influ... influa...”

“Influence. Yes, he does. Hopefully, I can raise enough support of my own to at least warrant an investigation through Grizzly, or even Stern if we’re lucky. It will take time, however. Time we do not have right now if they have already located Ministry Station. At the very least, after today, we shall know where it is as well.”

“That’s true...”

I still kept my head lowered. It didn’t make me feel much better.

The knowledge of where I’d have to go to find the next step of our escape was hardly sitting well with me.

The tunnels around us stretched on, lit only by occasionally flickering gemlights that still did their duty after all these years, casting a pale white haze over the uneven concrete and rusted metal below us. Occasionally, wind would blow down the tunnel, drawn into motion by the fires the slavers lit for warmth. Feeling my mane blow lightly felt surreal so far beneath the ground, although Protégé told me that trains would once have also done this. Welded doors lined the sides occasionally, and we even had to pick our way around one abandoned train still sitting on the tracks. I dared not step inside it. A train this far from a station must have been abandoned for a reason.

Protégé glanced in through the loose passenger door, however. The sad look on his face spoke all that needed be said as he gently closed it over once again.

“Probably thought it was a good shelter.” He muttered quietly.

It became obvious we weren’t discussing the subject of our destination. We both knew where we were going, yet he began to look back from ahead. I’d been falling behind, making tiny trots as though to prolong the time for arrival.

“Murk.” He, for once, didn’t seem to know what to say.

"I... I just... I'm scared."

"I know."

He waited for me. When we started trotting again, it was at my pace. I saw him checking his revolver a half a dozen times. I kept flicking my saddle's mouthpiece in and out.

We were going to the outer metro. The thought just simply hadn't sunk in yet.

We had been told to watch for the red signal lights still running and turn into the service tunnel there. It took a good ten minutes of slow and careful trotting over the uneven rails to spot the little blinking light up ahead. We must have been catching up on that group ahead of us from before, for I could hear low voices drifting out of the black fog further down the main metro line itself. Thankfully, we had reached our turn long before we'd go where they did. Go into the service tunnel, look for the maintenance room on the left hand side, and in there we'd find a stairway to the outer metro.

The service line was hardly as clear as the inner metro itself. The roof had partially cracked and dropped chunks of rock and rebar all around it, leading to a very cautious advance through it. Multiple times, I trotted right into a poking point of metal or banged my knee on a rock despite my pretty good sight in the dark. It became a game of tentatively pushing a hoof forward, feeling around, and then finally stepping. Puddles of foul water below us set my PipBuck clicking, and the ground became uneven in a torn part of the underground system. I wondered if we were below the crater, where the balefire's enormous forces had cracked the metro's tunnels apart completely.

We were getting nowhere.

"I think we should perhaps risk some light, Murk. This will take us all day. Your PipBuck?"

"O-okay..."

Looking down, I played around with it till I found the button for the light. Glimmerlight's repair work had done well. It responded after the first push this time, even if the bulb itself was still weak and inconsistent. One way or the other, it gave us something to see the floor by. Having some light helped me feel safer. Really, the *inner* metro was beginning to feel like a haven. Images of ghastly beasts and unthinkable creatures shrieking from the darkness and dragging me away underground played through my mind again and again.

After a moment, in an excuse to stop again, I turned down the PipBuck volume. Sundial's messages could be set off at this depth, and a sudden beeping was the last thing we needed. Mistakes couldn't be made. Not now.

"Have you noticed where we're going, Murk?" His dark coat was almost invisible in the tunnel. I could only barely see Protégé looking up at the ceiling.

"N-no? I just see tunnels."

"I mean above us. This is heading back in the direction toward the neighbourhood of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I suppose that's only logical, likely why they started hunting down here in the first place."

I hopped up on a larger rock, pushing over it. Ahead, I could see a few doors.

"You think they're connected?"

"Not impossible. The Ministry turns up secrets every other month. There may be some form of hidden entrance inside or near to the Ministry that's difficult to find or activate from the surface. Maybe in a random house's cellar, or some secret elevator command."

He shook his head.

"The thought that something so unnatural and abandoned was always just below us; it made me sleep restlessly after I did my research into it. I... I've had nightmares of being trapped in the outer metro."

Protégé walked near the wall, tracing the coloured lines that led to each door and around various arcane boxes containing the systems that no doubt powered the rails. Hearing him open up like this, I saw the same sort of look I'd only seen once before, as he'd tried to comfort me during Barb's sick game, something that felt so long ago now.

Yet, suddenly, I didn't want to turn and say what I saw. It took a few attempts until I finally pointed.

"I th-think these are the d-doors, Protégé."

Four entranceways lay ahead of us atop a raised stone platform that arced around the larger tunnel section. Short metal steps led up to them from either side. Climbing carefully, alert for any rusted steps ready to snap below us, we came to stand in front of the entrances.

The maintenance door was obvious amongst them. Protégé pointed out the word on a sign, but I could see the toolkit symbol. The others, it seemed, were sotrage for replacement track links and electrical components. Yet the maintenance access was lying open with a paper sign crudely nailed onto it. Trotting up, Protégé tore it off with his magic and read aloud.

"Lower levels quarantined by order of Master Grindstone. Do not descend stairs or remove barricade. Death awaits."

We glanced at once another for a few seconds, before he gently let the sign fall into the train tracks behind us and warily stepped inside.

Behind the door lay an already stripped bare repair bay. Only a few steel tables and spare tracks and track pins lay against the walls, while every drawer, cupboard, and container had been looted clean by the slavers and now lay open and empty. On the walls, I saw posters and charts displaying measurements of nuts, wrenches and various safety regulations bearing the mark of the Ministry of Wartime Technology.

Before us, however, we could see the stairwell leading down. It had been blocked off by numerous barrels clustered together on the landing, and planks of wood nailed across the doorway out of the bay. The layout was clear, this was as much to try and stop us from going down, as it was to try and stop anything coming up.

That alone was unsettling enough, it was heightened by a square section of balsa wood nailed to the blockade, bearing a painting of a screaming pony across it, circled and crossed in red paint. A warning from somepony who couldn't write meant for those that couldn't read. They didn't want to risk anyone going down by accident.

Putting his hooves around the rotten wood, Protégé pulled near the nails and prised a few of them apart. The sign came off easily, clearing the way into the blocked stairwell. Stepping through, I found a long drop where an elevator had had once gone. The stairs surrounded the empty pit, winding around the cage that blocked anyone falling down where the elevator had once moved. Below us, I could see the shimmer of a puddle and little else as it fell into the depths. We were going deeper underground.

"The outer metro is significantly lower in places than the inner, Murk. This could be a trek. So... ready?"

"N-no..." I couldn't help but be honest.

"Your friends are at the end. Just keep thinking of them."

Biting my lip, I tentatively stepped around the crudely stacked barrels, following him onto the stairs. I couldn't believe I was going this way. *They* were down there. The outer metro was a death zone. Someplace ponies *didn't go*.

"Then what are you thinking of?" I asked him quietly.

Protégé hesitated, before shifting another barrel to the side and reaching the first landing.

"Master Red Eye faced down this place before. I... I'm just trying to think that perhaps I can steel myself as he did. Now, come on. Let's get this over with, before we both lose our nerve."

All the same, even as I shook terribly and began to travel down after him, I could see that he wasn't as calm as his own words.

Flight after flight, around the rusting cage elevator, we travelled down into the damp and dark void below us. I strained my ears, but all I heard were the drips or sounds of slavers passing by the maintenance room above us.

My PipBuck light illuminated stained walls rotting with soft weeds. About half way down, I felt the stairs change from stone to a thin metal with punctured holes in them, reminding me all too uncomfortably of the hazy thoughts from when I'd dreamed in a coma not a couple of days ago. Cages and metal stairs.

It took five minutes. It felt like five days.

Every second, I expected to hear something unnatural. To feel a chill on my spine. Protégé even put his eyepiece back on, activating his E.F.S; he wasn't taking chances.

Eventually, reaching the bottom, we found what truly sealed the over metro. A colossal metal door stood before us.

"An old fire door, to contain any metro incidents from reaching the other tunnel. This would hold anything in or out."

"D-does it open?"

My eyes had found the blinking control panel to the side. Holding my PipBuck near for him, Protégé toyed with the controls. It was all I could do to not beg him out of opening it.

It really began to hit home. A real and true fear that made my gut twist, my stomach feel empty and set my hooves pacing. We were going to some place that had monsters known for killing hundreds of ponies, and no one had ever seen them. How could he expect me to do this?

"Remember, Murk."

Looking at his face, I saw that I was not alone. We were both scared. Sighing, I turned back and looked up.

"Rotten mint. If we smell rotten mint, we simply gallop back the way we came. Don't hesitate. Don't stare in fear. Just... just run. Don't look back."

"I d-don't want to do this, P-Protégé..." The thought of me admitting this when I had to help my friends made me feel wretched.

"Neither do I, Murk. These tunnels... we sealed them for a reason. Even Master Red Eye d-doesn't talk of what really happened."

I saw him suck his lip, a nervous tick even if his body held still.

"This is the only way to get to that station."

"Are you sure? We could hide in the slave lines! We could bribe somepony! Or wait for them to come out?"

My voice raised in pitch each time. I put both my hooves on his shoulder, as though pleading.

Protégé simply shook his head. I knew he was right. I'd seen how stringent Shackles' nest was, and we had no idea what lay beyond. I heard him take a quick breath, pushing his courage to do it.

"Here goes..."

He hoofed a large blue button, having to push hard until the rusted device actually depressed. For a few seconds, nothing seemed to happen. Until a deafening whine of hydraulics filled the room, followed by the groan of metal being torn from its rusted stasis. To our right, a red light began flashing and spinning, casting its dual spotlights all around the bottom of the stairwell and playing havoc with my night-vision.

I could see the door before us begin to lift. Thick and heavy, it slowly rose up, giving us a view of our destination, of the outer metro.

Before my eyes could even adjust, other senses felt the difference immediately. A slight breeze carried a crude, milky damp that washed through my nostrils. A strange warmth followed it, sticky and humid, trapped underground with no outlet to cool down. It reminded me of the Stable, yet with a rough, earthy tinge to it instead of the oil and metal. A sweet scent that burned my nostrils.

Yet, my first sight was not of the metro.

The moment the door raised up, something lunged out of it. I screamed. I even heard Protégé yell as we both fell back. I saw a revolver drawn and scrambled to turn in the wet ground. A crackling, boney noise fell around us with movement all along the bottom of the door.

I was already going for the stairs, my wings flaring out in shock. I heard Protégé move quickly behind me.

"Murk!"

I dared to turn.

Protégé stood sweating below, breathless and coming down from the adrenaline spike. He was looking toward the door.

Below it, I saw the remains of ponies. Skeletal, bearing still-decomposing flesh, they had fallen against the door, left behind when Grindstone had sealed it. There were at least a dozen of them, torn bodies that had been lying in a heap against the gate. They'd finally gotten through it as soon as it had opened.

I had to hold my stomach and turn away when I realised that it was only *parts* of them, more so when the sickly sweet smell hit my nostrils. The farther in I saw from my PipBuck's weak light casting into the outer metro, the more I saw body parts simply strewn around. One face still bore a scream upon it, a mask of terror and agony. There was no rhyme or reason, no repeated patterns of death. Some had been torn apart from the chest outward. Others limb from limb. Some were intact with their necks bent at unnatural angles. Some had no significant pieces left to recognise them at all.

Enough. I couldn't look. Holding my eyes shut, I had to let Protégé lead me past them. I could hear my heart racing, feel the sweat dripping down over my closed eyelids. I didn't want to be here. I *really* didn't want to be here! Please, please, *please* let me just pass without incident! Tell me they'd gone away, that these ponies had killed whatever it was!

Coming to the bottom of the stairs, I had to gently help my wings to rest against my side again. Their newly strengthening muscles twinged after having sprung open in shock.

"They were locked in." Protégé's voice held no anger, simply a horrified realisation.

He looked at me, eyes sad and wide from the massacre around us.

"They were trapped when whatever did this came for them."

Stepping inside, I had to check that the door wasn't going to close behind us as I got my first look at the tunnels of the outer metro myself.

It could not have been more distinct from the inner ones we had just been in. Instead of the smooth concrete, it was made of brickwork and sandstone. The outer metro tunnel was rectangular instead of curved, other than the arch along the roof. Up there, I could see tangled power lines where trains must have once connected to get their energy from. Below us there was little other than thicker metal rails and inconsistently sized wooden blocks for a train to run on, not the same powered ones we had seen before upstairs.

"This place is old, even by wartime Equestrian standards." Protégé shifted along the small platform and glanced down the lines either way. "I'd heard the outer metro was different, like a maze, but I hadn't realised it was like this. Remarkable it even stayed intact in the balefire impact. Look, are those mosaics up there?"

This hardly felt important to talk about, but I knew he was trying to distract himself. I could see the cracks in the strange, almost ornate patterns in the roof, and missing bricks that now clustered in piles on the rails or to either side. Moss actually grew down here, turning the ground into a sticky mush while the air held a faint, still mist. Even as I walked, it felt wrong to be wandering through air so still that my own movements sent a ripple effect through the trails I could see floating above me.

It felt too otherworldly. Like someplace where evils beyond my imagination could lurk.

"Murk! Over here, look!"

Snapped to attention by his words, I turned to find Protégé. The slaver had trotted down the platform to gaze into the tunnel. We'd been told to go left, take no side tunnels, and that we'd know the area when we saw it. Trying to avoid moving near to the smeared remains of those who had been trapped here, I couldn't help but notice how the line of bodies went all the way to where Protégé was. Around the rusted mesh wire holding defunct generators, I saw him trot toward a lump in the darkness.

"The ghoul said they'd mounted a cart down here. I think we may have found it."

I moved closer and saw what he meant. Upon the tracks, just where the dead ponies had come from, was a small wagon with a crudely wired engine and pistons to let it move on the tracks. Three seats faced us with another three on the opposite end. A little area for supplies was mounted between the seats.

They had tried to escape on this from wherever they had been.

Protégé climbed up onto it, looking over the controls.

"Looks like it just stalled and cut out. It still works. I don't know about you Murk, but I would much rather have something that can get us back here fast if we have to. At least we *know* the door is open."

"B-but noise..." I bit my lip, advancing around the rails rather than continue walking through the decaying remains all the way to the cart. "It might bring them!"

"They were working here for days before it happened, Murk. I... I think that it should be fine. Listen, we're both injured and only just properly healing now. I don't think either of us can claim to be the fastest galloping ponies around. If anything happens, we need a way out. This almost worked for them."

"Almost." I looked back at the door, afraid it might close on its own. "B-but... okay."

I began to climb up onto the powered rail-wagon, taking his hoof as he pulled me into a

seat. He breathed out slowly, playing his hooves over the levered controls until he found a large key.

"Here goes..."

Twisting it, I heard a dull squirting warble of the engine mounted just behind us. Cutting out, spluttering, it died. He tried again, then again. Finally, with a roar that sounded shockingly loud in the quiet tunnels, it caught and surged into being. Before us, two huge lamps illuminated the tunnels ahead of us with their hanging weeds and uneven muddy ground around stained brickwork. Farther than twenty feet, the darkness simply ate the light.

I was taking long breaths. Through the lingering mist, even the sway of underground vegetation or a puff of warm air felt like some sort of ghost. I heard Protégé curse quietly as he played with the levers, eventually finding one that released tension and set the rail-wagon rolling slightly forward. Then, with a grinding squeal, it began to pick up speed.

"We go in, we get them, we get out."

"In and out. Y-yes."

"Here we go." He pushed the lever forward with a hoof after resting his revolver right beside him. Carefully, slowly, we began to accelerate, and I saw the metro's brick walls shift past us a little faster. Giant pillars holding up the arches above them swooped by as we rounded the corner and passed out of the station.

Gripping the seat, I simply held Unity's Littlepip statuette close to my chest and tried my best to not whimper too loudly.

"Murk, I need you to keep watch."

Shivering, I had to force my eyes open from curling up in the seat. Protégé's voice was strained, tense, and reflecting the same anxious nature I could see on his face as he kept the speed controlled over the ramps and unstable rails of the ancient tunnels.

Biting my lip, I looked up and around. These ghostly tunnels were flying by a little faster than I'd expected. Little rushes of air blew over us every time we passed a set of pillars; them being placed at odd intervals with no consistent pattern. Our passing disturbed the strange underground fog that had gathered in here, making it part and twist behind us in small spirals. Casting my eyes around, I saw our rail-wagon pushing its way through vegetation and passing under dripping water from partially collapsed sections of roof. With Protégé driving, I had to watch our sides and presumably, our rear.

"Do you see anything?" For Protégé, this was a rather stupid question, like he just wanted to hear communication. I somewhat felt the same.

"N-no." Behind us, the tunnels curved away and were lost to the dull yellow gemlights that barely lit our way. "It's like it's dead."

I wasn't sure if I believed myself. Every so often, I'd hear faint noises in the distance. Rocks cracking, wood creaking... all too often like something alive moving down one of the many side tunnels.

"Pray it stays this way." Protégé simply muttered, before scowling as the rail-wagon jarred and bounced over a broken junction. The engine cut out, sending us drifting forward on momentum. After a horrifying few seconds of silence, it spluttered to life again.

I was just watching the side tunnels instead. Each one gave way to thick darkness. Some

were as thin as alleyways, hiding the unsettling orange lights of repair rooms or old generator clusters. We passed a construction area made of rotting wood that barely held up an unfinished piece of brickwork refurbishment. I whimpered when I saw long-dead bones huddled together in the corner, surrounded by empty food packets.

“Oh for the love of—!” The engine cut out again, this time long enough that the wagon rolled to a halt on a flat stretch. The lamps died, leaving us isolated in the flickering green glow of my PipBuck.

“Protégé?”

“It’s just stalled out.” He gunned the engine once, then again. Each time, it died.

I felt my hooves shaking. Keeping the light away from my eyes, I peered into the darkness. Without proper light, the underground mist flowed and twisted in the black like moving shapes in the distance. My ears twitched, hearing distant sounds. Creaks and rumbles. Drips and brief sounds like a kind of ‘whup whup whup’ in the far off tunnels. The heat down here was making my mane stick to me, so clammy and uncomfortably close. I couldn’t even hear the sounds of industry above us, we were so deep now.

“P-Protégé?”

The engine gunned, unhealthily stuttered, and died.

Looking behind us, I swore I saw movement. Or was it just the fog?

My ears twitched in the thick air. I could hear so much in such a silent place. Little drips or pebbles falling. The vibration of the passing rail-wagon had been making things fall from the roof.

In the distance, I heard something larger fall and clatter on metal.

“Protégé!”

“What? What is it?” He leapt up beside me, revolver pointed.

I pointed where the noise had come from.

Everything went deathly silent. He was breathing hard, his revolver pointing to the left... then the right. I saw his eye glance more intently at his headpiece.

“There’s nothing on E.F.S.”

“T-try the engine again, quickly!”

He turned, gunning it once more as I stared in the direction we had looked. Groans of moving air in the tunnels came from either side. Behind us and to the left, I heard a pop, like something wet and sticky bursting.

Squinting my eyes, I saw there was a door right there, falling apart from time. The sounds were coming from there. From within the haze behind that rotted door. I kept hearing things, little noises I couldn’t identify, before—

I yelped as a sudden noise broke through the air. The engine flared back to life, and light washed over the tunnels. Falling back in the seat, I saw a foul mess near the door, stained yellow like pus. It glistened and seemed to creep up the walls and door from inside. Some sort of spreading, mutated fungus that had overwhelmed the entire room.

I didn’t want to think about what those noises inside were.

The rail-wagon began to move along, clicking and clacking its way over the uneven tracks.

“Murk, try to pace your breathing.” Protégé looked away briefly from the tunnel at me.

I hadn’t even noticed that I was hyperventilating and gripping the seat tightly. “I... I... trying...”

“Just... keep watch.” I heard him take a breath himself, gulping hard.

We passed a full crossing, one side entirely collapsed and sunken with earth and the other leading to a concrete dead end where a platform narrowed into a caged area. Benches and lockers lay within that were so rusted they had begun to disintegrate. There was a safe there, but any wish to stop and loot was far from my mind.

"Something's worrying me, Murk." Protégé slowed the wagon.

"What?"

"My E.F.S. Usually it picks up masses of signatures from things like radroaches and tox-slugs when I'm underground. But it's got absolutely nothing. It's like anything in here has just... gone. We've tried all sorts of infestation control, and it's never worked. But here..."

We passed beneath a gaping hole where huge fans lay inactive, the sound of a large passage making a strange groaning hum from our speed.

"...it's just dead."

My teeth were grinding rather uncomfortably, but I couldn't help it. Climbing into the back of the rail-wagon, I kept trying to peer as deeply as I could into those passageways while hunkered down beneath its raised sides.

With a sudden clank that jarred us both, the style of the tracks seemed to change. We passed under an elaborate arch, Celestia and Luna engraved into either side, and suddenly the area overhead was smothered with thick cobwebs that stretched for metres in every direction. The green light of my PipBuck turned to a sickly yellow as it hit them, giving the small area I could light tunnel a pus-like colour. We saw shreds of rotting flesh by the wayside. At a guess, it was those that hadn't gotten on the wagon in time during the evacuation.

"Not long now. He did say it only took six minutes."

Beep!

I squeaked slightly, perhaps not even heard by Protégé. But looking down at my PipBuck, I held it close to me and kept the volume low. I didn't need anything being heard by Protégé by accident that I didn't want him knowing...

Beep!

Click.

"I don't have long. They've left me somewhere while they check something. They've brought me underground to some huge chamber just behind somepony's cellar and locked me in while they went deeper. They've been right beneath us all this time! The zebras have been right here!"

So they had taken him to the metro first. That just about confirmed right off the mark that Aurora was involved with them. I kept looking around as we passed away from the cobwebs into the darkness once again. Even the interest of Sundial wasn't enough to quell my fear. We began passing through an open area filled with wooden beams and old storage pallets piled high with bricks and a thousand dark places to hide.

"A-apparently, I've to work on something for them. They asked me what kind of terminal I used so they could get one for me. They have something for us to do, some job they need Wartime workers who know arcane things to help with. Oh, Pinkie... please help me get out of this when I know enough. If I could go now and just tell her where they are, I would! I—wait. I think they're coming back. It's some sort of elevator that goes down below the city! I can hear it coming up!"

A shriek from mismatching rails sent sparks flying off the wall, illuminating stone carvings of the sun and moon that had been warped and corrupted by moss and lichen.

Protégé pulled back the speed, but going downhill, I could still feel the rush of air pick up. We were going faster!

"I just keep feeling like I'm out of my depth. I don't know why I'm here, even though I... well, do. I'm not the pony for this. They've got others in here with me. They look like refugees. I don't know any of them. I just have to keep reminding myself who I'm doing this for!"

Barely able to listen, I grabbed the holds of the wagon and held tight! Lights in the labyrinthian side tunnels flashed by faster as we rode around a corner. I could have sworn I saw something dash by ahead of us in the lamps under the mist! Ahead, I saw flickering red and orange lights spearing through the fog.

"They're coming now. To take me down. Sky, Dad... Mom. Whatever happens now, I love you all, okay? I have to stop before they hear me. Whoever finds this, I hope you can understand why I did what I did. I—"

"All of you. Stand up and move forth to the vertical stairs."

An exotic tone cut through the speaker as though from further away. The fog swirled all around, becoming thicker and cut with heavy particles of dust that hung in the air. I jolted forward as Protégé hit the brakes, the lights ahead beaming harshly into our eyes before the rail-wagon slammed to a halt on the end of the line with a juddering snap. I flew forward into the front seats with a yelp.

Protégé snapped up his revolver, staggering to his hooves as he pointed it all around above me. I could hear groans and distant pattering sounds. Somewhere, a pipe gurgled. Every noise sounded alive, the heat having staved off suddenly to a dull, lukewarm ambience. I heard Protégé leap off onto the soggy floor.

"Let's go Murk. We're here. I don't want to hang around here any longer than we have to. This place is not natural..."

Creeping up, I poked my head above. The brickwork was patchy and stained with a dark red. It led to a massive hole in the wall. Mining tools scattered the floor where they had been left. Some bore black marks on their blades, the same as that on the bricks. As I stepped off the wagon, the ground sank beneath my hooves for a few inches, and I dared not look down too closely to see why.

Through the hole, carved into the remnants of some archive room, we could see that somepony had knocked clean through the wall into something else entirely. In here, there were massive rows of filing cabinets and haphazardly stacked boxes. All of them, and most of the floor, were covered in rotted paper. The architecture changed slightly in here. Once past the cut rock leading into this document room, I could see the glint of metal and polished tiles alongside smooth walls that had once clearly been a bright white. No longer.

Protégé led the way in, his revolver whipping from side to side rapidly. Ancient papers were strewn by more rotting bodies lay all around. Grindstone hadn't just left a team down here. He'd created a massacre to contain the threat.

Slowly, both of us hesitating and glancing at one another nervously, we shifted onward into the hole, passing into whatever this place was that Shackles' teams had found.

As I moved, I heard somepony else shifting and almost freaked on the spot before noticing it was my PipBuck. Sundial, with his PipBuck still active, was being marched into the lift. I heard the cries of ponies echoing, as he entered into the same place as this two hundred years before.

"Wish me luck..."

"Baton Round was right. This doesn't belong."

Protégé went first, stepping in with his revolver raised and E.F.S. active. The hole itself was a good six feet deep, a thick wall that had been mined through to reach this place. The presence of metal linings and mesh wire perhaps hinted they'd spotted it through an air duct that once stood here.

Only, Protégé was right, this wasn't like the area we'd just been in.

What we had found was a connecting underground corridor. It bore the same brickwork as the outer metro, still clearly of the same era. Yet the light fittings and flooring seemed newer, more wartime in their design. Protégé looked down and trotted in a circle as he looked at it. I cast my light for him to see. Mouldy tiles ran along the edges with a laminated centre. Other than two hundred years of disuse, it would have been seemed pristine. Clean. Clinical.

"The doors are prefabs, Murk. Somepony refitted this place from what it once was. The outer metro has many old constructs within it where ponies once did engineering work or held storage areas."

My hooves made little tapping sounds on the floor, which was different from the more common, satisfying 'clack' of stone that I'd become used to. Even those tiny sounds seemed to carry for a long way. Dirt had trailed all the way in and inactive lanterns hung on either side, but this place seemed frighteningly basic and secluded. The gloom went off into the distance, revealing the prefab doors Protégé mentioned. Almost a half dozen in a line along this corridor ended with double doors bearing cracked glass.

"He said it's through this place that you get to Ministry Station, right?" I kept my voice low, my head as well. Every few seconds I checked behind me.

"He did. Only now I'm wondering why."

Gently, we stuck to one side and crept further toward the double doors. Each one of the prefabs we passed was jammed shut, bearing huge metal padlocks over bars that blocked them off.

Suddenly, I heard something. Every muscle in my body stiffened painfully as I heard the definite sound of movement behind us. I dared not speak. I simply spun around fast enough to attract Protégé's attention. Gasping, he backed off and pointed the muzzle of his weapon at the hole.

The sound kept going. Earth and metal being rung upon. Then I began to hear something Protégé had mentioned a long time ago. I heard a distant *beep*. I swallowed only to find my throat dry... something was out in the tunnels we'd come through. I glanced to Protégé and found him sweating profusely, his mouth open a little.

Looking closely, I saw his eyes wide in terror. There was a tiny, deeper red dot on his eyepiece shivering wildly from side to side.

I dared to whisper. "H-how... f-far?"

"Distant. Sssh."

We held still for a few moments. Slowly, he began to back off, his hoof nudging me to back away from the hole as well. Dust fell from it, disturbed by our passing. The opposite route down this new place was filled only with hazy yellow dust swirls hanging in the air.

My eyes ached to let loose tears in stark terror.

Beside me, I heard Protégé sniff the air every few seconds, just to check. I heard it again, a little far off bleep like an alarm clock, echoing down the tunnels.

I counted in heartbeats. After ten or so, Protégé seemed to sigh.

"It's gone. But whatever it was, to be so far away and move that fast from side to side, it must be—"

"D-don't..." I had to stop him. My imagination didn't need anything more to work with. I wanted to run away, run and hide, get back to the inner metro. Yet, now that I knew it was *out there*, I didn't know what to do. And that thought was the worst of all.

"We shouldn't be here, Murk. We might have gotten lucky. Let's get farther inside, maybe they're just in the tunnels."

Sounding calmer than I, he turned to the double doors and gently eased one of them aside. They creaked, turning on rusted hinges, and I couldn't help but keep watching behind.

"What is this?"

"Huh?"

Daring to turn and quickly move through after him, we found ourselves in a much larger room. Basic metal benches lined the entirely tiled floor that led up to a canteen at the far end. It seemed normal, other than that the kitchen was protected with mesh wire, only bearing a hole for food to be passed out.

We moved in, stepping over discarded metallic trays and shattered bowls. Both were stained green from where food had once rotted away. Straws and plastic cups lay near them. I tried to ignore the shattered skeletons near the door, yet Protégé wandered nearer them and lifted a riot shotgun in his magic.

"Empty. Loose casings on the floor. They fought here. These sorts of weapons were given to security guards more often than anypony else."

"What does that mean?" I didn't turn to him, instead looking up at the massive banner still hung above the area with smiling ponies beside white-clad employees handing them hay and flower sandwiches.

"It means something down here needed guarding. I've never read about anywhere like this in any of my books on Fillydelphian history. Some sort of prison the Ministries kept hidden away?"

I knew the Ministry of Morale was known for that, yet I couldn't bring myself to believe it. Pinkie would have mentioned it, wouldn't she?

We continued on, shifting toward the larger doors that lay ajar out of this place. On the wall beside them, I could see dark stains alongside impacts from buckshot cracking the old bricks. Despite being away from the tunnels, this was still the outer metro. All this new place had done was put new age materials inside old tunnels. Try as it might, it couldn't hide the grim sickness and dull green moss growing everywhere.

The door was heavy, leading to us both pushing it open at once. To my surprise, there was a dull light through here, like the next room was still lit.

Yet, trotting through, we found something far deeper than what I had expected down here.

We were standing on the upper level of a plaza, similar in shape to the one in the Mall, if smaller and more crowded. Our level was like a rectangle around a large open-plan hole in the middle. It was dimly illuminated from barely active gem lights in the ceiling that

flickered and cut out every few seconds. Dark and mouldy tiles clicked beneath our hooves, while tangled wires were strung over the gap at the centre.

“What in Equestria...” I breathed in disbelief as I stepped over to the edge of the hole to look down.

This was much larger than a few rooms.

This was a haunting place, as dark and gothic as it was sterile by design, with enormous columns that rose past us into arches on the tall ceiling. I could see three floors below us through the great balcony-ringed hole. Rows of doors littered every level. Each one bore a small viewport in it, surrounded by rubber sealings and sliding locks. Down there, amongst the mist, there lay a shattered ground level, similar to the ancient designs in the metro. A giant clock face had been dashed upon the floor below, fallen from a broken mural on the wall, and was now surrounded by a cluster of skeletons and piles of metal beds and chairs in the centre of the room. Other remains lay upon the floors above as they ringed around the great rectangular hole.

“This is no quick refit. This is something older.” Protégé breathed lightly, before whipping around. “Back! Into that room, there!”

We shifted quickly as he pulled one of the iron doors open. Diving inside, I felt the ground soften with a warm dampness. Protégé backed in, his weapon pointed through the crack in the door. He’d seen something on E.F.S. further off. I couldn’t help but creep nearer, focussing my ears and peering out. I listened for beeping.

Beep!

I yelped in fright. That had been right beside me! I felt Protégé clamp his hoof over my mouth to keep me quiet.

Beep!

It was my PipBuck! I wrestled with the volume switch, how had it turned back up? Convincing him to let me go, I held it closer to me in the darkness of this tiny room we hid in.

Click.

“He-hello, it’s Sundial again. I—oh geez...”

He cut out. In the distance, I heard something fall and clatter upon a tiled floor. Then I heard a door slammed shut. Whimpering, I turned away, back to my PipBuck as Sundial returned.

“S-sorry, they were near. I’m down here now, trying to record what I see, l-like Pinkie asked. This is incredible. Incredible and terrifying. They’ve got a whole operation down here in some sort of station! There’s bucks and mares I knew from work who went missing here! Every so often I see troops of ponies like refugees. But they look more like slaves. They don’t look happy...”

If only he’d known.

“Every room I go by, they’ve got some sort of odd tool inside with a few workers. Zebras sometimes pass with these weird weapons to keep an eye out, way more than could normally sneak in. Are they planning an underground invasion? They’ve told me to work on the same things I helped design in the Ministry, to make miniaturised spark batteries like I did for the armour. I don’t know why.”

“Murk, we have to move soon. We can’t stay here. The signal’s gone.” Protégé didn’t turn around when he spoke. I saw him push the door open a little and had to fight the temptation to tell him not to.

"O-okay."

"Just listen out. We're not alone in this place now."

Oh, great. Just make me feel a lot better, Protégé.

"But I did see something. Those refugees, they're taking them somewhere else! Somewhere deeper. One look through the door, I saw it looked like some sort of prison, they even had guards. I swear I saw somepony too. I don't believe my eyes but I'm... I'm sure it was her."

I stopped, looking down. Was this confirmation?

"She was directing things, talking to zebras and looking over what we're doing here. I know it's her. I saw the pony who leads the Ministry of Arcane Science in Fillydelphia. Aurora Star is a traitor."

Click.

I'd known it, but somehow hearing it in his voice made it all seem much more real. Aurora Star had betrayed ponykind to work for the zebras. She had turned against them, working against Equestria from beneath the very city she'd sworn to *Twilight Sparkle herself* she would defend.

Protégé pushed the door fully open. Shaking, I followed him only to see him look back into it.

"What?"

"That room..."

"What about it?"

He pushed past me, putting his hoof on the ground and walls, pressing in.

"Padded walls, iron doors, viewports... oh no..."

He moved back, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"What? What is it Protégé?"

This place, it isn't a prison." I saw him bite his lip. "It's an *asylum*."

Quickly, he moved around, looking over the lip of the rails surrounding the gap between floors.

"We're moving on, *now*. I don't think we should be here, Murk."

I nodded, before cringing and whining under my breath when another creaking slam came from somewhere above us. I heard something moving on creaking floorboards.

"Protégé. Why didn't you see this one? It sounds closer..."

"I don't know. *I don't know*. Let's go. Right now. Just hope it's a wayward ghoul or... or something. We need to find the way through. Stay quiet. Don't speak."

He trotted, then cantered, and clearly had to stop himself galloping from nerves to get through this nightmarish place. We headed around the balcony, passing each of the barred asylum rooms as we went. Some lay open like the one we'd hid in and held nothing but festering wool leaking from the padded walls, or the remains of broken chains and dark stains.

We found some stairs and hopped down the gap in them. Picks lay nearby. Somepony had started destroying this stairwell but had gotten caught before they could finish. Coming to the next floor, and pushing open the heavy wooden and glass windowed doors, we saw that this one straightened out at the end. It had a much larger 'common' area underneath where we had been on the floor above, that stretched back into the wall. Passing quickly alongside the guard rail into the hole again, we moved toward it. In theory, a common room might have a route to the main way in, right? As we moved cautious, I kept seeing shadows

moving in here, in the hole to the next floor, or within abandoned inmate rooms. They sprang and stuttered with the inconsistent light of my PipBuck.

Protégé pointed to a sign. I didn't know for what, as it held a word I was in no mindset to struggle to read right now, but the little picture of a pony running toward a door beside it gave me a clue. This place was, according to Sundial, lower than the Ministry Station, so any emergency exit had to be toward the level the station was on. Right? Did that make sense? I hoped so. The increasing sense that this place had realized that its territory had been breached by two wandering ponies grew with every metre we moved into it. I didn't dare think about how far we had to gallop if we needed to flee back to the rail-wagon.

Then I heard it again. A distant beeping. Feeling about ready to just curl up and cry, I tapped Protégé's shoulder to get him to look around. Judging by the angle of his head, it was above us again. The noise got louder. A locked door was struck so hard that even Protégé heard it. Then it was hit again... and again.

We both staggered back and huddled against the wall as an unearthly shriek pierced the air in the asylum. Long, high-pitched, and only growing louder and higher, it echoed down the hallways from wherever it was. I heard a shattering of metal, as whatever door had dared bar its way broke down. I felt my cheeks become wet. I even saw Protégé look frozen in terror. Something was in here, and it was very real. I felt him pull my hoof, dragging me onward. At a canter, we kept moving.

I didn't smell anything.

I didn't smell anything.

I didn't smell anything.

Repeating the mantra again and again to make me feel safer, I stuck to the rules. We didn't smell anything, so it wasn't near. Sound just echoed here a lot. It wasn't near us! It couldn't be!

Passing into the common area, overgrown plants in pots wrapped around the benches they had clung to and almost tripped me. My PipBuck began clicking to warn of radiation. Tugging on Protégé's clothing, I pulled him away from where it was. Had something got caught in radiation down here? How could Balefire reach so deep?

Avoiding the radiation took us closer to the larger rooms where I guessed staff might have once resided, at the far side of this level. Only, something caught my eye. Wires and thick cables snaked into it, and I could see the faded light of a terminal. The cables looked too new for this old place.

New things looking out of place were what we were looking for down here in the first place.

"In here," I whispered into his ear before creeping forward to poke my head inside.

What I saw made my face go pale.

There were terminals all right. A whole bank of them connected to the cables were placed on a crude desk. Yet what lay before them is what had caught my eyes. In this area of all places, I saw something I recognised from long ago. A huge machine that dominated the room. A pony could sit in it, with straps that held them tight and a headset hanging on a half-torn cable above it.

After a second, I realised something. It was two machines, two machines I had seen in two separate places connected.

Aurora Star's memory machine for ponies who didn't have magic seemed to have been combined with the device that had created spell orbs in the Stable. Two kinds of research

had been connected down here. A machine that showed you memories combined with a machine that created orbs you could learn from. Was this to... no, this was beyond my mind to guess. This was something for Glimmerlight to figure out.

Just, why here?

"The fact that this strapped its users in pretty harshly worries me, Murk." Protégé shifted the leather straps with a hoof. "You only do that if it creates spasms—"

"Or if somepony didn't want to do it." I finished for him, a hoof gently caressing one of my own wings. Still unused to them, they had remained frozen to my side since we entered this place.

He nodded back, before simply shaking his head.

"What kind of asylum is this place?"

Trotting back, he made it very clear that we weren't pausing to go terminal file hunting. Yet even as we passed outside, I saw more rooms next to the chamber. They contained surgery beds, stained with oddly-coloured liquids and ranks of unidentifiable bottles near them. Lamps craned over each one, while loose buckles hung from either side. Suddenly, the groaning of the decrepit structure was all too eerily similar to what my imagination saw this place sounding like while in operation. Ponies had not been treated well here.

Across the common area lay various open windows. Cracked, and in some places, shattered, they looked in on a third chamber bearing banks of similar machines. Memory machines, all linked to one glowing orb at the top. Locked in its own little cage, there was no way we could access it, and I highly doubted Protégé would want to use it. Now was no time for memory orbs.

"Memory technology?" Protégé peered closer. "Why would you force somepony to watch a memory? Some sort of torture? Interrogation?"

"Or to show them something?" I added, before realising that that is pretty much the purpose of memory orbs anyway. I cast one more look into the room before turning to leave.

I did see one thing. Lying on the ground was a pack bearing the mark of Red Eye. Reaching over, I pulled it up and found it to contain little more than an audio tape. Ensuring the volume was low, I plugged it into my PipBuck as we trotted on.

Click.

"I can't get out. I can't get out!"

A buck's terrified voice whimpered into the microphone.

"They told me it was safe! They told me there were no monsters in the old metro! They lied to me! They lied! They're all dying out there now! Can you hear me? Do you read? Do... do you hear me?"

He'd thought it was a radio. Protégé leaned closer.

"There was something downstairs! We were sent to turn the power back on, but it was down there! This smell, a horrible smell! Can you hear me!? Get out if you smell it! GET OUT! GET OUT BEFORE THEY COME! PLEASE HELP ME! HELP! HELP ME, SOMEONE!"

I had to turn the volume down again as he shrieked. Protégé glanced around quickly, revolver creeping up again. The buck in the recording let his yelling fall to a defeated whimper.

"You... you aren't there. Why won't you answer? Please be there..."

Sniffing, beyond crying out, I heard him slump down.

"I can hear them coming. They heard me!"

In the distance, I heard something. A banging of doors followed by some sort of frantic movement and mad shrieks. Something knew where he was. It was coming.

"I can smell it. Oh no, I can smell it again! The rotten stench! Death! They're here! They're h— NO I DON'T WANT THEM TO BE HERE, GO AWAY! SOME PONY GET ME OUT OF HERE! NO!"

He dropped the device. The microphone crackled from the fall and the dent on the side suddenly made sense. He wailed, rushing off in the distance, his galloping quickly fading from the recording. In the time after he had fled, the sound of movement only increased in volume, getting closer, and closer, and louder!

It kept getting louder.

My eyes went a little wide.

"P-Protégé..."

The noise kept getting louder.

"Murk, what is it? I'm sorry, that was tough to hear—"

"Protégé!"

The horrid sound of something approaching stayed in my ears as I showed him the recorder.

It had stopped some time ago.

"...no."

Behind us, a tremendous slam of metal echoed across the entire balconied section of the asylum.

We both turned, a cold sweat forming on me as I saw dust explode from one of the locked and sealed doors. It struck again, throwing up more pebbles and fragments of brick. Dulled, yet high-pitched, a great, unearthly shriek of bile and rage keened out from behind it. The noise made my legs go weak. I fell. My entire body felt frozen up as I heard it.

Huge thumps, rends, and slams sent the heavy door buckling in its slot! A gurgling howl, desperate and repeating, roared up from behind it.

"It-it doesn't show on E.F.S..." I heard Protégé, his revolver shaking even in his magic as it raised. "Why can't I see it!?"

The door bent inward as the seal broke. The frame fell off, leaving only the hinges to hold it back.

There was a tiny hole at the top of the door that now let the smell seep into the room and burn my nostrils.

Rotten mint, sickly and distinct.

"Pr..."

"Murk, run."

"I... I can't... I'm..."

"Murk! RUN!"

He grabbed me, *threw* me ahead of him, and then took off. I couldn't do anything but scream until my throat gave out and sprint after him. The world around me became a blur. My eyes watered. My heart slammed against my ribcage with every single smash of the door behind us. The shrieking became a cry of desperation and infernal rage, as though it sensed us getting away from it. An unnatural ambience, like a low moan, began coming from every corridor and air vent that grew until it filled my ears with its deathly, haunting sound.

Protégé rounded a corner, easily overtaking me. I hoped he knew where we were! I saw

open doors!

"In one! We can—"

"NO! Just *run!*"

I felt exhausted, my injuries coming up as I exerted myself. Concern for my own lack of speed made me doubt myself. We ran through banks of broken doors. Every room held its own obstacles to climb, jump or crawl around. I at some point leapt over several beds crammed into an old fitness room. Behind us, I heard that worst of sounds.

The sound of a door springing open.

There was no delay. No great scream from whatever it was. I simply heard something push the door aside and tear off after us. I felt my wings shivering, moving instinctively to try and speed me up. Protégé hit a door ahead of us, rebounded from its padlock, and fumbled with his revolver to aim it and blast the lock off. The first shot missed entirely, the second skiffed it. I heard him curse in a way that hardly befitted him before the third sheared the lock off. We ran through. Ahead, I saw a glint of green, the same symbol for the exit!

Both of us almost fell down the stairs, slamming into the wall of the landing before rebounding off to launch down the next flight. Behind us, the sound of something tearing past beds, upturning them, and screeching with lust and a desperate want and *need* to catch us. The stairs we went down led to another twisting series of wards. I was completely lost. I didn't remember where we'd turned, and I barely got a sense of where we were.

We came to a crumbled section of roof, sheer rock jutting down. Squeezing, turning side on, I had to wriggle past the thin gap it left. I threw myself into it behind Protégé, kicking and pushing with my exposed hind section until I was just inching through. I felt Protégé pull me from the other side, the clamor near behind me! I couldn't see it! I was trapped and I couldn't see what was bearing down on me! I screamed as something slammed into me, until I realised it was Protégé's magic pulling me through. Something scrambled, fumbling at the wreckage I'd just emerged from before turning and leaving, a sound like tearing on every motion, tinged with metallic tinkling.

Then the unthinkable. I heard a second howl join the first. It came from the corridors beyond us. Somewhere off to the right, a beeping sound picked up as I saw a flash of movement in the shadows outside of this room. We were far past it before I actually saw anything, but I heard the the frenzied screeching and that low, drawn-out moaning erupt from those deep corridors. The distance made me wonder just how huge this place was.

It tore into the room behind us, bringing a wave of nauseous smells in its wake. Protégé turned and slammed a filing cabinet down in front of the door we just passed, locking it in behind us. Peeled wallpapers of a peaceful Equestria lined the walls on either side, and maps of the area fallen upon the floor. The door behind us shattered, the wood and glass exploding like shrapnel.

Protégé led us through what I suddenly realised was a reception, yet Protégé turned away from it as though to run deeper in! I shouted to him, grabbed his hoof.

"RECEPTION! DOOR! WAY OUT!"

I just cried words wildly as I ran instead to the main doors, suddenly realising my guilt that I had just run ahead and not even helped him up. It was getting hard to see. I felt dizzy as I slammed into the heavier doors. Behind us, the creaking moan, beeps, and howls grew closer. The smell grew greater. I struck the doors again and again, but they wouldn't open. I cried to anything to save me, until Protégé pushed past and pulled a huge lever to the side.

With a dull clank, the doors began to open just enough for us to squeeze through. I didn't even see what was on the other side before I ran into the wooden planks barricaded over the entrance. I heard his gun fire, and I squeezed through the shattered hole. Somewhere, somehow, I felt another lever on the other side and pulled it.

Turning back, I saw the entrance closed over like the ones on the inner metro. Signs of danger had been painted across it. Falling off the lever, I saw the doors begin to slam shut again. Through the tiny hole, I caught one final whiff of the smell before they came together. The last thing I saw was the doors to the reception blasting open as though Brimstone himself had charged them.

These metal doors were too thick to break. The creatures slammed into them and pounded hard. I heard their muffled, horrific sounds for minutes afterwards as we limped and clambered away. They made keening wails that cut deep into me. Each scream went on for half a minute or more. I hadn't even seen Protégé until we emerged into a dark tunnel.

Protégé fell against the wall, slumping. His ponytailed mane had come loose in the frantic chase, and I saw him lean over, his revolver and eyepiece falling to the ground as he put his head in his hooves.

I had never seen him shed tears before.

As for myself, I simply found the nearest corner, curled up with my wings and hooves around me, and finally let it all out as the adrenaline painfully wore off.

Not a word was spoken between us for some time.

We had shifted away from the door the moment we got our breath back. Neither of us wanted to be anywhere near the asylum right now, and it was all I could do to stop my imagination running rampant with replays of that minute of terror. I found myself preferring the silence and melancholy of Stable Ninety Three over what lay in the outer metro.

The path had led upwards along a gently tiled slope shaped almost like a large tube of smooth brickwork walls, almost pitch black but for our lights. It was, however, entirely silent.

At least, I thought it was. Every so often I could have sworn I heard something nearby. Just a whisper in the dark or a feeling as though we were nearing something. Like I could sense something deep down below. Shaking my head, I took a deep breath and a gulp of RadAway to ward off whatever I'd stepped in. Brimstone's birthday gift had made my life so much easier.

Ahead of me, however, I saw Protégé stop and stare for a second. He looked to the side briefly as though just at the wall, before shaking his head and moving on quickly. I could have sworn I heard him mutter 'nothing' under his breath. I trotted closer.

"You, uh, alright?"

"I'm fine. Just... thought I heard someone there, felt something in the air."

"S-so did I."

There was a brief pause to look at one another. He simply shook his head and kept moving.

"This place was not meant for ponies. Let's just... just go..."

I followed behind him. Yet even as we trotted, I kept looking behind or below me. Little

sounds of air moving whispered through the air, yet I felt no draft.

Protégé seemed more than a little uncomfortable, shaking his head again as we turned a corner.

There, finally, lay our destination. Ministry Station.

The great door ahead of us, the way out of those nightmare. It bore a massive bronze emblem of the Fillydelphia Metro.

It surprised me, really. This was a place I had been searching for. A place that could contain the key to escaping our bonds forever. I might have given more thought to what it might have looked like or even what I might find, but with my mind so preoccupied on simply wanting to see the outside world again, the very place I'd strove to find to make that happen held little imagery my head.

Now, far beneath the city of Fillydelphia, I had found it at last

The large door before us slid open easily. Yet once Protégé had pushed it, there were no creaks or stiffness. It fell quietly aside.

This was not what I had ever expected. Not in any of my active imagination.

Inside, it was not like my world. I had to squint as bright light flooded into the corridor. I heard Protégé mutter in disbelief and cover his eyes briefly. A white glare, clean and warm, filled Ministry Station. Peering past, I saw that there were fully functional lighting panels over white tiles; a smooth marble flooring dotted with polished metal patterns. There were clean walls, free of graffiti, stretching to either side along a platform studded with benches and backed by colourful murals upon the walls. They bore visages of the Ministry Mares, or green countrysides.

It was not unoccupied. Before us, once our eyes had adjusted to the metro platform's light and shining brilliance, we saw slaves working frantically around it. They polished the murals and swept the floor of any dust. One was repairing a vending machine near the back. If it hadn't been for their threadbare clothing and bony bodies, I might have never realised what they were.

Only, none of them seemed to care that we had just wandered in. I felt exposed as we trotted onto the clean flooring, but no slaves looked at us directly. They continued to murmur and go about their business so steadily that it took me a second to really realise what was different.

They were smiling.

None bore any chains, they had no fresh injuries, and worked with a confidence and genuine effort instead of the dull and slow grind you would see on the surface or the inner metro.

Yet that smile... every one of them bore it. Almost identical, sharing the same expression and look. Some chatted idly as they worked.

"We're almost done."

"I know, almost done!"

"I'm so glad I came here. I can help Equestria."

"I know, me too!"

"Yeah."

"I can't wait."

Protégé wandered forward, finding them completely oblivious to his presence. The platform stretched ahead of us, with three low, rounded passageways on the left leading further into the station while the metro line lay over a lip on the right. The tunnels at either

end had been closed off entirely or had never even been dug. It was just smooth stone blocking them off. No wonder it had taken so long to find this place.

"What in Equestria is this?" Protégé muttered as we moved further in, holding his head and wincing from the bright lights.

I didn't know, but I could feel the hairs on my neck rising and my heartbeat increasing. I had expected blood and whipping and slavers shouting and...

Not this. This was somehow worse.

I could see it in their faces. They all wore the *same expression*. Their mouths were smiling, but their eyes were dead and lifeless.

"I've finished the panel!"

"Good work, that's one more thing finished!"

"Wonderful, there's so much to do."

"I'll go ask what else I can do."

"Okay. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

A slave wandered past us, passing between Protégé and I, and I got a good look at that lifeless face. There was no spark there. He moved into one of the passageways and disappeared up a stone stairway.

Even as I glanced at those stairs after him, I heard the sounds of working going on above and below us; the soft tapping of hooves moving calmly in every direction. All seeking just to help what they could nicely and without any spoken worries. A yawning feeling that there was something different here. A new feeling that was wonde—

I stamped my hooves and shook my head, knocking my hoof off it a few times. No, this wasn't good. There was something *wrong* in here. I could feel it in the air, an ambience of stillness lacking the personality and colour of life.

"Protégé, what's going on?" I voiced the question I knew he couldn't answer, but I needed somepony to talk normally.

He didn't answer. I turned over to find him.

"Protégé?"

He was near two of the slaves, watching what they were doing quietly. Both were working on some wires behind a metal plate in the wall. One of them stretched a hoof to find a wire cutter, and Protégé lifted it to the struggling pony with his magic.

"What are you doing?"

He blinked and turned back to me, as though surprised or even embarrassed I'd seen.

"I... just handing it... no, nothing. Nothing, I'm fine. This place is not what I expected. There's something very, very wrong here, Murk. These ponies, look at their eyes."

Stepping closer, peering around the worker without her even acknowledging me, I saw what he meant.

Her eyes were fighting something. Small shivers in her hooves matched up to rapid blinks. She looked horrified, aghast, but only in her eyes. Only there, above that bright smile. I recoiled in confusion and fear.

Protégé lowered his head, taking a stoic look. "Let's get deeper in, find out just what Shackles is doing down here. I... I don't even know what to guess or where to begin."

He certainly looked at a loss as he went the way the slave had gone. Those behind us simply continued their work without even noting our leave.

Yet, even as I went onto the steps, I heard something. A scratching, earthy sound of

something moving quickly. Turning back, I saw nothing but could keep hearing it. The sound was coming from the metro line, behind the smooth stone that blocked off the tunnels.

Very faded, lessened by the thick stone, I heard something gurgling and beating against it. Dull thumps and wet cracks. Then I heard a creaking moan. Then another. A third. A fourth.

It was them.

The stone that blocked up the tunnel trembled as a muffled shriek broke the calm silence. I felt Protégé stand ready to flee again as the beasts slammed again and again into that apparently thin wall of concrete keeping them out. Fragments of dust fell from above. Sickeningly wet slaps of something impacting against it rose higher.

Yet the slaves around us didn't pay any heed. Two of them were right beside the wall applying new layers of material to the tunnel to cover any of the small cracks I could see. They didn't even acknowledge what was right outside!

"Murk, please tell me, are you seeing the same thing I'm seeing?"

"It's like they can't think for themselves..."

"Come on, let's get out of here. I don't want to be around if those things break through."

He tugged at me a little while I stared. I could hear more impacts on the opposite end of the platform too. The sound was drawing them in. Even from behind me, a yawning sound of wind rushing through the tunnels caught my ears, yet I felt nothing upon my skin.

Suddenly, Ministry Station didn't feel very safe at all any more. But I wasn't sure what it was that truly scared me more. The physical threat laying siege to it or the unsettling atmosphere playing on my every sense that lay within.

It seemed Ministry Station was not simply occupied by mindless slaves. After little more than a few dozen metres into one of the half-circle shaped passageways, we had to duck behind an old ticket booth. I'd heard two ponies conversing more normally up ahead, laughing in rough voices.

We settled in behind the old chair where a ticket-pony might once had sat bored all day. Listening carefully, I heard the loose banter that unmistakably belonged to slavers.

"—so I says, 'look, I just want out of this place.'"

A female voice responded.

"Same, the sooner we get that damn shift change back to the inner metro, the better. This place just freaks me the fuck out. Keep thinking it'll do to me what it did to the ones Shackles broke in. You know Squib woke up screaming last night? Saying he heard somepony whispering in his ear in some zebra language or some shit."

Protégé glanced back at me as though to check I'd heard the same. This place truly was unsettling to those staying here. What was wrong with it?

"You kidding? Fuck me... let's just check on those slaves on the platform and get the hell topside back to the den as fast as we can. They told us it would only go for the slaves."

'It'? Had something changed them? I could feel a cold sweat of fear passing over me. I hated these things, the things you didn't understand or couldn't see. The effects of magic beyond what I could understand.

The slavers trotted quickly past, grumbling about Shackles keeping them down here so

long. I gave them time to pass down the stairs we'd come up a few minutes before and took a peek out. The white tiles and colourful artworks covering the unblemished walls stretched out to a junction ahead. No pony in sight. I could hear many more though, somewhere above, along with a deep throbbing in the air.

Only going for the slaves. What did that mean? We had to move on, I needed my friends out of here as soon as possible. *I* needed out of here as soon as possible!

"Protégé, it's clear."

I moved out, before realising I'd heard nothing from him.

"Protégé?"

Turning to look back into the booth, I saw him just sitting and staring behind us. With a start, I looked back... and saw nothing. I whispered his name again and shook his shoulder. Blinking, he made a little shake of his head and a little gasp.

"Are you alright?"

He looked over at me, as though surprised to see me there. "Yes, yes. Sorry, I was j-just finding it strange that such a place exists. I'm fine. This place is just... incredible. If we could preserve this..."

"Maybe..." I just muttered to myself, not really caring much what anyone did to it so long as I was nowhere near it for the rest of my life. "It's clear, come on!"

This time, he followed and we crept further inside. The roof opened up, revealing the junction to be part of a larger network of tunnels down here. On one side, there lay a gigantic curved staircase of the same marble, while every exit from this junction bore a brass emblem above it. Likely leading to each of the platforms. I had seen this sort of style before, but witnessing the old Equestrian architecture properly lit and cleaned was as breathtaking as it was unsettlingly different in the dismal future we lived in. Amongst this light, I felt exposed, unable to hide.

At the bottom end of the junction, opposite the stairs, I saw a large metal door with welded plates holding it shut. I could only imagine why.

"Do you hear that?" Protégé stopped and looked around.

I couldn't, that in itself was unusual. "Hear what?"

"Just... something out there. I swore I heard somepony trotting nearby, but all of the slaves are still."

Clearly, Protégé was more spooked than I'd known. I just shook my head, cantering past quickly to the stairs. They had to lead to the main level of the station! I hopped up each of them in turn, trying to ignore how loudly my hooves seemed to echo in an area that no other sound echoed in turn. My head was hurting.

Just get your friends, Murky. Concentrate on your friends and getting out.

I reached the top and found the source of the noise. Wait... a noise? Why hadn't I heard all this below? The sounds of mass ponies moving around, of work going on, and others shouting or conversing everywhere! The sound flooded in, only realising it as I walked across some unseen barrier and left the silence of the tunnels below.

I came across the primary floor of Ministry Station itself. I had expected some shop outlets, ticket stations, and benches. I got them. They were all there.

But I didn't expect this.

What I had emerged from was but a small stairwell down to the platforms. Ahead of me lay a *gigantic* room, taller than it was wide! Great columns of white marble rose out of a mosaic patterned floor toward a curved and lavish roof. Archways decorated in brass vines

surrounded the open floor, hiding the empty units where the shops or waiting rooms might have been in. A huge, round desk lay in the middle of the open floor, where tickets much once have been sold. The similar designs in the outer metro, and even in the asylum made it clear, this was made before the war had broken out.

It was filled with slaves. They moved in lines, hooves moving in sync with one another as they trailed or collected wires. Some hung from the ceiling, repairing the lighting panels that had shorted out. The floor was covered in Ministry workbenches that I'd once seen in Aurora's workshop and each bore another slave fixing all manners of talismans, spark technologies, and mechanical items. Others offered inane and dead conversations on basic observations as they swept alongside one another to get rid of the industrial burrs and fragments that fell to the floor.

I simply stood and gaped. Ministry Station, or whatever it had been called before the balefire, was a masterpiece of design hidden below the city. Only now it occurred to me, this was supposed to be the link between the inner and outer metros, a primary location for anypony who came to Fillydelphia. It was undoubtedly to be a crown of design, and it likely had been dropped and left unfinished the moment the war effort had taken its funds away. For all its grand nature, it held no equipment, nothing to set a metro station in motion.

Now it was nothing but a precious secret to those who had found it. Aurora Star's hidden research area where nopony would ever bother looking.

I felt my fleece grabbed and pulled back. A black hoof covered my mouth from the squeak I made in shock, and I felt somepony hold me still.

"Sssh."

Protégé! Confused, I shifted to look before the slaver trotted by while munching on an old packet of dried biscuits. Blinking, I began to see the familiar things I'd missed in my astonishment. Slavers wandered around them, checking on progress. There were no whips, chains, or canes. They simply watched quietly as the slaves did what they were supposed to, those empty smiles on their faces the entire time.

Yet every so often, I swore I saw one slave look up and around and gasp, before holding their head. Amongst so many moving at once, it stuck out. Within a minute, they would fall quiet, and drop back into their routine, where the smile would slowly creep back onto their face and they would pick up their conversation again.

"Let's go. The others are waiting for this."

"I know, I hope they make use of it."

"Me too. It will be good to see this working again."

"Haha. Yes. It will. Haha."

Two slaves cantered past us, smiling and looking dead ahead as they talked without looking at one another. They talked just like the ones below, like they all had the same personality in different bodies.

There was something about this place. The slaves acted strange, but the slavers didn't! They said it only affected slaves but... why?

Something about the atmosphere in here... it had to be. My mind hurt from trying to think on it. Glimmer would know though, she'd have figured it out!

Glimmer...

Glimmer...

I stopped and gasped. *Glimmer!*

I saw her! Right ahead at the opposite end of the great underground hall, I saw her

looking along a line of small magical talismans with a careful eye. Throwing a few into a pack, she rejoined two other unicorns and began to trot toward an exit. I didn't see her face, but that unmistakable pink mane shone bright amongst the jaded and dulled slaves who had been in this sterile place for longer!

Taking a quick look around, I scampered out of the stairwell we hid in and took cover beside a workbench. The slave working at it didn't seem to even notice my presence and kept working on her wires. I heard her whispering.

"Yes, masters. I'll do it, masters. It's for the best, masters. But I... no, no... you know best, masters."

Creepy...

I made to go on, before turning to see where Protégé was.

He was... *what!*?

I saw him having stopped in the open, helping up another pony, and getting their fallen cargo back on their saddle. Smiling like I'd never seen him do, he patted the buck on the back as he reasserted the heavy load.

"Protégé!" I hissed strongly. "You're in the open!"

Ensuring the pony was fine, he turned, seemed to realise and ducked in.

"S-sorry. I was just... just helping."

"Helping?"

"Helping *him*. A... a slaver might have gone for him if he was late."

I just stared open-mouthed. Had the mint beasts really shaken him up that badly? All the same, his face hardened again and pointed ahead.

"If you go now, you could make that next workbench, the slaver's looking away. Go now!"

Almost wanting to shake my head, I hurried as quickly as I dared to get behind the slaver and heard Protégé creep behind me. The two of us pressed into the abandoned workbench, trying to stay out of sight of any slaver we saw.

This wasn't working. We were too conspicuous sneaking about. We needed to speed up. We needed to blend in. Looking up at the workbench, squinting as the lighting fixtures above flared into life with a joyless cheer from the slaves, I reached for the rags some ponies had left behind and threw one to Protégé. He took it without a word, clearly guessing the plan.

"You, um..." I bit my lip.

"I what, Murk?"

"You still remember how to, uh..." Oh, this was awkward. "You remember how to trot like a slave?"

He held onto the rags for a second, his hooves tightening around them. There was a faraway look in his eyes.

"Two years is a long time, Murk." He spoke quietly, sighing as he did so.

I wanted to call him out on the hypocrisy. That he had forgotten the suffering while still feeling bad for his own memories. To look at the inner metro mines and the waste of life, or to even see Fillydelphia above and callously talk of 'acceptable losses' while still *daring* to look sad.

Yet right now, seeing that look in his eyes, the one I knew I gave to a lot of ponies, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

We pulled the rags on, waited for the next passing of slaves, and slowly slipped out to trot

behind them with our heads level. They might have been falsely cheerful, but they still moved like slaves. Ordered, shivering, and clearly weak of body. It felt strange to feel like I had an experienced eye for slavery, but there was, even amongst their strange behaviour, something amiss.

They weren't entirely mindless. Their bodies sometimes showed a reluctance, or a staggering like they would normally. Whatever was affecting them wasn't a complete change. It seemed imperfect, like it came and went every so often in subtle ways. I wondered if they would stay like this if you took them out of here.

As we fell among them, I hardly needed any help to blend in, my body was still aching from the exertions earlier on my healing wounds, but it almost shocked me by how easily Protégé fell back into the routine. With his loose mane, lack of eyepiece, and that look on his face below the hood of the rags, he really did look every inch the born slave.

He had to come with us. He had to... I couldn't leave him here.

Rubbing my head, trying to get my ears to stop twitching and aching from the odd atmosphere down here, I tried to move as fast as I could. I could see Glimmer exiting ahead of me! She was talking to the mare beside her, probably flirting or something. I couldn't wait to see her again!

We came to the same passageway she went into. It was ringed with that same brass pattern and lined with carved wooden benches either side. She wandered in ahead of us, turning a corner farther down. We both sped up, now that we were out of sight, cantering after we left the main room.

It was so quiet in here. It was...

Wait...

I turned, hearing the main room again behind us filled with activity. I saw Protégé look oddly at me. But it had just been silent. Why had all the sound went for a few...

"Murk, what's wrong? Come on!"

I felt my breathing increase. This wasn't right. Turning, I followed him as we pursued Glimmerlight. The corridor led to a larger room with plush couches and low tables. An empty space for a bar was across one side behind crystal clear-stained glass. Some sort of VIP lounge! She must have gone already, had they galloped?

I heard a door close to the side.

"There!"

We both turned... and found a blank wall behind the VIP couches.

"Murk, what are you pointing at?"

"I... I..."

I didn't know. I had heard it! I looked closer, seeing the lines where a door had *once* existed before it had been filled in. Protégé trotted up to it, running a hoof along them.

"They've laid concrete to cover the door."

The wall shook in, a guttural howl right behind it. The sound of bone cracking against a hard surface set the entire blocked door trembling. We both screamed, falling back across a coffee table to get away from it, the reason *why* they'd blocked it up becoming clear! Those things were even inside here! Trapped in pockets of sealed rooms!

The wall splintered, pieces of dust and pebbles falling from the joints. I saw small cracks form up the sides. That blockage was strong, but it wouldn't hold forever. Rapid, hoarse retches like something trying to throw up without any success emitted from behind the barrier.

Yet none of the slaves within earshot of it in the room we'd just left reacted!

I couldn't take it anymore. I galloped! I leapt over the couches, sprinting to the other side despite Protégé's protests and rounded the corner, away from the monster behind the door even while it shrieked and drew slavers running behind us. They started shouting, ordering slaves to patch it and block it up! I heard one cry 'They're trying again!' before we got out of there.

Away from the lounge, down a gentle slope, the corridor opened up. The walls turned to frames of large windows, empty of glass. They looked down on shallow depressions on either side, where I could see banks of terminals and various machines of magical technology all around the walls, their cables leading into rougher, more newly carved tunnels at the sides. Slaves tinkered over them or typed on the terminals with strange excitement on every movement other than their faces. Huge blueprints had been pinned to the walls, bearing arcane symbols and florid writing as much as they did hard print and diagrams. The zebras and Aurora had torn this entire part of the station apart to fit in a full laboratory!

"Woah..." Protégé breathed as he saw the torn walls and advanced machinery in various states of activity within. "They must have somehow smuggled entire generators down here to power this."

"Or it's powered from something already here." I muttered, remembering (and indeed still feeling in my skull) that same throbbing of power from somewhere deeper. Somewhere up ahead.

We slowed down, seeing the slavers below wandering amongst them. We were still close, only a few steps kept this corridor higher than the lab areas either side. Cables hung from the ceiling, all connected to memory machines and tables for ponies to lie on beside headsets. The thought of those same ones in the asylum came to me rather uncomfortably.

The raised walkway we were on continued right over it, meeting another one going horizontally across the room too, leaving four giant lab areas around it. Reaching the cross, I looked to either side. There she was again! Off to the right, about twenty feet past where the walkway ended and became a clean corridor again, Glimmer waited beside a huge metal door that had clearly been installed by Aurora's teams. It looked like the kind I'd seen in factories.

I was so close! I had to really fight to keep my trotting at a slave's pace with so many more slavers in this area. I felt dizzy from hope, and a pain in each leg like it were slowing me down and holding me back. My eyesight blurred as I felt the world around me spin a little. Voices from below mixed, sounding older, cleaner, more scared.

What was going on?

I could see slaves below all holding their heads, some sort of pressure in the air...

Staggering... I tripped. A sound of wind passed by again, throbbing in time with crackling sounds in the air. There were more voices here, somewhere, down amongst the slaves. A different language...

No... *no!* I willed myself to wake up, Glimmer was there! I wasn't sure if I actually shouted to myself, 'Wake up, Murky! Wake up and move on! You're almost there!'

Opening my eyes, not even realising I'd closed them, I began to move forward unsteadily, hearing the groans around me. Protégé had fallen too, like many slaves. The slavers looked unnerved and silent. I heard voices, but no pony was talking!

Then it passed, as suddenly as the pressure began. It left and normality snapped back.

I couldn't take this. I galloped forth, trying to catch up with her before that door opened. I felt more waves of pressure and more fuzziness in my head, but I pushed on. I heard Protégé stop behind me, gasping suddenly.

After too long, I reached Glimmerlight. She was looking at me, and I threw myself onto her.

"Sis! I... we're here!"

The pony I'd grabbed turned to me, surprised at this little buck holding her. Her emotionless eyes above a dull smile raised an eyebrow.

"Hello. I've got to get back to work. Sorry. Shall we talk later?"

Not since our argument had I ever felt my heart sink so far.

No, Glimmer, no... *sis*...

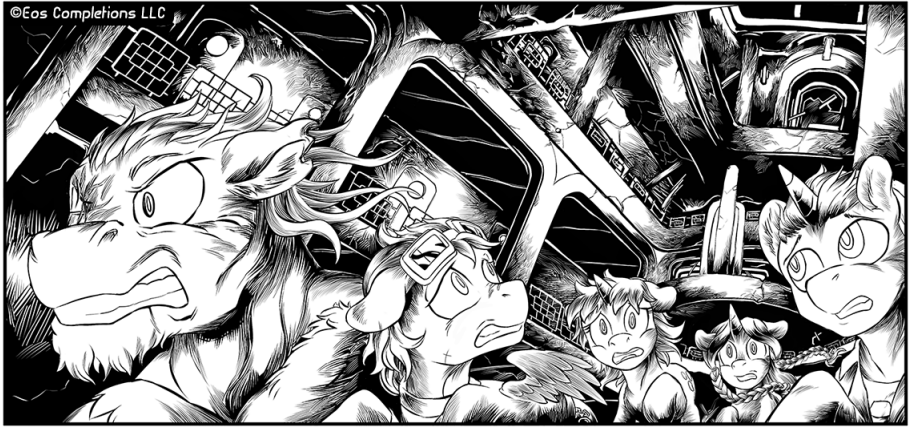
I pawed at her even as I heard the door behind her open and the sound of a booming voice within cry out for them to go in. A familiar voice. One that snapped at my very soul. Somepony was tugging me, throwing his hooves around me to pull me desperately through a door to hide. My hooves flailed out, a hoof covered my mouth to stifle the plea.

Yet even before the door closed, red magic snapping it shut, I saw that colossal metal door slide away and Glimmerlight smile and walk inside past Chainlink Shackles himself without a care in the world.

Even as I struggled with Protégé, crying and wanting to shout out, I heard the gigantic door slam shut, and I fell back, hopeless, before collapsing into a curled little ball.

Sis...

Just Downstairs



“Are we any closer to the primary chamber?”

“N-no, master. The door remains unbreachable. The slaves say that... that it just resists everything. It must use Stable technology in it or something, the Ministry of Wartime Technology *did* build it after all and—”

“Silence, cretin! Do not lecture *me*!”

There was a sound of somepony being grabbed and lifted from the ground. Sat in the room we had hid in, I could hear the conversation clearly.

“If you cannot go through the door, go around it. If you cannot go around it, go under it. Whatever it takes. This operation has drained much of what we can muster in this ridiculous mountain expedition already. Now get to work.”

“Y-yes, master!”

“Don’t forget who it is that saved you from losing your life, and who could happily throw you back to the wolves of your debts should you begin to think yourself above your station.”

“Yes, master!”

They were dropped and quickly galloped off. I heard somepony else trot out of the huge door behind Shackles. The horror of what had become of Glimmerlight tore at my mind, but the fear of who lay just outside kept me silent, merely watching the door that Protégé held his ear to.

My hearing had no such requirement.

“I suppose you can’t blame the poor buck. This place tends to leave most with headaches as it is.”

That was Grindstone’s voice!

Shackles made a low, dangerous sound in reply.

"Only those that matter. This place holds secrets, Grindstone. It is a nexus for slavery of the mind, the source of Fillydelphia's history of servitude. I won't tolerate delay on finding *why*."

I saw Protégé narrow his eyes. Shackles' words were grand. A nexus of slavery?

"One of many secrets, yes." Grindstone coughed harshly and trotted past the door, joining Shackles' stomping tread. "My work in the Ministry has encountered similar problems. We miss one piece of the puzzle to make the simultaneous memory experiment function properly. We try orbs, but they simply fracture. They are not designed for it. We need one *made* for it, just as you need what I would presume to be some sort of key to find the end of your own search."

"You believe this mountain holds these secrets?"

"I only know it is something Aurora had *great* interest in visiting regularly and supporting it with funds diverted from her own Ministry's records. All off the charts, disguised as payment for several non-existent experiments that all 'failed' and were disposed of. Simply put, whatever lies in her Ministry, this place and the mountain's mines are linked somehow. Perhaps we shall..."

His voice trailed away, even for me they had moved too far down the corridor for me to hear the rest.

Finally, I dared let out a small sob with any volume. Free of the fear Shackles left in his wake, the memory of Glimmer came racing back.

"We need to go in there!" I gritted my teeth, moving toward the door until Protégé blocked me.

"We cannot open it, Murk."

"*We have to!* Glimmer's in there! She's... she's not well! I need to help her! I... I need to!"

I almost fought with him, trying to push past and scraping my hooves on the ground.

"The door is locked shut, Murk! Calm down, we can—"

"*Calm down!?* They've done something to my sister! I need to help her! Help me, please!"

It was almost a scuffle. I fought and shoved, but the bigger pony held me back before dropping me to the ground.

"Murk, listen! We..." He blinked a few times, putting a hoof to his head with a groan before wandering away from me. "We can't get... in. We just need to find something... something in this place for it. So we can help to get it open. Help..."

The change in his voice broke my mood. My eyes followed the slaver as he leaned on the wall. His eyes closed, and he kept looking side to side.

"P-Protégé? What's wrong?"

"Just a... a headache, Murk. Like I can hear things in here. That sensation when we pushed after Glimmerlight. There's something down here, Murk. Something that affects ponies."

Getting to my hooves, I couldn't help but glance to the door we passed through in order to hide. I dearly wanted to just shout through the door, maybe she would hear me! Yet I knew he was right. The door was massive, and we'd heard it slam shut behind Shackles and Grindstone.

All the same, I didn't fancy hanging around here much longer. I had a growing headache, too, and the sensations of moving air and thick, throbbing power below our hooves was getting to me too. Protégé seemed to especially dislike it. He'd been acting really strange.

I trotted over to him, finding him apparently very interested in the walls of the darker

room. They were broken tiles, dark with rot and yet uncleaned like the remainder of the station.

“Protégé? I... I’m sorry. I’m just worried. and scared.” I crossed my front hooves. “The things earlier and what happens to ponies here I...”

He didn’t even seem to notice me.

“Protégé?”

“Seems odd to miss cleaning this bit here. Wouldn’t take long if somepony went at it with enough effort. Finish it off. They’d feel happier about it, wouldn’t they?”

He spoke conversationally. Like he’d forgotten what we had been even talking about.

“Protégé?” I hoofed his shoulder hard, and he snapped around like he’d seen a ghost.

“I...” He looked around, down the darker corridor, his eyes wide, his pupils dilated. “I just... nothing. Was sure I heard somepony saying this place needed sorting. Sorry. We should head on. Find a way to open the door.”

I just nodded while he wandered away in front, but I watched him warily. This was dangerous enough without him losing it.

Or without the same happening to me.

The corridor was actually a room, now that I saw it clearer, with low arches and with cages barring entrance on either side. The air stank of unwashed ponies.

At the far end of the corridor, I could have sworn the shadows shifted in between my blinks. Like ponies were moving without anypony there. Sweat dripped down the back of my neck. This place... I almost preferred the obvious danger of the metro lines we’d passed through.

Cantering after him, I looked into each of the caged arches. Slaves lay in little pony piles, sleeping in strange unison. After a second I realised why. Each of their breathes made their torsos expand in sync with one another.

“What have they done to them, Protégé?”

“I don’t think it’s the slavers, not directly anyhow. Shackles said this place did it. Those machines we saw, do you think—”

“Murk?”

I stopped on the spot. The deep, gravelly voice rumbled out of the cage just ahead of us. I knew it! *I knew it!* I galloped past Protégé and right up to the rusty bars, pushing my head through them.

Brimstone Blitz was getting up right before me. Dropping a thick piece of fabric away to the side, he advanced to meet me before bending down. Behind him, I saw Coral Eve look up before rushing over. Pushing her front legs through, I met her in the best hug I could manage.

“What are you doing here, you two?” Brimstone glanced at Protégé.

“Getting you out.” Replied the unicorn. “Both Murky and I need you, for both our purposes.”

“Our purposes?” Brimstone’s face showed no hint of giving any games away.

“Don’t take me for a fool, Warlord. You and I both know what you are all trying to do. What we want just happens to coincide right now. Are you and Coral okay?”

“As good as we can be.” Coral looked up, letting go of me and wiping away some of my tears with a hoof. “It’s been hard. We’re hurt and starving... very weak. But we’re alive.”

She looked it. Coral had always had a strong frame to her body, but now she seemed thinner and more drawn. Her cheekbones were noticeable for the first time. Even Brimstone

looked lethargic, his injuries in the Pit still recovering. The massive burn scar on one side of his body looked raw, and I still wasn't used to seeing only one eye staring back at me.

"G-Glimmer..." I didn't even know what to say.

Brimstone growled under his breath, looking beyond us. "So you saw."

"Glimmer, she hasn't had it good, sweetie." Coral stroked my mane gently. "Since we came here, she kept saying she saw things or had dreams of Old Equestria. They got bad, turned to nightmares, and she started using her orbs to remove them. I... I tried to stop her but... something in this place, Murk. Something she was vulnerable to, we all felt it, heard things. But for her it was worse. Then she started volunteering for shifts. Even with it just being a couple of days down here she doesn't even recognise us any more after that."

Whatever tears she had wiped away were quickly being replaced. My sister had needed me.

"I'm so sorry, hun. We've seen it happen to others. I don't know why not us. We feel it, things out of the corner of our eyes in the dark, winds we don't feel, sounds of ponies whispering, yet nopony talked. This place is *evil*, Murk."

Protégé looked behind us at the door.

"If this is a slave pen, they may be back any time. Brimstone Blitz, we need to get this cage and that door outside open. Do you know how?"

Brimstone snorted and knocked the cage with a hoof, the strong bars clanging hard.

"I tried to bring it down. Don't think I'm quite as strong as I once was, boy. The only pony with the skeleton keys down here would be Shackles himself, likely in his own room. If you can get them, we might be able to get out. Just be aware, I will not leave this station without Glim."

"I wouldn't imagine it." Protégé was hasty to add.

"Good." Brimstone snapped the word out, staring down at Protégé. "Head back out of here and directly to the opposite end of that big bloody lab they have. Good to see the sassnach bastard's still limping."

Brimstone seemed rather pleased with that thought. His one eye turned to me and saw me crouching down fearfully. We had to steal something. I knew who it would be that had to do it.

"He's not your master now, kid."

"I... I know."

"Aye. In, out, grin afterwards when you imagine how pissed off he'll be imagining you stealing his personal slaves away from him. You two better get going now. They'll be changing shifts within half an hour."

I gulped and nodded. Protégé was already moving away from the cage to check outside. Shivering on the spot, hearing the strange ambience of Ministry Station in the air and feeling the stark terror of confronting Shackles himself in my mind, I realised I had to rise up here. I *had* to rise to the occasion.

How many times had Glimmerlight saved me? How many times had Coral helped me keep going? How many times had Brimstone obliterated an obstacle I couldn't fight?

For them, I had to manage this. I saw Coral's weak but confident smile as she rested her hooves on the cage, and I saw Brimstone winking that one remaining eye at me. They believed in me. They believed in *me*.

Oh Goddesses, they were insane.

"Come on, Murk. You're not alone. I'll help you do this."

Protégé trotted beside me when we put on our slave disguises and crept back out.

“Thanks...”

All the same, the way he'd been acting and what Coral had said, I worried all the same.

Why didn't it affect Coral or Brim? Why Glimmer?

All the more, why Protégé?

Beep!

My hoof flew to the PipBuck quickly, tapping the volume dial rapidly to make sure it stayed quiet. I had been hunched behind an abandoned cleaning cart left lying by the side of the smaller labs we had entered when it had gone off. After passing through the main area, Shackles' room hadn't been hard to locate. Following his voice wasn't exactly difficult.

Now we simply waited opposite that imposing steel door amongst a small lab of ponies fixing up spark batteries and magical talismans. Protégé watched them, but I had something else to listen to, waiting for my chance when Shackles left...

Beep!

Click.

“Um-um, hi.”

“Hi...”

“Just a quick update. I'm in a room with some sleeping workers, so I have to be quiet. It's been three days now down here and I... I don't think they're going to let me out. I'm trapped. I'm so scared. I know that Sky must be so worried about me. We were supposed to meet two days ago, but they won't let me leave!”

I looked up at the workers toiling with dead smiles around me. The atmosphere was eerily cold and calm, mixed in with hoofsteps going back and forth in the corridor. Sometimes, I could swear no actual ponies had passed by when I heard them.

Gulping, feeling the hairs on my neck crawl, I returned my gaze to the PipBuck, and my attention to poor Sundial.

“I've been briefed by Aurora Star herself. She's really weird. Like, she's intelligent, but she's a little socially awkward. A bit like me before I met Sky actually. She seemed really nervous, constantly glancing at the zebras. Did she get trapped in this as much as I did? She wants me to join a team and help construct these memory orb machines. Really, it seems to be an adaptation of the same techniques we used to help the spells in Ranger armour 'remember' user settings. Something about orbs that can teach ponies things.”

That matched up with what I'd seen. Just like the Stable, they had continued her research down here and developed the same things from Aurora's theories. Spell orbs.

I heard hooves getting up in Shackles room and nudged Protégé. The unicorn took a second to respond, looking dully across the room, before jolting his head up.

“There's something bigger planned, though. Some expedition soon to take some of us to another place. They keep talking of 'safe zones' to develop something. What's dangerous about memory magic, though? It's just teaching ponies things they couldn't learn otherwise. All the same, I woke up last night hearing somepony screaming, running away from what I now know is an old asylum the Ministry built and then abandoned after Fluttershy had deemed it unsuitable. I saw the pony run past our room from the direction of it... her hair had gone white.”

My teeth chattered a little. Just what was in there? What were they doing? Was this zebra magic? I'd heard all the legends about the things they'd done in the past, like melting ponies alive or devouring them for food.

"I... I hear someone. I need to—"

Click.

If I'd hoped to have any time to think on that after it ended, Shackles wasn't going to give me the chance. His voice rung out from his room.

"There is no shortage of slaves to use for testing, Grindstone. I will get more if you require them."

"Be that as it may, Master Shackles, the slaves here are unsuitable after this place has had its way with them. They are too defined, too imperfectly aligned for any sort of memory tapping. The ones on Fillydelphia's surface, perhaps, yet many retain too many thoughts unwilling. If we had a foal, we could—"

Grindstone's careful tone was interrupted. I had begun to learn that one could never get too long to speak before Shackles would take control of any conversation.

"**We don't.** At least, not yet. Maintain what you are doing, I'll deal with that in time. You and I both know what's coming. There is one that might help us with minimal effort, however. Leave **him** to me. You simply get the team together for that mountain, if you believe it will help. Waste no time."

"Of course. Heh, you really are getting younger by the day with all that ambition showing, Shackles. Not seen that look on your face for years."

"This is my city, no matter what Red Eye thinks. It always was. Now I own its heart."

Shackles and Grindstone moved from the room and wandered along the side of the lab, facing away from us. I could see Grindstone was limping, stopping to cough every few feet in the thick air down here. His elderly frame shivered and struggled to keep up with the gigantic slave master beside him. It really felt odd. Grindstone must have been the only person in this entire city that could actually hold *any* sort of conversation with Shackles.

I didn't waste time. Nodding to Protégé, I sneaked out behind them and pushed my way into Shackles' room.

The inside was sparse. Made of steel on all sides, it clearly had been put together by the workers down here rather than when the metro was built. A worryingly identical desk to the one in the Mall dominated the room with a rusted cage in the corner, likely where I would have been put had I still been his. To the other side, there was a musty old bed on a metal frame. Listening out behind me, I rushed to the desk and started hunting right away.

While my hooves tore open drawers and hunted among piles of odds and ends upon his desk, I couldn't help but ponder more on just what this place was. Sundial hadn't mentioned any strange ambience, so that must have come later in his time. Something had happened here, maybe because of the balefire? Or after? Did it have to do with some crazy memory experiment that went wrong and released a memory orb into the air that created recurring perceptions of all who were in the area that perhaps now manifested as ghosts caught between the physical world and their own memories?

I stopped for a second and blinked. My imagination really was on overdrive today.

"Could anypony *blame* me?" I muttered, digging into Shackles' things.

I moved drawer to drawer, hooves spreading the papers, tools, and shotgun rounds he kept aside in the hunt for keys. Shackles was a practical slaver. He *had* to have spares! I'd just take any I found and—

"Aha!"

I found one large ring of keys and threw them into my pack. The thought to rush out now entered my mind, but who knew if this was all of them? I needed to make sure. Shivering the longer I stayed here, I moved to the next line of drawers and began digging through sets of hoof cuffs he had stored ready.

If he came back, there was only one corridor. I'd be trapped.

"Come on, come on..."

Minutes passed. The drawers were finished. I began to hunt along the edges of the bedside table and under the folders he kept there. I flipped through them to look for anything in between the papers, and instead got a rather unnerving sight of photographs. They were of slaves, each in the same collar and each on their last legs. Every photo bore a red cross over them. There was one of me in here, one I hadn't even remembered he had taken. It bore no cross.

I was a skeletal, broken figure, looking up at the camera with submission in my eyes.

Sweet Goddesses, I'd been so hurt I hadn't even remembered things like this.

Well, not anymore.

Throwing it down again, I noticed a ring pointing out the side under it. The ring led to a huge and fancy looking key. Yes! Throwing it in my bag as well, I made to hunt over the last things.

I should have gone then. I knew I should have, but I didn't want to leave *anything* to chance!

I really *should* have gone then.

The stomping hit my ears just a moment too late. He was in the corridor outside.

Standing rock still, my body froze with fear and my mouth dropped open in shock. He was coming! Oh Goddesses! I had no way out! There was no airducts or floorboards! He had no cupboards or drawers big enough to squeeze in, it was too sparse!

"Get back to work, worm!"

I heard a whip slap into somepony's back, and a stallion shriek in pain. Then again and again until a begging was heard, promising that he would work harder. Shackles was in the lab outside! Protégé must have had to hide!

But I couldn't.

No, I could! It was the worst hiding place ever, the most pathetic attempt born of a foalish comfort. But it was all I had.

I hid under his bed. Crawling right to the back corner, I curled up and shook terribly. I was sweating so hard I feared he might *smell* me. My heart slammed into my ribs hard enough that it hurt. With shaking hooves, I gulped down far too much of my RadAway than was necessary just to ensure I didn't cough.

The door opened.

And he entered.

His hooves were visible in what I could see. They made the thin steel floor bend beneath him as he limped his way in, having acted stronger when around Grindstone. I could hear the rasp in his breaths after Brimstone's attack a few days ago. Clearly, he was still recovering just as much as I, Brimstone, or Protégé was.

The hooves moved forward, setting to his desk where I heard a low growl under his breath.

"Somepony has been in here."

I had to stifle the squeak. He'd noticed! Oh Goddesses, it had to be the same trick Protégé used in his office! I'd been so *stupid!*

"Somepony after keys..."

'Please... please, please, please...' I endlessly repeated the word in my head.

He moved in further. His mere presence, the smell of that mangy coat washed into the room so thickly that I wanted to gag. He was moving right toward the bed! Reaching the side, he stood right before my hiding place, before turning and sitting upon it. The bedframe protested and groaned when the huge stallion's weight sank. With horror, I felt the wire mesh holding the mattress above me press down, pushing upon me and effectively trapping me here. Claustrophobia set in, the frame lowering down and keeping me in my little corner, restricting my space till I couldn't move! If I did he'd notice me for sure, it was too small a space to move quietly!

I heard him pick up the folder and open it.

"It seems our little thief is getting bolder every day, eh? Daring to come here. Daring to steal from their *Master*."

Biting my lip, eyes clenched shut, I simply covered my eyes and prayed internally. He knew, he had to know! Maybe if I came out, he'd go easier! If I gave up.

The bed frame suddenly released and he stood up again, his hooves clattered to the ground before me. I heard him put the folder down and move further into the room.

"The perfect slave in the heart of Fillydelphia. The eternal chain... hehe. The Master will be so again. Nopony escapes it, not even the ass, for whatever that ageing mule thinks. **There is only one Master.**"

To my immense relief, he moved toward the door. Only then he stopped.

"Murky Number Seven."

Never in my life, had my heart felt so still. Hearing my full name spoken without him even knowing I was there. Or did he? Oh no. *Oh no!*

"It won't take long to break you back in. The born slave. The servant who knows his place. You were meant to come to me. None of the others... just you. Just you and that lovely broken mind... hehehe."

The door opened, and I dreaded hearing even one step back as he stomped out and left. His hoof treads echoed long as they disappeared down the hallway, leaving me in the dark.

I emerged a couple minutes afterwards, trotting into the small lab to find Protégé. Trotting toward me, he clearly saw the look on my face, saw the tears. He'd seen Shackles go in.

I fell forward a little, sitting down awkwardly, and leaned against the wall with my hooves covering my face.

It didn't matter that he was a slaver, or whether or not I could call him a friend. Just feeling *anypony* resting a hoof on my shoulders and quietly telling me it'd be okay was enough for me right at that moment.

Our return wasn't so simple.

The moment we had poked our heads through the door leading back to the main lab, we had dropped back rapidly.

Chainlink Shackles stood at its centre, dominating the proceedings and bellowing orders.

He was right on the elevated bath between them on the centre. We'd never get past him!

"Find more materials to block the exits! I will not lose another room to these beasts forcing in! Should they take a room of importance, it will be you retaking it! Get going! NOW!"

Shackles didn't threaten. That was an ultimatum.

It only confirmed my thoughts. Ponies in this place were attracting whatever lurked in the outer metro, drawing them to every possible entrance. They couldn't possibly keep it much longer if they ran out of supplies; these things were finding every possible way in that ponies might have overlooked. Now that I cast my eyes up, I could see that even the air vents had been welded shut with huge iron plates.

"There has to be a way around, Murk. We passed a few other corridors. Let's go before we're spotted."

He was right. Much as my eyes were focused on my *ex*-master (I did like to remind myself of that whenever possible), we had to get moving. I didn't want to be here if we were spotted, let alone if something broke in...

However, just as I began to step back, my eyes caught somepony amongst those moving back through the labs. There was a group of slaves awaiting instructions on where to go at one side of the large room, mostly sitting or leaning on the wall. Slavers were dividing them up.

An earthy yellow coat with a deep brown mane streaked in red.

Sunny Days!

She was *right there!* I knew she'd been taken here, but I'd thought it was the inner metro she'd been left in! Yet here she was, lying against the wall and resting as best she could. Filthy and bearing injuries, she looked weak. Heart in my mouth, I dearly hoped she had held up down here, and not become one of them. I knew she was strong inside.

A massive blue mare began shouting at them, dragging slaves up to move elsewhere.

"C'mon! Git oop! Getcha movin' now!" Her odd accent, seemingly formed of many origins, penetrated the air with sharp, whiplike cracks before Sunny's group began moving. I saw her slide in between the ponies, staying out of sight and inside the crowd. Smart mare. A few others trotted with her, mutually helping one another.

"Murk, what's wrong? We have to *go!*"

"There one pony more we've got to get, Protégé. An old friend."

He pulled me back from the door and let it close. "We won't get anypony by standing around, let's go."

He was right. I nodded, and we slipped off into the deeper areas of Ministry Station. We passed by many of the fallen slaves idly chatting while carting supplies around or attempting to break into sealed rooms. Others made a point of *securing* some rooms. The lower we went, the more we found they were having to block it all up.

Eventually, we found ourselves entering less populated areas. An old café near some interior windows that had been stripped of anything useful lay ahead of us. This wasn't getting us anywhere. Every direction we'd taken was putting us farther *away* from our goal of the slave cells, yet no way around presented itself. Hanging around to wait for Shackles to move back in wasn't much better...

Behind me, Protégé stumbled and caught a table with his front hooves to keep himself up, groaning and holding his head briefly. He looked behind him, staring at a bare wall.

That wasn't helping much either.

"It's getting to you too, isn't it?"

"I'm *fine*, Murk. Let's... let's just keep going. I'm just... hearing things. What they said for Glimmer, I won't fall to it... s-something about her orbs weakened her. Come on!"

He pushed on ahead, knocking a few chairs out of the way with more aggressiveness than I'd seen in his movements in a while. Not since he'd grabbed me earlier on today at the thought of the foals being endangered.

"But it got others..."

My words went unanswered, the strained look on his face showing more frustration and anger than anything. He didn't like that it was happening.

Reluctantly, I dropped the issue and followed him to where he looked through those interior windows. Below the café, about fifteen feet beneath the window, I could see another level. It held open platforms beside metro lines. These, however, bore only smashed barricades at the openings to their tunnels. Something had broken through before the concrete had been laid down.

"That platform, it runs all the way to the east, the direction we want to go, Murk. Look down there."

I craned my head and hopped up on a small box to see over the lip better, feeling decidedly dejected from my height. The platform was between four metro lines, studded with smashed benches and ruined signs that bore, presumably, times and departures. I looked at the yellow text upon them, taking some time to decipher the single word, eventually realising they all said "delayed." How appropriate.

"What was I looking at?"

"The stairwell on the far end."

There indeed was one. It went up to—

Ah, that could—

My eyes found those smashed barricades again, and I gulped.

"Nooooo, no, no, no! I don't think this is the best idea."

"It takes us to the opposite end of Ministry Station, below that main lab area, and back into the place we found your friends from the opposite side."

"B-but the barricades. Those things must be down there! It's open to them!"

Protégé glanced at me, before unlatching the window and pushing it open. Stale air swept in over us both, the stench of decay and dust blew into the café.

"No mint." Protégé muttered to himself. "It's only thirty metres or so. If we sprinted..."

"*No!*" I pleaded with him. "If we open it, they'll be let in here! Everypony will die!"

"We could rappel down from here."

"There'll be another way!"

"There isn't."

"I... I..."

I was quaking so hard that I hadn't even noticed that Protégé looked afraid, too. He was right. We couldn't risk staying unseen forever, and we *had* to get over there. Shackles knew I had these keys, he might even have known it was me! We couldn't delay. He might go for the cells to cut us off!

Taking a slow breath, I muttered quietly to myself. "For Glimmer, Murky. For your sis."

Letting the breath out, I nodded, and spoke up.

"Okay."

Getting a boost up from Protégé, I sat on the windowsill, attracting a curious glance from

Protégé to the way in which I sat on my rump with my legs dangling out. (Why does no pony get it? It's *comfortable*!) He vaulted up after me and held on as I hooked my, uh, hook onto the window and bit hard on the mouthpiece to lock the wire in place. We didn't need to jerk and fall. Breaking a leg in an area they could reach would just be horrific.

"Ready, Murk?"

"N-no."

"Glad I wasn't the first to say it. Let's go."

He bit his lip, a strangely meek expression from the stoic slaver. I closed my eyes and released the tension on the wire a bit, dropping us from the window. Gradually, we lowered down, the wire taking both our weights fairly easily.

From below us, I heard a small, metallic sound. Like a bit of tin hitting the ground.

I stopped immediately, ready to bite to pull us back up. Protégé's revolver flew out, pointing down toward a tunnel where the noise had come from. We simply swung in silence, waiting...

Waiting...

Nothing.

Whimpering to myself, not in the least from the weight on my saddle tugging at my torso, I lowered us to the ground.

"Th-this might make noise when it comes loose to retract, Protégé."

"Then get ready to sprint. We can make it."

The repeated line was whispered to himself, something I wasn't meant to hear. Taking a breath, I released the tension. The sound of the saddle whirring and dragging the released hook back in seemed deafening, the *clack* as it jammed even worse. Wincing, I tugged at it, but it wasn't moving.

"What happened?" Protégé seemed impatient to get moving, I could see his hooves pacing.

"I'm stuck!"

My hook had wedged on the window as it slammed shut above us, the rusted joints failing. I was stuck onto it! Like I was chained to a post! My hooves tugged at the wire, biting for it to retract hard enough that light traces of smoke flew off from the airgun mechanism and smelled like burning. I looked to either side at those looming dark tunnels. Things lurked in there. If they heard us...

"Come on, Murk!" Protégé pulled with me, the wood above cracking.

I didn't want to leave my precious saddle! I'd never get another one, but it'd take me so long to get out of it! If I was caught half way...

From behind me, I heard that same sound of metal striking the ground, echoing down one of the metro lines.

I had to fight not to scream. Another sound, a scraping sound, came from down one of the tunnels, rippling out. I saw Protégé's head snap around and gasp. He suddenly redoubled his efforts, pulling harder until the wood splintered, the hook almost free!

"What is it?"

He gritted his teeth, pulling again and again with me.

"Protégé, *what is it?*"

The hook flew free, dragging the entire rotten window with it. Falling away, the hook almost slashed my face as it sucked in and snapped to my side, the window collapsing from above us. We dove to the side, hearing a shattering of glass and wood on the filthy marble

floor behind us from the entire frame coming crashing down.

“E.F.S. spotted something red. GO!”

I needed no telling. We made for the opposite staircase at top speed! My hooves clattered on the flooring, leaping over the piles of scrap and weaving around the benches. Protégé clambered over one to simply move in a straight line. The sound from the falling window echoed around through every tunnel.

Fifteen metres!

We passed under the platform board.

Ten metres!

The stench was unbearable! Rotting bodies were near the stairwell, insects scurrying over them when we approached. Such a sharp and sweet scent like...

...mint.

“Protégé, RUN!”

I couldn't help the scream, the pain from my chest and neck was too great, but I didn't dare slow down! On all sides, I heard sounds, something scything along the ground at high speed, faster than us! Snorts, wails, and bellows preceded the greater wash of the nauseating smell that exploded from the tunnels ahead of it! Shrieking, like a child reaching for something they couldn't have, echoed around us.

Five metres!

We were there!

Protégé galloped ahead of me onto the stairs. Something crashed from, down a tunnel behind us. I heard a frantic alarm sounding from the tunnel just to our right, clipped and broken, like some security sensor someone had set up to warn of things coming down it. Protégé struggled with the doors, trying to heave the massive valve lock with his body weight. I joined him, crying and not daring to look behind me. Slowly, it ground around, slipping and opening.

Moving at the same time, we piled through the door together, landing in a heap. His horn flared, pushing the door shut and spinning the lock again on this side. Ten seconds after that, the door was slammed into by something... and then another. A metallic clang and an unnatural roar, like something in terrible pain, cracking its voice.

I scrambled up, getting off Protégé, and pulled him to his hooves, before we both simply galloped away. There were no words, no ‘thank goodnesses,’ no ‘pauses for breath,’ no jokes about never taking the train again.

We simply ran because we were in terror. The haunting moans and metallic scraping fading behind us, as whatever was down here departed to find another way to reach us.

We didn't stop, we just kept running. Up the stairs, into the Station again, through a shop, and down the tunnels that led back to the main area.

Beep!

I didn't cease moving. I could hear it just fine! I dearly hoped Sundial would say something to make this place feel more real! Something to make me less unsure of just how far beyond sanity it went!

Beep!

Click.

I heard a frenzied panting, not unlike our own to get away.

"I... I don't think they saw me. By Celestia, those zebras are cautious. I'm only allowed this PipBuck to do my work. If they saw me using it to say any of this..."

His voice fell away.

"It's been two weeks now. Sky must be terrified. My family must think I've disappeared like all the other ponies going missing! I want to tell them so bad, but I now know how important this is. There... there's something being done down here that is not natural. Something of Aurora's invention that's been corrupted by the zebras and their weird rituals. I hear them sometimes, chanting in small groups. I'm so scared."

It felt strangely unreal to hear him sniff and clearly hold back tears. I wanted to just hug the PipBuck close, as though it would help him somehow. That is, if we weren't sprinting for our lives. I wasn't taking *any* chances. I'd seen one of them rip down a steel door to get at us!

"That's not all, though. I kept wondering how they got in, that's what Pinkie wanted me to find out more than anything. They have this... this room, across from the main lab. It's closed off to us, and they tell me I'm not allowed. That's their secret way into Filly. But I know it doesn't lead anywhere! I've been in the overhead wiring ducts around it! It's just a room to nowhere, but somehow it lets them in and out. I've got my suspicions, but I dunno..."

"Murk, keep up!"

"I... I'm trying! I'm tired... I can hear ponies nearby."

I could, even over Sundial's terrified message. I heard the stomping of hooves, of many hooves at the same time. Sound was unclear in these tunnels, echoing in ways that noises shouldn't.

Wait... that room he mentioned. That must have been the one Glimmer went into! Just off the main lab?

"That's the least of my worries. Those refugees that came in? Some are put to work. They are interrogated for skills. B-but some, they just never seem to be around at all. I saw some being taken to that weird prison place. They were saying something about "Orb Duty" or something. Aurora's all about memory orbs, but what could they want from refugees' memories? I... I thought it was just to teach them spells from those, uh, spell orb things, but I've seen earth ponies and pegasuses, I... I mean pegasi going in, too. I don't know what's going on, but I'm a part of it now. Two weeks down here, and... and..."

He stammered.

"Aurora Star spoke to me. She told me quietly, away from the zebras, that this is for Equestria's benefit when the time comes. I don't know for sure, but she sounded worried, like she was even more scared than I was. Look, I've got to go, they need me to hook up another of those memory devices for non-unicorns. I have to be close, I feel like I've got all the pieces of the puzzle, but no idea on how to solve it, nor any clues as to what's the end goal of all this. Um, goodbye. I, um, I realised that I haven't ever told you how I got my cutie mark. Hehe... silly right? M-maybe when I get out."

Click.

All the pieces of the puzzle but no solution, didn't I know the feeling. Memory orbs, spell orbs, memory machines, missing refugees, Aurora acting stranger than ever, hidden inventions, and some secret in a mountain. It *all* had to fit together somehow!

For the betterment of Equestria, yet in the company of zebras that wanted to destroy it. I

really wished I knew what Aurora had meant by telling him that.

"This... this way! It has to go right back up to—argh!"

Protégé shouted back to be, having run ahead, clearly following some sort of tracker on his eyepiece to get back to my friends. Only as he galloped past a corner, I saw him collide into somepony coming the other way. Yelping, I fell back and hid behind a polished bin for a few seconds. It wasn't cowardice! I was just aiming to maybe ambush them, if they weren't nice!

Unfortunately, it wasn't somepony nice.

Protégé fell off to the side as half a dozen ponies crashed down around him, their chains pulling one another off their hooves from the impact. Within it, I saw a huge blue shape rear up.

"What in the fakka!?" The slaver mare we'd seen earlier spun her head furiously, spotting Protégé instantly. "Come 'ere and see!"

She stormed forward, throwing slaves to either side. They shrunk back, cowering. They clearly hadn't fallen yet to whatever happened here. I saw her pull a length of chain from her back and start dangling it in her mouth. Protégé reached for his revolver, but I saw the chain flash forward, and heard him cry out in pain when it scythed over the hooves protecting his face.

"A fuckin' gun! I oughta... I oughta... wait, wait..."

She threw him out of the crowd, sending Protégé slamming into a shelving unit piled among these old passenger lines.

"Fuckin' you!? Spah! You spahin'!"

Oh flustering heck, she'd recognised him!

Protégé rolled away, trying to come to his hooves, looking for his dropped revolver. The chain flew down to one side of him, then the other. The mare swung her head, holding it in her mouth and arced it right around, catching his legs in it. Too injured and slow to dodge, he was pulled from his hooves and dumped down.

I couldn't stand by and watch this!

Steeling myself (by which I mean, repeating 'Oh my goodness' multiple times with every breath) I galloped forward, flicking out my saddle's mouthpiece, and fired the hook into the ceiling. Hopping off my hooves, biting down until it pulled me off the ground, it whisked me up to land on her back. I felt muscles coil as she flailed, screaming blue murder loud enough that my eyes watered at the stinging pain in my ears, and sending echos down every route of the station tunnels. I held onto her mane, being thrown back and forth. If only I had my old metal ruler, I could have done some damage! What could I do?

What I always did. Fight dirty. So, I grabbed her neck and bit down on her ear *hard*.

"Aaaargh!" Her voice roared as she reared up and dropped the chain from her screaming mouth. "Lil' bitin' midge! Fuck ya!"

We had to end this quickly! I hoped Protégé would do something, her screaming would alert the others!

She spun, hurling me so hard that I came flying off her and smacked into the wall. My chest heaved with pain, making me choke as the iron-tinged fluid burst into my throat. Sliding down, I coughed and held my bandages, feeling the swollen wound below pulsate around where Wildcard had... yeah.

Through blurry eyes, I saw Protégé launch back on her.

He ducked one hoof, stamping on the side of one knee before diving away again. I could

see him looking for his revolver, using his magic to keep that chain away from her! I saw him charge up to her again, trying to spin and buck for her neck, but the mare twisted away, launching onto him with both front hooves! In a grapple, her huge size was always going to win, and even while I tried to pull my sore body up, I saw her grab him bodily, and throw him to the ground before her.

Her hoof slapped him right across the face, before a second impact tossed him right into me. I howled out, falling to the side, blacking out for a few seconds in pain.

The world swam back into view. Protégé was stunned, holding his head as he lay atop me. I could hear the huge blue mare advancing on us and the sound of a chain being picked up.

“Little spahs in mah place!” Her rasping mouth spat to the side. “Gonna take ya to Master and he’ll deal, y’right!”

Her slaves cowered back behind her, their chains rustling as she advanced on us. I could see Protégé’s revolver lying nearby, but the pain was so great. I couldn’t push that far! Not with his weight on me.

“Protégé!”

“H-huh?”

I worried if she had concussed him. He just stared with empty eyes.

“Your gun! It’s right there!” I hissed, trying not to let her hear.

“I... not mine... Master owns all... I...”

I gasped at the words, seeing that faraway look in his eyes from the dazing blow. This place was—no! No, not now! I shook him, trying to get him off me.

“Protégé, fight it back! You’re confused! Please! Your gun’s right there! Argh!”

I’d tried to force myself toward it, but my chest was in dire pain. I hoped it hadn’t reopened the wound. There was nopony to help me down here!

“Right, c’mere!” The mare stomped over, that chain swinging up and around, making a lethal hum in the air!

I could only look up, seeing those glinting eyes awaiting her revenge and adding a couple more to her roster. I could do nothing but just watch. Every second lasted a minute as the chain slowly descended.

Slowly, in just as excruciating slow motion, I saw the form of another rise up behind her. That fiery mane over an earthy yellow coat. I saw her bared teeth and sheer determination burning in her eyes. Sunny Days rose up from behind the slaver, launching onto her back with her own chained hooves twisting around the slaver’s neck.

The moment Sunny had a grip, she pulled hard and crossed her hooves, wrapping her hind legs around the massive slaver’s thick neck. I lay open-mouthed in wonder.

I began to hear properly again as Sunny’s dire cry of rage struck past the slaver’s roar of anger. The blue mare fell back, staggering as her windpipe was crushed, throwing herself against walls to try and loosen the mare upon her back! Yet Sunny held on tight, grimly locking on a death grip, her eyes mad with fury. *Weeks* of rage and pent-up frustration exploded forth on the slaver that had held her, as she saw, finally, a chance to unleash all of it on her!

“Remember when you choked me, *bitch*? How d’you like it!?”

The slaver gurgled, eyes turning from rage to panic as she found herself suffocating.

“Going to watch you black out just like that slaver who tried to have his way with me! You ever wonder where your little crony went, eh? *You’re getting the same!*”

She tumbled to the side, trying to slam Sunny off the floor, but even under the crushing

impact, she held firm, digging in her rear hooves and pulling so hard that the chains actually began to break the slaver's skin! They writhed together on the floor, screaming and gasping. Even below the injuries that covered her body, I saw that Sunny was not weak. Those muscles were still strong as ever!

The slaver's hooves began to twitch and waggle more than kick, her movements slowing. After a long and slowing battle, she slowly died before my eyes in a horrible and panicked fashion, twitching and choking even after her eyes had rolled back into her head.

Then there was silence.

The slaves didn't seem to know what to do. Most of them cowered from us and stayed safe near the wall, awaiting another master to come fetch them. A few came up behind Sunny, asking if she was okay, no doubt companions she had survived with. They all looked stronger than the others, more alive in their eyes.

But my eyes weren't for them. I could only look at my saviour. Sunny Days stood shakily, exhausted and still venting some anger with little bucks to ensure the slaver was dead.

"Been waiting a long time to do that. Always told myself I was saving it for when I knew I was going to die anyway."

She spat on the corpse, before finally turning back to me. I managed to get myself up, pained and limping, to move over to stand before her.

"S-Sunny, I... I'm so glad I... I mean I'm sorry and... or I came to, you can..."

I didn't even know where to start. There were too many things. I held myself against the wall, taking deep breaths just as she was, and instead settled on something simpler.

"Thank you."

"Yer welcome, Murky." She managed a grin through her dry, split lips. "Just surprised to see you here in our deep little corner of hell. Didn't figure you'd got away after the psycho-raider jumped us. I mean, I'd have stolen something to drink if I knew you were coming."

That little grin. Oh, that grin. Such a relief! I'd witnessed her hurt, afraid, and dragged into the worst of Fillydelphia, but here she was still managing to smile. Very quickly, I realised what the bright sunny face on her flanks really meant. No doubt that attitude had kept her alive.

There were so many questions I had for her, so many things to tell her.

Yet with the groan behind us, I knew they would have to wait. We both turned, finding Protégé sitting up, his back against the cold tiled walls and looking around as though absolutely unsure of where he was. Slowly, I advanced and held out a hoof.

"P-Protégé?"

His eyes snapped around to me, breathing hard and looking almost afraid of me.

"Where is he?" His voice was weak, higher-pitched than normal, like it was about to break with emotion.

I bit my lip, hearing Sunny and a couple of her friends trot up behind. I waved them back, he needed room.

"Protégé it's..." I couldn't believe *I* had to say this. "It's okay. It's just me! Um, Murky!"

"My... my Master, he's... he's down here, he'll be looking I... I should get back to work and..."

I shifted forward again, placing a hoof on each shoulder.

"C-calm down!"

There was advice I never thought I'd be the one giving.

"Look at us. You were just hit on the head, b-breathe or, um..."

Sunny knelt beside me. "Listen to me," She began, "Just hear our voices, it's all right. This place does that. Concentrate. You're fine. Breathe slowly and calmly. In..."

I saw him follow her instructions, breathing in deeply. Clearly, this wasn't her first time reciting them.

"...and out."

A slow exhale.

She repeated it a few times. I saw the colour returning to his face, his eyes becoming sharper, looking around. He made a sharp twitch, his hoof almost pushing us away.

"Space! Please! I just need a little..."

I gave him it, the unicorn trotting off to get his revolver and reasserting his eyepiece upon his head. The moment it was back on, I heard him sigh almost in relief.

"Protégé, you were saying—"

"I wasn't saying anything. A-a concussion." He snapped back over his shoulder at me, not even looking fully round. "I just hit my head."

"We can't ignore this, Protégé, you're—"

"*Fine!*" He made to stomp a hoof, before seemingly thinking better. "I'm... fine. Nothing's wrong. Just-just hit my head and... l-let's go."

He began trotting ahead, leaving me with Sunny and the rest of the slaves. I looked to her.

"We have friends. We're getting them out of their cells. We may have a way out!"

Sunny nodded, not taking her eyes off Protégé. "All right, I'll help you. Come on, I'll explain on the way. I'm sure you have questions."

She turned to her friends, explaining for them to stick with the group, to hide the body and get back to their cells before it was found. The cover story was that Protégé and I had killed her, given we weren't meant to be here anyway. I hoped it'd hold.

Then we took off, just Sunny and I to follow Protégé as he waited up ahead. Watching him trot I saw him constantly looking around, often stopping to hold a hoof to his face. He would seem to breath deeply before trotting on, his pace slower than his usual confident stride.

Instead it looked, if anything, like how I'd used to trot.

Meekly.

"This place, it does things to ponies."

Sunny moved beside me as we made our way through the lower tunnels of the metro. We were going up stairs, moving out of what looked like engineer's routes back to the pedestrian levels. Most corners bore some slaves in hypnotic-like motions, working away at their tasks.

The tunnel itself was held up by recurring archways, each bearing carved stone of the Ministry symbols, gleaming with gemlights. Aside from our whispering and the background hush of slaves, everything was silent. I half expected Shackles to appear. This is when he would. He usually did.

"I've seen them, my friend Glimmer, she's..."

"Fallen?" Sunny's face sunk a little. "I'm sorry, Murky."

"Wh-what does it?"

She took a long breath, holding her head up. "We don't know. But there's something deep

in here, we never get to see it. It's all behind this big security door, somewhere a few corridors along from the main lab. I've been near that door before, Murk. Huge, engraved with some sort of symbol. There's... there's something pulsing in there. Something that does all this, I just know it."

"My friends told me that it makes ponies like this."

Sunny looked grim for a second.

"It does. I've been down here for some time now. I've seen the patterns. The symptoms, the dreams, and all the strange things. The ambience in here is like it's out of the past, Murky. I sometimes hear ponies talking around the corner who aren't there. They talk about the war. You'll see somepony in the corner of your eye at the end of the corridor, but when you turn they're gone."

She shivered.

"It goes for those who are vulnerable, plays on their mind and hurts them, making them into automatons. My friends and I, we stuck together. Kept ourselves going, stole things from the slavers to survive and shared between us all. They never caught us, no matter how much Shackles wants his 'little thief.' He probably thinks I stole those keys you have. We've lost some along the way. There's maybe only half of us left now."

With a glance up, she looked across those working at a table. The ponies were making an eerie similar laugh, one that stopped at the same time, as though coordinated.

"It goes for slaves because we're hurt, Murky. We're suffering and being told to only listen and never speak. To do this and follow orders. We hear things, things to make you want to do jobs. Eventually you just... fall. Broken slaves are the worst, the ones who see nothing other than master and slave."

I felt my lip quiver, my eyes turning to Protégé striding ahead of it now, determined as though driving himself forward by anger.

Glimmer though... it must have been her memory orb addiction that did it. Made her vulnerable, open to its indoctrination!

"Sunny... I'm hurt. Protégé's falling to it, a-and my friends are locked up. I need your help."

"I already said I would, Murky."

She smiled down to me. I couldn't help but say it again.

"Before, I'm sorry I brought you here and... what you went through. I heard you were sent to the Stable. I saw you in the Ministry! I'm sorry I got you sent here."

I felt her hoof pat my shoulders.

"It's all right. You didn't mean for this. I'm still here." She took a deep breath. "They wanted me broken, so I gave them what they wanted. Oh, they heard me beg, plead, and say 'Yes, Master' so many times; but every time I let it build inside, telling myself, 'this is just for now.' When the time came, I knew I wanted to snap out of it. If I'd rebelled all day, they'd have killed me by now."

Simple, practical survival. I guess a hardened wastelander like herself really knew how to do it.

"We are here." Protégé announced ahead of us, speaking bluntly. Ahead of him, I could hear the main lab still, Shackles' voice rising above the rest and making me falter back.

"The portal room will be stripped by the end of the month, Run About! Your excuses are false!"

I heard the slaver squeak his affirmation back, before running off. Poking my head out, I

could see him still standing there, watching them all. Seeing him suddenly turn, I pulled back drastically.

That had been too fast. Did he know? What if he knew? *What if he was just waiting!?*

Thankfully, Sunny had no such requirement. She trotted out as though simply going to the cells. With a brief glance, I heard her whisper.

“Go!”

We moved out, and I felt that one heartstopping moment of fear, as we ran into the lab, over to the portal room corridor, and into the cells. I could see Shackles moving away on the opposite side. I didn’t stop, almost tripping over the oblivious slaves around us, as the pain beneath my bandages flared up and drove me to hustled limping. I pulled the keys out as we arrived. Protégé hung back near the door, keeping a wary eye out on the way we’d came with his E.F.S.

“Murk!” Coral galloped across, seeing me struggling with the keys in my shaking hooves. “Good job, my dear. Well *done*.”

It took a minute of hunting, but I finally found the right one and threw the door open, falling into her waiting hooves. Brimstone surged to his hooves, bending the cage door further open on its rusting hinges, and cracked his neck out, making the scar tissue up one side of his neck warp in horrid ways.

“Glimmer.” He spoke simply, as though there was no other possible course of action.

I couldn’t disagree. Helping Coral to her weakened hooves, she limped out of the cell where Sunny quickly took over in aiding her along.

“She-she went into that big door, Brim!” I moved across to him, the big pony’s eyes focused on the exit back to the portal room corridor behind us. “Sunny, i-is there any way to turn people back from it?”

Sunny cast a little glance to Protégé, before shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Murky. We’ve never seen—”

“There *has* to be!”

I’d forgotten the hollow feeling in my rush to stay alive and the hunt for the keys, I didn’t need reminding now that she was nothing but a shell! I *refused* to believe it!

“Maybe... maybe if she saw me and—”

“Murky!” Sunny cut me off. “I’m so sorry, but I’ve had friends who have died for one another in here, just like you I’d imagine. We could never get through to them. There was no way to make them see! They just... keep working.”

“Lost or not, she isn’t staying here.” Brimstone began moving toward the door, leaving me standing between them all.

“*She isn’t lost!*”

I was whining, I knew, but I didn’t want to believe it! Glimmerlight couldn’t be just gone like that! She was... she was *her*. Always the one to make a joke... to... to...

No, I’d have to try! I had to! She was in there, I knew it!

Sunny helped Coral toward the door where Brimstone was peeking out.

“The slaving fuck’s gone. We can get in.”

Protégé glanced behind us, seeing the other slaves still in their cages. They lay on their sides or padded uselessly at the walls. None of them seemed sane. None of them even noticed us.

“Should we not help them?”

“They are lost, slaver.” Brimstone didn’t even look back. “They wouldn’t follow us and

even if we wanted to take them, we can't carry them all."

That was that, it seemed. Nopony dared to suggest that we take time away from getting Glimmer in front of him right now. I could hear the intensity beneath his words, just waiting for a chance to explode after being locked up and no doubt worried for her. Protégé bowed his head, still looking breathless and weak, and dropped the subject immediately.

Then we moved.

We didn't go like a swift group of experts. Most of us were limping, and all of us exhausted. The voices in the background of this place were beginning to filter in, unintelligible and distant. This wouldn't help us at all here. We had to get out *soon*.

The huge door lay before us, and I held the elaborate key in my hoof.

A door to nothing, yet a way out.

Were it not for Unity and the foals still being out there, I might have been excited, but this was not the time for contemplating escape. This was the time for saving my sister!

Hoofing the card forward, I shoved it into the slot and heard a series of clicking sounds. They gave way to a hiss of gas and clanking metal struts inside the thick metal. Gradually, slowly, shaking the material as it went, the door began to slide apart. Intricate metal plates swept away from one another and the emblems rolled to the side, revealing the inner room's contents.

I had been used to my expectations being let down. Not so this time.

It opened to a room lit by humming lights attached to a generator in the corner. Three banks of terminals lined each side of the large chamber, and I could already sense the hum of power within.

Yet at the back, as the doors parted, there lay the way the zebras had entered and exited Fillydelphia so easily. Their pathway in.

Beneath a huge shard of a purple gemstone, surrounded by a cage of shining metal and flickering with bands of light that sparkled and gleamed, there lay a platform. Even I, in all my illiterate lack of education, could tell what this was.

A portal. They'd used a *portal* to get into Fillydelphia!

Suddenly, the scale of what the zebras had been capable of was far beyond what I had ever thought. My companions clearly thought the same thing I did. Who *wouldn't* think it?

That being, 'did it still work?'

Ahead of us, I saw a pink mane bob upwards, and Glimmer's face look up from working below the gantry of the portal's platform. It slowly turned to show a rictus grin below lifeless eyes.

"Oh, hello! Do you have the parts I need? I could use them very soon. This machine won't work like it used to anymore, but we could still use it to power some other rooms. Wouldn't that be nice? It would be bright."

"Yes!" Another slave chimed in. "It would. So much easier to see!"

"Oh yes." Glimmer replied to her. "Then it would be comfortable to stay here."

"I'd like that."

"Me too."

"Haha."

I was standing in front of our group, the first into the room. I knew how many things should have been racing through my mind. All the theories and possibilities we'd just unearthed in this room! Wishes and dreams should have sparked me to think about what it could do for us.

Yet, confronted by what this place had done to my sister, I couldn't bring myself to think of anything but her. Even when we had argued, I had never felt like this. So helpless, so at a loss to comprehend my own love of a friendship that was now at threat, if not already gone.

Those behind me said nothing. They simply watched me trot forward.

"Glimmer..."

"Can you pass me that spanner? Thank you."

She didn't even look up, simply ducking her head back in to tighten something.

"Glimmerlight! *Sis!*" I felt my words go into a higher pitch, fears of being caught fell away. I just needed time. Time to get through to her. Please...

I cantered up to her, shaking her shoulder. Those eyes looked up at me. No, they looked past me, barely even recognising my presence.

"Oh, hello there. How are you?"

"Glimmer, it's me! It's-it's Murky! Y-your lil'bro!"

She simply sat and stared, wordless, then she laughed. A dry and humourless expression.

"It's nice here, isn't it? Do you like it? I've got a lot of work to do, but maybe I can see you —"

"*Glimmer, it's me!*" I grabbed her shoulders, leaning closer. I could feel my eyes becoming damp, my body shaking as the fear grew. I shook her, I actually shook her as I tried to get her to just focus on *me!*

"R-remember? We were going to escape together! How we've fought and-and saved each other? You taught me so much!"

The thing that I was shaking merely looked confused, even a little scared. It didn't know what was going on. It tried to smile.

"Do you need a drink? You seem rather tired, perhaps—"

"*IT'S ME! PLEASE!*" I screamed into her face, feeling my eyes well up and tears stream down my cheeks. "We've done so many things! Why don't you recognise me!? Glimmer, you're in there! I... I know it! Wake up, h-hear me! Please, Glimmer, *please!* I need you!"

I had to wipe my face with a hoof, and my words got caught up in a massive, quaking sob.

"I don't want to lose you, Glimmer. So... so if you can even hear a bit of me, fight it! *Fight it and come back! I know you can! I KNOW YOU CAN!*"

Her eyes just stared. Her mouth formed a sudden 'oh' look.

"Y-yes! That's it! See *me!* Remember how you made me all embarrassed? How you'd joke about s-stallions or something? O-or how you'd try and make me giggle, even when I was sad, because you wanted so bad to see me smile?"

She just blinked, seemingly focused on me, confused and looking more than a little 'off.' The world was just me and her! I could do this! I had to!

"Every time I was at my lowest, you came back to me, Glimmer! I... I want to help you! We'll get by this, we *always* get by things! You and me, sis! You and me! R-remember how you told me that when we got out you'd show me places and we'd travel? How we dreamed together? H-how you'd laugh with my drawings? So..."

I spluttered, tears dripped to the grind, my hooves rested on her chest.

"SO COME BACK TO ME! I KNOW YOU CAN!"

I didn't dare look up.

I didn't once dare even consider any other possibility.

Then finally, I heard her speak.

"You..."

She took a breath.

"You want to help? That would be nice if you could."

'Glimmer' smiled wider. Her eyes weren't even looking directly at me any more. Crushed, I fell back.

"I just... no... G-Glimmer... if only I'd been here I... I could have stopped you using those orbs and..."

I fell to my haunches, hanging my head, my hooves dropping off her. Behind me, I heard the others shifting uncomfortably. Brimstone's heavy tread approached from behind me.

"We don't have time. We have to go now. Sunny, was that your name? Is there any other way out of here?"

Protégé's voice kicked up, quiet and thin. "We came in through the asylum, but I doubt the main doors are accessible anymore."

"There's a way out through the asylum? You came in through its reception, right?" Sunny responded to him. Protégé must have nodded. I didn't hear him respond. "There's one other way. Brings you onto the upper levels. I can take you to it."

"Fine. Sunny, get Murky and take him ahead to wherever this is. We'll follow behind, and I'll carry Glim out. We have to leave now. We have no time for this."

I was just sitting in a little heap. My mane hung over my eyes, hiding the lost face before me. She simply returned to work, talking idly about the temperature with the other workers who had never even ceased their tasks. She *ignored* me.

I felt Sunny's hooves around me. "Come on, Murky. We have to go, you have to—"

"NO!" I screamed, throwing my hooves around. I didn't care about the pain as I struggled to throw her off me.

"Murky, I'm sorry! She's—"

"*No she isn't!*" I fought her, struggling like some desperate foal. "*She's my friend! I can... I can!*"

Slowly, I felt myself being pulled farther from her. Like I was being dragged away. Too many times, had I been torn away from ponies that I loved! Thrashing, squealing, and kicking Sunny off me, I galloped back and threw myself onto Glimmerlight. My hooves crushed around her, and I buried my face to her chest.

"She can come back! She can! *They might have something down here! I can fix this! I... I can... I...*"

It all came out, even as I heard her aloof voice ask if I needed somepony to help me find something, it all just came out in one line, screamed through all the tears and pain.

"*I just want my sister back!*"

None of them dared even touch me in that moment, as I did nothing but wail into her chest, not even letting her move away to work despite all of her dead words. They hurt more than any wound, harsher even than her telling me not to call her 'sister' long ago. That was still *her*.

Now I'd lost her...

It felt impossible to accept. Impossible to let go. I realised what I'd lost, and what I'd never have any more. All I had now were memories.

Just... memories...

My eyes sprung open, and I felt myself gasp, nearly hyperventilating. I let go of her, and began digging through my saddlebag. She couldn't hear me telling her who she was. But

there was one last chance, one last hope!

This place had come after her when she had been vulnerable, afraid of bad memories. But I could fight fire with fire! I could fight memories of a cruel past with memories of a glorious present!

My friends behind were getting anxious, but I ignored them. Protégé even pulled at my foreleg, but I swept him away, and pulled out the bright, glowing, light-green orb that Glimmerlight had given to me! A present of my very first birthday.

Tentatively, afraid for if I was even right, I turned back to her.

“H-here! Glimmer, can you hold this for me please?”

“Oh, of course! I do like to be of help to other ponies. Don’t you?”

Her magic caught the orb, and I immediately pushed it through the air to her horn, wishing and praying for *anything* to help her.

I heard her gasp, and then the world fell away.

I didn’t know why it was different. I knew memory orbs were supposed to take as long as their original length, and this was a very long one. Hours long, a whole evening. It was a stupid idea. It would trap me and Glimmer within it until we were caught. But I *wasn’t* thinking. Nothing mattered to me except finding some way to help her.

Maybe it was something she did, I never asked her. Maybe something deep down, but the orb passed so much faster. Whirling into my own memories and *showing* her, from my tiny perspective, what it was like to have a big sister look down at you and smile like there was nothing wrong in the world.

It all flickered past, like I was blinking again and again and seeing something different every time. From trotting out across Fillydelphia toward the Roamer’s inner-wall extension and seeing her bouncing before me, to seeing them all sat around that table with a ridiculous set up of balloons and little hats. From us laughing at Brim sitting with that silly get up, looking like he wanted to be somewhere else, all the way to her cuddling me and setting a mug of alcohol before me. She laughed, I laughed back. Whizzing shots of faces and jokes kept flying past. I floated between them, a limbo of my own life.

I saw her getting very quickly drunk! How she grinned and hugged a lot, how she teased and flirted shamelessly with those around her. I saw my gifts from her, she must have seen the little engraving she had done on my PipBuck! We shared stories, I laughed because of how she gave me confidence. Please, Glimmer, see how you changed me. How you made me better.

That iconic image to me... of me and my sister dancing upon a table, like there wasn’t a care in the world, and we were free. Ponies cheering and stamping around us as music blared and gave *life* to a place that so often took it. The sights of us stumbling and singing at the top of our lungs even while griffons and slavers wandered past with their weapons and whips.

No, you didn’t make me better. You made me the pony I *am*. You saw it the moment you met me. You saw what so few other ponies had. You didn’t see a slave, you saw a little pony who wanted to be cheeky and funny! You saw one who wanted to enjoy life with friends, not one who ran away and cried.

You saw me for who I was, and you did everything in your power to make me realise it.

Please, Glimmer, *see*. See and remember what you did for me! Who you are! This is you, my big sister best friend forever!

Forever doesn't end now! We're going to get out! We've found something that could help. The door to the outside! We're going to escape and travel the wastes! You're going to show me Tenpony Tower, and we'll go hunt my mother to free her! We can even stay together, stay safe, and have fun for the rest of our lives, the siblings who chose each other as brother and sister!

Remember me, Glimmer! Remember that little buck who cuddled up to you after you gave him the best birthday ever and let that show you who you are...

...because he's never going to forget you. Not ever...

Please...

I was lying down when I awoke. Cold tile below my body cast a cutting chill through me and reminded me all too harshly of where I still was. To go from being in a warm memory of happier times to being stuck in the outer metro, within a labyrinth of nightmares and unseen threats, was not easy. I simply curled up tight to the pony across from me and longed to go back there again.

"Easy, Murky. Don't worry..."

My ears perked up as I heard that form speak and feel it wrap thin hooves around me. With a gasp, I opened my eyes and hoped beyond measure.

There was that smile, gently looking back to me. Please... was it truly her?

"S-sis?" The words felt so quiet, so hard to say. "Please... tell me it's you..."

There was nothing but her and I. No sound, nothing but this close little moment. Gradually, to the joy of my heart, I saw her smile grow far past what it had been. I saw eyes gleam and spring to life, and her face lit up like the sunrise did in my dreams.

"You'd better believe it! You always did wake up after me from orbs."

She grabbed me, holding me tight to her chest with my head over her shoulder.

"I knew my lil'bro wouldn't give up on me, Murky. I could see you the whole time. It's like being trapped in a body you can't control. I was screaming, crying that I couldn't just reach out and grab you! To be trapped in the cage of my own flesh for the rest of my life, it scared me so much! Thank you, Murky. *Thank you.*"

She was shivering, so much so I worried that she might be in some way hurt and not herself. What if she wasn't quite the Glimmer I knew once the adrenaline wore down?

She got up, pulling me to my hooves.

"Now come on, let's get to the others and get out of this place. I've been two days working beside the *second* best mare flank you've ever seen and not even able to have a little date with rosie hooves to let it out! By all the mad gods of the wasteland, I am in dire need of a drink! All they had was lukewarm water!"

Scratch that. She was fine.

We'd need to have a talk later, work it all out. Yet for now, this was all I needed to hear. I laughed. I actually laughed and dared to let my heart rise again.

"So who's *first*? Leafshine?"

"Pfft, who do you *think*?"

I wanted to think of all the other mares I could name or mention. I wanted to spend time

joking, but this wasn't the place.

"Really... thank you."

Glimmer shifted closer to ruffle my mane again, before almost falling against me. A hazy look came over her eyes, a dizziness as I sensed another wave of unsettling ambience pass through the area.

"My head's aching worse than after my eighteenth birthday. Feeling weak."

"We need to get you out of here."

We both turned to wherever we were. It wasn't the portal chamber. Brimstone and the others had carried us elsewhere and now clustered near the door. Only Brimstone remained by us, standing watchful during our recovery. He hadn't said anything, but I saw his nod to Glimmer. I knew the big guy enough by now to tell when he was genuinely relieved.

Coral lay against a barrel in the corner of the dark room, getting her breath back. Sunny and Protégé were keeping watch outside. I saw Sunny looking over almost in disbelief.

"You actually did it, Murky. I... I didn't even know—"

"Memory magic did this." Glimmerlight cut in, trotting forward a little unsteadily. "I can feel it in the air. I *know* memory magic well enough to recognise this is the work of a master. Whatever happened to cause this... this effect in the area, it had its origins in memory magic. It attacks the subconscious, I think. It's the same thing as a memory orb, just less directed and more widespread."

That sure made sense. Even waking now, I could still sense that great well of power surging through the facility every few seconds.

All the same, I could hear its whispers and flowing air going through my mind, like I could always remember it before it even said anything.

At the door, I saw Protégé groan, looking behind him sharply. Most of the others shook their heads harshly to clear it.

"I don't know what caused it," Glimmerlight continued, "but the things they're doing here, I got a good look at them while they had me working. Even if I couldn't control my own willpower, I still *learned*. That portal, it's inactive. It'll never work the way it did ever again. There was a schematic or something I must have skimmed. It was all a blur."

Brimstone lay a hoof carefully on her shoulder.

"*Think*, Glim. That room could be our way out of Fillydelphia."

"I know! It's broken for sure. Used to be able to take ponies and whoever else in and out every few minutes! But..."

Everyone looked up, that one word standing out.

"But maybe it could do one more, *if* this place were fully running again and *if* somepony did a little jury rigging and *if* you had a good half an hour to work on it! That's without even considering that you have to know the coordinates of where to go to and none were ever left behind, let alone what kind of input it requires. Presumably they did it all from... heh... memory. Appropriate, I know."

She shook her head slowly.

"Look, even if we ever got a chance like that, it's unpowered. Not been active in centuries. Since the zebras, probably. It isn't our way out, but this place has other routes to the outer metro we could use to get outside the walls and—"

"As much as I am willing to listen to you all talk of escape from my Master while in the very same room as me, I cannot help but feel you would be better served talking of all this *outside* Ministry Station and the outer metro line?"

Protégé moved back into the room. I couldn't help but agree. I had questions and all sorts of things to say to Glimmer and the others, but we had to go. We wouldn't stay undiscovered for—

"It must have been that big bloody raider! Choked her right out and then he disappears with his own cell mates?"

I almost yelled, quickly shouting to the others for silence and pulling the door to this dark store room closed. Multiple ponies went running by us, the sound of slides being pulled and magazines being loaded all too clear to me.

"Where are we?"

Sunny slid up beside me, poking out after them. "Not far from the portal room, about two hundred metres from the nearest way to the asylum. I can lead you all there, if you're that damned insane as to go out there again!"

"We have no real choice." Coral Eve finally stood up and limped over. "Shackles' den is impassable, and there is no other way out of Ministry Station."

"Very well..."

I gulped hard, sharing a look at Protégé. I could see the same shiver in his body as I felt in mine. The others hadn't been out there. They didn't know...

We waited another minute, with me in front beside Sunny to listen for anypony coming, then we made a break for it. Our store room emerged into the same primary chamber of the Station, those immense pillars and arches above us with dozens of other slaves moving around. Sticking to the sides, we moved only when most of the slavers seemed distracted, using the massive columns for cover, them being so big even Brimstone could take a few seconds behind one before moving.

Sunny was amazing. A born survivor, she took to sneaking alongside me like a radroach to a sewer and helped guide the others up by using my observations as her decision maker. We made a good team, really. Before long, we got to the same raised staircase Protégé and I had emerged from originally.

"There's a good chance they'll see us going in, Murky. They've got guards above and likely down there too. Your big friend could take them, but the word will go out."

"Oh... oh dear."

I peeked out and saw the rifles swinging from above. They were watching the main concourse for *anything* untoward.

"That Warlord cannot hide his bulk so easily! Find him!"

Falling against Sunny when that booming voice echoed out into the archway hall, I felt my body turn rigid. Chainlink Shackles surged forth from the opposite door.

"Search the platforms! Get those slaves for the mountain expedition out of here!"

Behind me, I saw every pony with us have the same thought, that they were going to block us. We had to go, and it had to be fast and hard. No sneaking if we wanted to get there before them now.

They wouldn't follow us into the Asylum, would they?

Curiously, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sunny slipping a hood from her rags up over her face. I didn't have time to ask though.

"We need to go, now. Brimstone Blitz?" Sunny looked to him. "Can you lead the way? Down the stairs to the left then on the far end of the platform. Door's locked down there."

"Not for long." Brimstone snarled and rose fully to his hooves. "Just keep up. Don't stop moving!"

Glimmer nodded. So did Coral. The pair of them were supporting one another as we went, one weak physically and the other still suffering from the ambience in here. I kept seeing her make the same twitches as Protégé.

“GO!”

Brimstone surged forth from the pillars, charging directly for the three slavers blocking the way down! We galloped out after him even as Shackles’ voice roared for the slavers and any slaves to stop us!

I saw Brim go past a ticket machine, pause for only a second, and rip it from its mountings on the tiled floor. With a great heave, the machine flew fifteen feet and crushed the slavers guarding the way. The enormous projectile bounced off the floor, rolling end over end down the stairwell to the platform tunnels. He didn’t hesitate, rushing right after it, and sending one guard flying a full ten feet. The slaver’s high-pitched scream echoed off the walls as he followed where the machine had gone.

Two of them ran up on our left. I heard Coral cry out, before a thick snap of pressure that sent my mane flying into my eyes exploded in the air around us, and knocked them into one of the huge pillars with a sickening crunch. Whipping her head to the other side, her horn flared and sparked. I felt the backlash of telekinetic power fly sharply over me, as the receptionist’s desk spun off the ground as though kicked by a dragon. Its heavy weight slammed down atop group of guards getting to their hooves in shock. One managed to dodged to the side. and Sunny tackled him quickly, stamping a hoof into his groin hard. I heard others run from our path, fleeing from Brimstone!

We were clear!

“Down! Down! To the left!”

We hit the stairs. I looked behind us and saw two dozen slavers gunning for us.

Then I saw something else.

Somepony else.

There was a large group of them, chained and waiting for the ‘mountain expedition’ at Shackles’ order. They were being marched out. But who I saw made me want to believe my eyes were tricking me in this strange place. *Somepony* amongst them being led right at the front. I saw her cream body, and orange mane streaked in red.

Unity.

It made me hesitate. Lost in seeing her golden-hazel eyes looking this was, I didn’t even give the bullets smashing the enamel tiles on the floor around me a second thought. There she was, staring at the chase and witnessing a little dirty green pony looking right back to her. I could have sworn I saw her mouth move, saying my name. They had her chained and kept apart from all the other slaves. Why? Why her more than the others?

“Murky! Come on!”

I didn’t even know who it was that grabbed me, but gunfire whizzed above my head as I was pulled away.

Ahead of us, I saw some poor guard come to see what the commotion was, and rather unfortunately discover that the common was called Brimstone Blitz. His soon flattened body lay groaning when I passed him.

Unity! Unity was up there! She was still in Fillydelphia!

We ran left, making our way through the low curved tunnels to the opposite platform from the one we had come in from. I simply kept thinking of what I’d seen! Of her! She had been unmistakeable! It was my very first friend in Fillydelphia.

She would be on that mountain. We were going there.

I had a chance to get her!

My mind was snapped back to the present, being huddled ahead of my friends and helped along forced me to put that away for now. If we wanted to save her, then we had to get out alive first!

“That door, there! There!” Sunny pointed hurriedly.

A huge steel door sat partially ajar before us, slaves working around it not even noticing us as we ran inside and into the dank service corridor. Coral yanked it shut behind us. Stepping back, her horn flaring dangerously, she stumbled and was caught by Glimmerlight. Sunny threw a mop through the handles of the door, and we kept going, with Glimmer supporting her old, bitter friend.

There were huddles of slaves in here, mostly all working on the ground in their blank ways, trying to vain to clean a floor that never really could be. They weren’t even paying attention to us.

I dared to feel a sense of success. The slavers wouldn’t catch us now before we found the way out, not with a barred door behind us.

Before us, a massive boarded-up door had been placed into the wall, bearing the same design as the one from the asylum’s reception. Just how intermingled were these two places?

Brimstone began to smash the boards, not even giving thought to what lay beyond.

“Murk!” Protégé shouted to me, “Give me your PipBuck!”

I didn’t even hesitate, tossing it to him while he played with his eyepiece.

“You went through here once. Your PipBuck will have mapped it out. I can lead us with my eyepiece. Listen, all of you!”

They turned to him, and I saw the slaver genuinely look taken aback. Almost scared that their attention was on him alone. Only Brim kept up work on the door.

“Mu-Murk and I came through here. There is something in this place. Something that we do not know and which I’m sure you have all heard at least once in that Station. We must move quickly, but cautiously. If you smell mint...”

“...run.” Sunny finished for him.

“Yes. Do not stop. We have a tram on the bottom floor through a hole that can, I hope, outrun them.”

“You *hope*?” Glimmer almost choked.

Protégé didn’t even respond to her, connecting a wire to his eyepiece from my PipBuck and hooking it to his clothing.

“Just... keep moving. Don’t look back. These things are not natural. They hide from E.F.S.”

The last board fell from the door with an almighty crash. Then another smash made us aware of slavers outside the door behind us. It buckled in, the mop beginning to splinter.

“Let’s go!” Brimstone shouted loudly, pulling the rusted door open. “And close it behind us, lest every slave in here die from a breach. Those things *want* this place.”

We were a group of ponies fighting for good. We were rescuers. Heroes, even, if somepony wanted to be dramatic. But that didn’t mean that we went without hesitation. The musty smell erupted from the darkness ahead. Even Brimstone himself took a second to consider before leading the way in. Then Coral, then Protégé, and lastly Glimmerlight with a glance to me. I motioned for Sunny to go first.

Then she held up her hoof.

"I'm staying."

"Wh-what!?" I stood up straighter, ignoring the crack from the mop in the door behind us. Ignoring even Shackles. "But you *can't!*"

Sunny was already removing her hooded fabric and throwing it through the door.

"My friends are here, Murky. A good dozen of them. Why do you think I sent them back to their cell? There's too many to get out through here. How many can fit on a tram? I know the kind he means. They can fit maybe five or six at most. I won't abandon my friends, Murk."

She stroked my mane a little.

"Just like you didn't."

"But... but..." I wanted to convince her.

"Murk, listen. We need each other to get by. I cannot leave them behind, just like you couldn't for yours! We are on a switch shift. Every second day we are in the inner metro mines. Look for us there when the time for your plan comes. Then... we will join you."

The doors almost smashed entirely inward behind us. I was shaking so much. I heard my friends hissing from within, afraid of disturbing what was in there.

Sunny moved to the huddle of slaves, simply blending into them as another mare in the crowd.

"Go Murky. We'll make it. You came this far for your friends." That smile showed utmost trust. "I know you'll make it happen for all of us. Now go, Murky. Hurry!"

I didn't want to. I really didn't want to! Yet I could see she had made her choice. I backed off to the door.

"Sunny?" I squeaked it out.

"Murky?"

"When..." I gulped. "When we get out of here, I'll get you a new d-doll... to say sorry."

There was a little half-second of silence between us, before she smiled and looked back to her 'work.'

"I'll hold you to it, little guy."

Behind us, the door burst open, two slavers wielding a fire extinguisher as a ram crashed through and fell forward as the others surged in. Behind them all, I caught a glimpse of Shackles snarling at us.

He'd seen *me*. The snarl had turned to a *grin*. He turned, throwing and shoving the slaves behind him into Ministry Station again, I saw Sunny slip by, leaving the slavers standing between the two doors, before Brimstone slammed the one in front of me shut. It didn't have a lock on this side, but it was heavy, and hard to push. We'd get a head start.

Behind it, I heard Shackles cry out.

"Into the asylum! Get them!"

"But..."

"Move!"

I backed away from the door. There were the sounds of a scuffle, of orders given and slavers screaming. Then I heard the first set of doors behind this one slam shut.

"Let us in! LET US IN!"

"This door doesn't open again till I hear that runt squeal for it! Better get moving fast, eh? We wouldn't want these others here to take your jobs if you don't come back now, would we? Don't think I haven't seen you all taking more than your share from the supply rooms. Get me that runt! He's mine!"

He was locking in the slavers with us, they were trapped between the two sets of doors! I just... I couldn't believe him! He'd always been sadistic, but this was madness, even for him!

The desperate cries of those trapped in his sudden game turned into a furious effort to get this door open and get *us*. They didn't have Brimstone's strength but already I saw it beginning to jar open.

Turning to my friends, I found us at the back of an old staff lounge. A couple of terminals sat on desks for recreational use, coffee tables surrounded by chairs lay nearly overturned hot water containers, and the entire ceiling had fallen in. I could see right up into the next floor!

Protégé looked from side to side, his revolver perpetually out even while he studied my PipBuck like a map and compared it to his E.F.S.

"We're about two hundred and fifty metres from the hole, I think!"

The door behind us was slammed into again.

"Protégé, hurry up! Which way!?" Glimmerlight was casting fearful glances around.

"It's... it's..."

In the distance, I was sure I heard a crash of metal and glass.

"P-Protégé!"

"To our left, down a couple floors! This way!"

He took off, moving at the gallop. We had to get away from this door before it attracted them all with angry slavers shouting and slamming!

The wrecked doors of the staff lounge moved out to some of the same offices we had passed in our frenzied rush out of here, but I still couldn't piece which way to go.

"Ahead! Ahead!"

Ahead of us, I could have sworn I heard something in the distance.

"No, right!" I hissed out loud, pulling at his sleeve.

We swung about just as the doors in the room we had left burst open. The offices led to an area with reinforced glass surrounding a pathway to a lift shaft. I couldn't help but notice that the glass had been warped and twisted apart by something. I stepped on huge chunks of it as I scrambled after them. The warm air in here felt dense. It choked my stomach, mixing with my fear and leaving me short of breath.

We could hear slavers shifting into the rooms behind us, a lot of them.

"Where did they go!?"

"Fuck knows. Just get them before Shackles keeps us in! He's lost it! Never seen him like this!"

I spun around, trying to recognise anything, but this wasn't an area we'd passed. This was some sort of waiting area.

"Can we get down the lift shaft!?" Glimmerlight rushed over to take a look at it. "*Shit!*"

Running up after her, I saw that it plunged for six floors, much farther than I had ever imagined for this place! A dark mist crawled and seemed to pulse below before it passed out of sight.

Something had moved down there. Fast.

"No, no! This way!" Protégé pulled a desk to the side, shifting through an almost hidden door that somepony had tried to blockade once. "Keep quiet."

He hissed the last line, completely ignoring that he himself had shouted just before. Behind us, the slavers were rushing with a determination I'd never heard from them before!

Protégé led us into a wrecked series of rooms with foul green flooring and surgical tables

set near various devices and wires. I *hoped* these were simply for examination, but the stains of blood didn't give me much hope.

"What kind of asylum *is* this?" Glimmer muttered as she passed around sections of bone on the top of one bed.

At the far end, there were several glass doors. Beyond them, I could see railings.

Wait, *railings!* The balconies!

Protégé seemed to realise just as I did and we made a break for them. We were moving too fast to be silent now. The slavers were the *least* of our worries!

"Hey, hey I heard them over there!"

"This way! HURRY!"

I was breathing hard, ears straining over every little sound I heard, but then...

Distant...

Simple...

Sharp...

A distance, echoing beeping.

A wash of cold ran right through me. They were coming. They'd heard us all, they'd heard the slavers! *They were coming!*

Brimstone ran out to the balcony again, looking around. He spun, seeing the huge floors around him with the ranks and ranks of thick, sealed containment areas.

The electronic sound was growing, like some warning signal of its approach. It never grew faster, only louder.

Behind me, I heard the slavers shout out.

"Hey, what was that? I heard them! Down there!"

They'd meant us!

"Murky, come on!" Glimmer waved to me, pulling me out to the balcony floors, but out here, I saw them all hear it too.

That beeping, that tone, grew into an alarm like volume.

"G-Glimmer." I fell against her, my stomach in so much pain from running, and looked up at her. "They're here..."

Behind us, two slavers ran into the same room we'd been in.

"They're over there! This way, everypony! MOVE!"

Then it came. That horrible, unthinkable *shriek*.

It filled the asylum, reverberating off walls and echoing around corridors. It rose to the very top of the levels, passing back and forth. After its fading howl, there was a silence.

The slavers and ourselves merely looked at one another. I could see the dread in their eyes as much as they could see it in mine.

Behind the slavers, I heard sudden gunshots. Rapid fire. I heard screams and saw slavers fleeing toward the two in sight. They looked around in shock, running with them. Two more ran our way, with us as their last concern!

"FUCKING MOVE!" Brimstone *shoved* us, getting us galloping around the balcony. "Boy! WHERE?"

Protégé had been staring, until shoved to go. He looked hurriedly at the map. "This way! Stairs!"

Glimmer wrinkled her nose as she smelled something, and I saw her eyes snap wide with shock. Then it hit me too, a scent. A rank stench flowing into the area. Sweet and tingling in my nostrils, it made me forget about all threat of the slavers, even as they spread all

throughout the facility, galloping and firing in all directions.

Then I heard it, something on the floor beneath us, rushing far faster than any pony could move. Not galloping, just the sounds of it rushing through the air and any objects in its path. It was *right below us!* I had to stifle my scream. It was going for the stairs ahead of us!

“NO! NO, BACK! BACK! PLEASE!” I tugged at them, before I saw Protégé doing the same. It was on his E.F.S! We turned and rushed backward again, sprinting along the balcony and running past two slavers, bone white with fear. They just ignored us and sprinted past.

“This way! This way!” Protégé leapt through window with a cry of pain. Following suit, we landed in a room filled with memory machines. Skeletons strapped into them screamed in silent, eternal pain. Rows and rows of them. Racing between their empty stares, I felt my breathing grow rapid at the sights. What had happened to them!?

The smell was getting stronger and the beeping still grew, coming from the areas we had passed. I heard gunshots again. Howls and blood thirsty cries punctuated the silence between each crack of a weapon.

Behind us, I heard the one chasing us reach the top of the stairs. The slavers were still in that corridor. They had to be!

“Oh fuck, *what is that!?* WHAT IS THAT!?”

“Help! HELP!”

I wailed as the low moan and wet, throaty noises grew to a keening roar. I heard it rush forward. I heard them shoot. Flesh ripped, their voices squealed high, and I heard harsh slavers become pleading foals. Bone snapped, and their wails mixed with a frenzied snarling. We could only run, hearing the two slavers continue to cry out, their torment not ending quickly.

Then ahead of us, I heard the beeping come closer! It was just through the wall! It—

The wall exploded inwards. I saw *something* come flying through the plasterboard amongst a cloud of dust and try to reach us! Never had I ever heard Coral genuinely cry out in terror before until now! Brimstone grabbed her, pulling her onwards! We were past it before I even got to see what it was!

Emerging onto the balcony again, further down this time, the screams in the air were taking over. On all floors, slavers could be heard being hunted down. I saw one rush across the mezzanine a floor up from us on the balcony, firing behind him. He was crying. Below me, I saw a shape whip past between two corridors, just a blur of motion, like a rip in the air, that I couldn’t even focus on! *That had been one of them, oh Goddesses save me!* They were down there too! And we had to go straight to them!

I tried not to notice the pool of blood where those two slavers had been on the opposite side. Whatever caught them was gone. I heard it shrieking back through the corridor we’d emerged from, the one with the surgical beds.

“Up ahead! The other stairs!” Protégé pointed, before crying out and opening fire. Brimstone threw Glimmer behind him and took up a readiness to fight. Ahead of us, a slaver begged from the ground, hit in the knee by Protégé’s bullet.

“Please! Please!”

I saw the look in Protégé’s eyes. He had fired before even knowing. Surely they didn’t care about us anymore! Right behind the slaver, I saw a door buckle inward. He held up his hooves!

"No! No! Take me with you! Help me! HELP ME!"

He was too far to reach. Brimstone forced us onward, his cold mind taking the lead. We leapt onto the stairs and started to descend. We made it down a flight before his screams for help grew louder, and then went silent. The smell became overpowering, making me dizzy. The slavers were dying, their screams becoming shorter as fewer remained. Yet the things slaughtering us only continued.

Somepony unloaded an entire magazine a few floors up. The floor ahead of us was streaked with fresh blood. I saw Protégé slip on it, having to grab the railing for balance. I who grabbed him, pulling him onward. Even I remembered the way now! This was near the canteen we'd come in from, just one floor up from it!

Then I heard something on the stairs behind us. I screamed, my own voice joining the chorus of the asylum, its dark past seeming all too alive. Hearing me, they all ran. We ran as a group to the next level. A slaver went streaking by ahead of us, and we heard the *thing* behind us coming roaring down from the level we'd just left, even as we rushed across the mezzanine to the opposite corner's set of stairs.

It was right there behind us.

I couldn't dare look back.

The surreal howls got close. I heard a sound like ripping paper, that grew into a warped shriek behind me.

Don't look back!

"Run! RUN!" Glimmerlight screamed it, clearly in as much panic as the rest of us. It was coming for us, right behind us! We all fell into the next stairwell, Coral's magic slamming the fire doors shut behind us. Protégé leapt up, snatching the locks shut as Brimstone held it closed. I saw Protégé fumble with the latches, and gasp, hesitating for half a second, even as he pushed the last crack in the door shut and dropped the bar... and then he backed off, stumbling.

He'd seen through that crack. His eyes had gone wide and his face turned pale.

He'd seen one.

From up above us, I could hear many of them. They were everywhere! Brimstone grabbed the stunned Protégé, tossing him ahead of us with such a brutal scream of 'KEEP FUCKING NAVIGATING' that I could have sworn Protégé responded with 'Yes, Sir!' The doors were already buckling behind us. I cried out as the wood splintered onto me.

Reaching the bottom, and we could see the canteen ahead! I felt a strength flow into me. We were almost there! The tram was waiting!

"You... you won't get me! You won't get me! Argh!"

To our left, within the huge open balcony area, I saw a slaver try to throw himself from the top level! He was trying to kill himself to avoid them.

He cried out as he fell, before squealing in horror as something darted out from a lower balcony, snatched him, and whipped him back in again so fast that he disappeared in a blur and a fading cry. Hollow pops and wet sounds splattered from where he'd been dragged, as his scream rose into a hideously contorted note.

We hit the canteen just as the last gunshots fell silent. A chilling howl sounding in the air as those things realised they had only one source of prey left now. Foul mold hit the bottom of my hooves in the canteen, but I simply kept moving! So close. So close!

Through the canteen, through the double doors, turning right into the hole, the maintenance room. The tram!

It lay right there! Every one of us leapt onto it, wounds a secondary consideration to *getting the hell out of here*. Behind us, I heard something scrambling nearer. Glimmer grabbed Protégé's revolver to cover it while he started the metro-wagon up!

"Come on!"

I heard the tables of the canteen being crashed aside as something rushed through the canteen like a hurricane!

"Come on!"

I heard it coming through the doors into the corridor!

"COME ON!"

The wagon spluttered, kicked into life, and detached its brakes! The engine roared into life as the lights flared on! With a jolt, it began to surge forward and immediately stalled on the spot, the lights dying!

"NO!" I screamed, my voice sounding cracked and whiny.

"Fuck this thing!" The foulest words I'd ever heard from Protégé, born of sheer desperation came even as he cranked it again and tried to build the pressure to start the engine!

It was coming through the maintenance room! The smell of mint was washing over us.

Glimmerlight shoved past us to the control panel, taking over from Protégé. Her magic tore at the circuitry and something sparked twice! The engine kicked in, and the tram roared away. I simply covered my ears and held onto Coral tightly! The tunnels moved by, a nightmarish chase to be away from whatever was hunting us!

It shrieked, sensing us moving away! My wide eyes stared at the exit to the maintenance room even as we finally began to pick up enough speed to outrun them.

Then my blood turned to ice. Just as we turned the corner, I saw a shape emerge at blistering speed from the room, shrouded in the thick underground mist, indistinct in the harsh but ineffective light of the wagon's beams.

There in the dark, I saw only two faint, but burning white glows hanging in the air, like eyes boring into me. The shape around them was indistinct, like blurry charcoal in the mists, as though I couldn't focus directly on it. Soon, the brickwork covered it as we passed around a bend, and it was gone, forever passing into my dreams for the rest of my life.

It howled even as it saw us moving away on the back of the wagon. A howl that chased us and reverberated down every tunnel and passageway. A call that was returned as others rushed through the tunnels. I saw blurred motion surging down long hallways and heard echoes all around us.

I hadn't even seen its real shape, yet I felt locked up. Frozen in terror even as I fell back into the wagon. I cried the rest of the way to the inner metro and had to be pulled out of the cart as we hurried through the security door, set it to close behind us, and then locked the control panel shut tightly. A couple minutes after we'd arrived and began the climb back to the inner metro, I heard it far below, pounding and shaking the door. Only when we reached the inner metro tunnels themselves, did I finally hear it fade.

With my brief glances to the rest of my friends, I knew wasn't the only one terribly shaken. Brimstone kept an eye out ahead of us, instead, leaving Protégé to sit and rest, his own wounds aching terribly.

From the look on his face, from what had happened to him in there, I could see that he had been given more of a shock than any of us, one that only I could truly relate to.

I just hoped it might help him see the truth.

The journey back out passed in a blur. None of us really spoke. I simply trotted beside my sister, trying to be there for her when the adrenaline that was keeping us moving wore off. The others plodded quietly, heeding my directions to avoid slavers. We took the abandoned shaft back up, carefully and gradually.

Protégé came up last of all, as he stood and stared down the tunnels, listening to the sounds of the slaves changing shifts once again in Shackles' mines.

Returning to him, I saw his eyes glued to the darkness, beyond which I knew that dozens were suffering down here. I didn't dare say a single word. I could see the frown clearly enough.

Eventually, he pulled the door to the shaft shut behind us, refusing to speak as we ascended on my grapple hook.

Truth be told, I barely even recognised the danger of the last part of our escape. Fillydelphia's streets didn't feel like anything anymore.

Not after what we'd discovered, and seen, down there.

It was much, much later.

It had taken the better part of a day for us to rest. To be hidden in the attic of Protégé's logistics centre, our new little place to catch some sleep, food, and whatever medicine Protégé could scrounge up.

I'd even used the time to 'acquire' some more odds and ends from his stores.

However, our mission couldn't wait, and before too long had passed, he had come to us with Ragini by his side and simply announced that we were leaving. Taking us out, he led us across Fillydelphia to some place I had never been.

An old station, connected to the Wall of Fillydelphia itself. Upon its colossal lines, I saw immense train wagons sitting ready. Ponies were loading crates of supplies onto it or even boarding it themselves.

This was to be our transport to the mountain. To become stowaways upon Shackles' own supply train. Their expedition had left hours before. We would slide in right under their noses.

Apparently, they were sealed from the outside before departure, with only slavers possessing the means to open the wagons again to prevent slaves inside escaping. Not that the route it took would warrant a slave *wanting* to escape. High cliffs, murderous Hellhound lands, and irradiated snow surrounded the trainline.

We had guns, medical kits, and, much to my delight, Protégé even somehow had gotten Blunderbuck to deliver a package to me.

Rarity's Grace.

Brimstone Blitz moved on, carrying something Protégé had acquired for him. The remnants of his armour, minus the helmet. He had been silent, eyeing any slaver with more suspicion than normal and sitting protectively close to Glimmerlight whenever possible.

Coral Eve had surprised me by coming. This wasn't her fight, by her own words. Yet, as we had packed to go, she had simply trotted with us. When I asked, she simply said that it was better than waiting.

Briefly, I had wondered if she perhaps bore a little more hope as a result of all this. I dearly wished that was the reason.

Glimmerlight moved on beside me, wearing one of the thick fur coats I had 'acquired' to resist the apparently freezing temperatures and *snow* that would be up there. We shared a nod. Her and I had a lot to talk about on the way there... amongst other things that needed dealing with. We weren't going to go into this with unresolved issues between us.

Ragini came along. Protégé had told her she didn't have to, but the griffon had simply turned up anyway, gun in tote, citing her duty to Protégé. Revenge, I guessed, still bubbled deep in her heart against Shackles.

However, there was one surprise had been who waited for us. The big form of Old Grizzly lumbered near us. Protégé had pleaded with him, saying that it was too dangerous. Yet, the slaver had remarked that it was too important, and that we needed all the help we could get. Protégé couldn't disagree.

My 'owner' himself, however, Protégé...

Since we had emerged, he had fallen silent. Speaking in hushed tones and avoiding eye contact, the slaver had taken to his books any time that nothing was required of him. In the few times we had spoken since the outer metro, he had given curt answers that were nothing like the genial 'talks' we used to have. He seemed ashamed, afraid... even embarrassed of himself; and given what he had been feeling in Ministry station, I could imagine all too well why.

Myself?

The past days had been an arduous task. I had run for my life, confronted friends and enemies, seen faces of the past before me, and found new discoveries about Fillydelphia that I had never known existed. I could sense this all beginning to come closer, more connected.

Just as Sundial had said, all the pieces, none of the solutions.

Yet, I still felt like just that little pony who looked up at that Wall and wished to make something of himself. A dreamer. I was just the pony who got caught up. I wasn't anypony special. Not *really*. Yet, now that I was embarking as part of this proper *mission* that could decide my future, I began to remember that this *was* about me. My journey to freedom. It had simply grown from the days of being an unknowing little rebel running at a wall.

Above me, that snowy peak shrouded in clouds rose above the Wall's height, right on the range that bordered this city. That was the place that mattered now. I had received just one more message from Sundial on our way out of the metro.

He had been transferred to the mountain lab.

Good luck, Sundial. I'll stick with you, even if nopony else in your time ever did.

Packing away my PipBuck, I joined my sister, hopping up onto the train. She grinned, and I tried to smile back.

"Let's do this, eh lil'bro? You told me yourself... we're going to get out. Let's go get the knowledge to make it happen! Go and find a way to make that portal sing."

Forcing a grin and a nod, I settled down beside her as I heard the engine spool up.

Forget the knowledge, forget whatever Aurora did. I had a new task now that meant more to me than anything inside that place. Something I had been yearning to have a chance at for so long now.

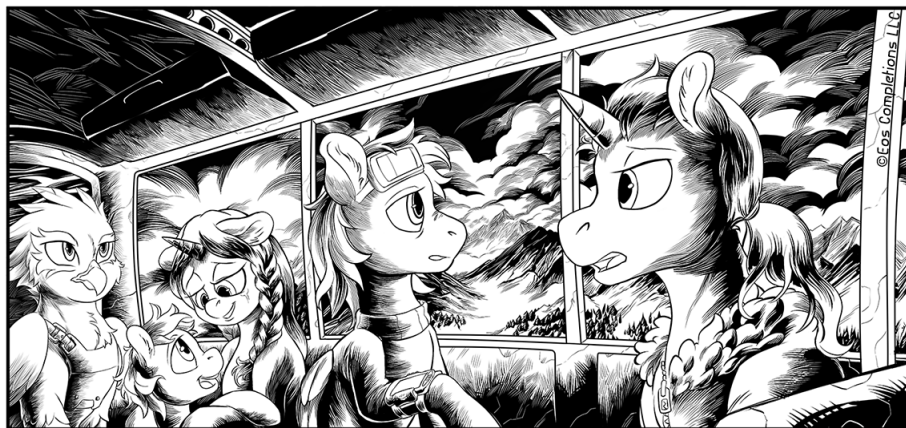
To find and to get back the first friend I'd ever had.

Unity was up on that mountain. This was the moment. I would find her, and bring her to the safety of our group. Show her that she wasn't alone.

If I had to march alone into the very home of Chainlink Shackles, Grindstone, and Wildcard, I would, because I wasn't going to let her be pulled away again.
Not this time.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Midnight PipBuck Reader – You sure are a cheeky one, using your PipBuck light to read when you should be sleeping. Wait, you can't read that well? Nevermind, I'm sure you'll find the ability to have your PipBuck light on with less chance of others spotting it a handy talent to have.

Winter Rad Up

“The story of somepony who is cold on the outside but deep down, is a good pony.”

“What’s it like to be part of something bigger?”

There’s a word about it, I think. About things getting bigger? Begins with an ‘s’ sound?
“Escalation?”

That’s it! I suppose that’s what it all felt like. Go back a few, I don’t know, weeks? Months? I was just some nobody running at a wall. Then I met other ponies and became part of a group to survive. We got involved in things like a big riot and then I became an outcast for a while. I had to spend days fighting for my life, both waking and in a deep sleep or whatever they called it.

Yet that entire time, all we were doing was struggling and garnering what we could. Trying to keep the spark of hope alive. Sometimes we were soaring, gladly taking stock of every little tool, morsel of food, and scrap of clothing we could find. Others, we were worried, casting eyes over old documents, and failing to find our way free. Every time we moved forward, something tried to push one of us backward. Difficulties lay on and gradually I felt my life hit the ground galloping as I realised that every day was going to have something happening now.

It’s kinda hard to say how that feels. A lifetime of unthinking chores suddenly switched to a daily struggle to become the pony I wanted to be. That ongoing struggle to claw our way through our plan. The plan to give us a shot at escaping Fillydelphia once and for all.

That required a lot of things, but more so it had become mixed in with the tale of Fillydelphia itself. Chainlink Shackles had his plans to usurp power and Red Eye’s machinations were coming to a head in the wastelands, with Protégé carrying out his will to stop a rebellion before it happened. A greater tale than our own was coming to its head, yet the things that mattered most to those two powers were also what we needed.

A little group of slaves against an army of slavers that was fighting amongst itself. Our

only hope laid in getting there before them and getting away before they even noticed. Somehow though, I felt like I could do it. Aurora Star's secrets, Sundial's story; they all led to this mountain at the same time. While I wore Sundial's PipBuck, something just felt *right* about it having been me to be here to see this happen.

Before anything could be done though, we had to work with Protégé and his allies to get in. He worried me. Ever since he'd left Ministry Station, Protégé had just looked lost and scared underneath that stoic expression. With his nose in a book for the entire first part of the journey, which side of the fence of loyalty he fell on was becoming rather unclear to me. He might see the truth and help us, or he might topple back to the teachings he knew best.

"That wasn't all, was it?"

What do you mean?

"Protégé wasn't your only issue to deal with, was he? You saw Unity."

I...

"They were taking Unity to the mountain."

They were.

Before anypony else, there was Unity. The mare I'd only met a few times, yet she had always been there like some impossible mission to find and help bring out! Her and, well... the one she sought.

You asked what it's like to be part of something bigger?

Well, this was how I felt. Desperate. Because I could see everything I ever wanted falling slowly into place. We had an objective, the ponies we sought to get were either in place to be rescued or so close to have a chance at reaching. Our supplies were ready and hidden back at the Mall in a place I could reach them. We had found Ministry Station!

Now I was desperate, because for me, for my friends, for all our days we'd lost to slavery, I finally felt like I knew the way. We'd get whatever secret lay in that mountain, use it to unlock whatever there was in Ministry Station, and find our way through the Outer Metro to the outside world! Be it through being able to turn on that portal, or simply to unlock some door to the Outer Metro lines that led outside like we'd always planned!

This *was* something bigger now. This was the beginning of the end. The place that would mark the start of events that would befall Fillydelphia when the world changed. A turning point in history that we would be caught at the centre of.

Of course, that was if we could even survive this journey. My first excursion outside the Walls had almost taken my life multiple times, and this foreboding mountain held its own dangers. Threats that aimed to keep us from ever feeling like we were any closer to freedom. Or more particularly, to keep me from finding Unity up there, even if I had to go to the very edge of the world itself.

Then of course, there were those who didn't want us to make that journey alive at all...

Glimmerlight hummed to herself, picking up a small pack and thin bolt-action rifle off her bed using telekinesis. In the faint light of jury-rigged bulbs strapped to rafters, she checked the weapon over. Little sharp tugs of magic worked the little lever thingy, and she peered into the empty hole the bullets went into beside it. Her magic tugged on the trigger lightly to test it, pointing the barrel up into the sky. The weapon made a sharp, clean snapping noise of metal on metal.

Satisfied, she slung it on her back, and danced her way to the door. It felt awkward as her body slewed one side to the other, bobbing her hindquarters about, and humming in tune. I'd never be caught dead doing that. (Well, not sober anyway, so I had discovered.)

Her home was rather abundant with half-finished gizmos and little self-made devices hanging off the walls or lying over a desk. Her eyes drifted across what seemed to be a hot stove attached to a large spark battery, and I felt her lick her own lips. Clearly, she had something in mind to cook on that by the end of today. Suddenly, the reason for the rifle became much clearer.

Aside from that, it was clearly somewhere she had set up herself. Cables leading outside were connected to a row of pink Hearth's Warming lights that twinkled above her bed and fireplace. Her Initiate robes hung drying in the corner near a collection of scavenged foods. With the technology, the colourful lights, and her own bouncy mood, I couldn't help but feel a pang of envy to have such a cosy little homestead all to herself.

Then of course, I remembered the future and bit that feeling back hard.

"Okay!"

She cheered the word out, before bumping her front door open with her hips and dancing her way out into the village, humming loud and proud.

"Alright, everypony!" Her voice carried out across the entire little village's common ground. "Who's up for some hot food tonight?"

Ponies looked up from their everyday tasks with bright smiles. Some cheered. I saw the wrinkled old elderly village leader grin and look up from cleaning some clothes in a bucket. Life was going on as ever in the little town. With ponies helping maintain each others wooden buildings or stretching leather over the roofs to keep out any rain. Others sat and sewed with some pumping from a large tank in the centre of town. I recognised it immediately as a scaled up version of Glimmer's scrap-built filtration system judging by the hoses and sieve-like rain catcher on top. Clearly, Glimmer had done a lot of good for this place.

Prancing her way across the square, her eyes moved to another certain building that bore a clothesline outside of it, along with a few hastily repaired toys sitting by the porch. I could see little crayon drawings across the lower walls of the exterior walls. The door opened to let out the sounds of light playful argument.

I recognised the squeaky little coltish tone immediately.

"But mom! I wanna come! I wanna see the woods!"

"We'll see when you're older, my dear." Coral's calmly maternal voice spoke down to the little foal being dragged on one of her hind legs. "But not today."

"You always say 'we'll see!'" Chirpy let go and ran in front of her, stopping only to set his floppy hat back on his head again. "The last five times out of six you meant no!"

Coral stopped and patted his head, making the hat droop down again. It never failed to amaze me how serene and at ease she had once looked. A far cry from the bitter mare of today.

"And you always count very well, hun. Now go on, your friends are over there. Go play till Glimmerlight and I return, okay? We'll have a barbecue tonight."

She winked down at her son, clearly knowing the reaction that it would make. Almost immediately, Chirpy Sum bounced up to his hooves and ran in a circle around her, repeatedly squeaking about a 'toast up.' Finally, he leapt up onto her back so he could hug her neck from behind, rubbing his cheek against her mane.

"Thanks, mom! I can't wait! I'm gonna go tell all my friends!"

"You do that. Now stay out of trouble."

"I will!"

Leaping off her, he went scurrying across the village, not even spotting Glimmer as he galloped on past and shouted to the other foals playing on a ramshackle-looking set of swings. Chuckling, Glimmerlight only trotted toward Coral, and called out to her.

"Ready to head out? Gotta leave enough of the night to play in! After all, I'm about as excited as he is. You hear that Riot Rush found an old stack of some wine? The sooner we get back, the sooner I can test that shit out!"

Coral Eve only laughed and shook her head, trotting past Glimmer and giving her a tug with a hoof on her saddlebag strap.

"I swear, sometimes I feel like I've got two kids. Come on, then."

They trotted out of Creaky Hollow together, waving goodbye to the rest of the town before entering the incredibly thick, dead woods that surrounded and protected their home. Not for the first time, I found the sensation oddly easy to immerse myself in simply *as* Glimmerlight in a memory orb. Only when I realised I couldn't think what she thought then did the illusion break. Not that it stopped me trying. All the same, to feel the wind on her brow and the confident trot she did like nopony else could was a joyous feeling. An example of a way I might someday want to be able to trot. Oh how I wished. To be able to go forth with my head up, smiling to everypony around and chatting freely.

Maybe even be able to flirt a little if I met the right—

Oh my, being Glimmer was *really* getting to me. Inwardly, I cringed and curled up a little, even if Glimmerlight only skipped over an uneven rocky slope down an embankment.

"You've had some good months with us now, Glimmer." Coral moved down more hesitantly. "When you first arrived you kept saying you might move on. What's keeping you?"

I felt Glimmer put a hoof to her chin while waiting on her friend.

"Well, I don't know. I could joke and say it's the great parties and getting to watch Thunderstrike when he cuts the logs..."

Coral's eyes hardened a little, and Glimmer quickly waved a hoof.

"Joking! I said joking! Really, I guess it's just, hmm, being able to be who I want? You all accept me. You let me do what I wanna do. You ask me for help, rather than barking orders and calling me 'Initiate' every day. There's no ranks, no chains around my neck telling me when I go where and who I do what with. It's just free out here."

She smiled as she spoke, before laughing.

"Although of course, the fact that we all got absolutely fucking *hammered* as a welcome party for me until I was singing the old anthems from atop the searchlight platform certainly gave me a little incentive!"

Even Coral had to chuckle, giving Glimmer a prod to keep moving.

"Well, I'm glad. You've certainly brought a certain energy to the place. Chirpy likes you."

"He's adorable! I love the lil' guy! Comes over and helps me with my math when tinkering. You taught him well!"

Coral pushed aside a branch, holding it for Glimmer.

"Not much of my own. He's a little sponge, so he is. Takes in what he sees very easily. Easily susceptible to being told what to think, though, so don't go filling his head with too much of that attitude of yours."

Coral's voiced turned briefly stern, prompting Glimmer to make a mock 'Who, me?' motion and laugh. Rolling her eyes with a smile, Coral simply followed my sister further in.

Frankly, there wasn't much to really see. They were hunting for something to shoot and drag home between them, yet with both staying silent to presumably not scare anything away, I was left rather without much input. I could only try to guess what Glimmerlight was thinking each time she stared into the distance. She did seem to look to the West quite a lot.

"Glim, *there*."

Her head whipped around as she dropped low. The dry branches rustled slightly beside her, and I felt her mouth move in a silent curse. Coral was already behind a huge fallen trunk and poking her head out toward a clearing.

"Radgator, eighty metres."

"I can make that shot," Glimmer whispered lightly, settling forward and lifting the rifle from her back. With careful movements of magic, I felt her move the bolt up and back before carefully slotting in a small bullet.

Slowly, she settled in, taking aim down the top of the weapon. I could see the radgator lying motionless on a log over swampy ground! A small one, I hazarded a guess at by my own limited knowledge. It didn't look huge, but then I'd only known radgators as fancy meat my masters sometimes ate.

"Aim for the skull, Glim. Try to—"

"I know, Coral, I know."

It seemed to blink a little. One beady eye looking directly at the two hidden ponies. Slowly, I felt Glimmer lick her lips, and felt her hoof moving to the uncovered trigger so her magic wouldn't give them away. She wasn't aiming at it, but there was a wind. Was she compensating? I didn't know enough about shooting. And then...

A gunshot echoed out over the forest, and the radgator spiralled off into the deep swampy water, thrashing and swimming away rapidly!

Glimmer hadn't fired!

Two more gunshots followed the first, breaking the quiet air!

"What in the hell is all that about?" Glimmerlight leapt up, gun held ready in her magic now.

Coral ran up the embankment, looking into the distance from a higher level above the treetops. She pointed. "I saw a muzzle flash a few hundred metres that way!"

Other noises were drifting in. I felt positively deaf without my own hearing, but Glimmer was still sharp. There were voices crying out, followed by howls and whoops between each of the bursts of gunfire! It sounded like a—

"A hunt."

Coral looked down. "What was that? What is it!?"

My sister didn't even hesitate, but took off into the trees, shouting over her shoulder. "Somepony's being chased! They need help! That's raider war cries!"

Leaping over fallen branches, she didn't even look back to see if Coral was following, and just sprinted into the dense forestry in the direction of the shooting. Skidding over broken ground, she almost collided with a tree when turning around an old cobblestone wall. The sounds were getting closer when I felt her legs start to burn from the sudden effort. Even as her breath strained to keep up with the exertion, it *still* felt worlds away from the little air I got on account of my disease. The sensation was thrilling! I was a fit and able pony rushing

to help someone else!

Then up ahead there was another wicked snap of a hunting rifle, followed by a sharp cry of pain. I felt Glimmer speed up, snorting as she pushed herself onward! I heard raiders laughing! They'd gotten their prey!

Then she emerged above them. Atop a dusty slope, Glimmerlight held a commanding view of the situation before her! Three raiders were surrounding a dropped body upon the floor. Each bore a patchwork of dyed fabric and foul tattoos, and carried long barrelled but rusty rifles by their sides. One of them was shuddering so heavily I thought him in the middle of a fit!

Glimmerlight didn't even hesitate, I felt her own rifle whip up and take aim before the trigger pulled. The tinny snap of Glimmer's hunting rifle sounded small by comparison, but one raider below immediately screamed out loud and fell away from the prone body, clutching a knee that had burst over the ground. She began swearing loudly, scrambling for something in a pack almost immediately. Any other pony would have been on the ground screaming! How had they managed that?!

"W-W-W-What the fuck!?"

"Up there! *Get her! Gethergethergether!*"

Glimmer dropped down, turning her back to a massive and precariously placed boulder by the edge of the slope as two shots whipped past her. One pinged from the rock and blasted tiny fragments against her back. Fumbling with hooves and magic, she loaded another round to the single-shot rifle, and leaned out on the opposite side of the boulder.

I saw the raiders swivel. They'd been waiting!

Both they and Glimmer fired at almost the same time. Theirs slammed in the boulder, making Glimmerlight flinch and causing her shot go wild above the treetops. Hurriedly, she reloaded and blind fired, just to stop them from rushing her cover; at least I thought that was what she was doing! I felt gripped by a fear that made no sense. I *knew* Glimmer survived!

Bullets would hurt though. Oh no... don't get hit, sis'.

The raiders whispered to one another. Frustration went through me as I failed to hear what it was. I could have heard that if I'd been there to help her!

Freshly loaded, Glimmerlight dove forward into the trees, crawling along the top of the slope to try and relocate. Rolling up, she popped up from behind some old brown bracken, rifle aimed.

There were no raiders.

"*Shit.*" She muttered to herself, looking each way.

I saw movement behind the rock she had just passed. Right at the edge of her vision. See it, sis! See it! Come on!

She saw it! Her rifle turned and slammed a shot into the thick dead vegetation there. I heard a high pitched squeal and a raider fell back down the slope, hooves to his ear. The raider began thrashing, the same one who had been shuddering earlier! Spasms as he sought to get up, foaming at the mouth! Glimmer moved up, trying to get a lead to finish it, running right up beside the pony they had been chasing as he lay on the ground! I heard her worried gasp.

It was Rough Diamond! He lay on his side, pale and bleeding from the stomach with his scrappy looking big bolt-action rifle lying across him. But he was still breathing!

"Diamond..."

The raider with the shot knee suddenly collapsed over out of cover, passing out from shock, maybe? Blood loss? The other, however, was getting up missing an ear! Glimmer spun to see him more clearly. She took aim on him!

A smaller shot came from her right, throwing up dust by her hooves.

"Mag-fed pistol, bitch! I can fire again! Don't move!"

From the bushes, the last raider emerged, hunting rifle still by his side on a battle saddle with a thick pistol held in his magic. Glimmer went rather still, breathing hard. I could feel the fear running through her. A chill down her spine.

"Drop the rifle."

"Okay. Okay..." She complied, her own small weapon falling out of her magic.

The raider advanced, standing in front of her. He was disfigured, bearing a horrendous deliberate pattern of scars on his muzzle. With his multi-coloured mane in a mohawk, he seemed to be fighting down mad giggles. The other one moved over, clutching his ear and scowling at Glimmer. His hooves kept pacing at the ground, like he was eager to go somewhere. I saw pinpoint eyes, signs of heavy drug use.

To Glimmer's great shock, even the mare on the ground began to get back up while jamming a three full syringes of what looked like Med-X into her leg. These multi-coloured raiders just didn't seem to feel pain the same way others I'd seen did! The way Glimmer's eyes went from injury to injury and saw them still standing as they passed out huge quantities of drugs to one another gave me a clear idea that she was noticing it too.

"Oh, looks like we got lucky here! Wildcard's gonna love having a little cheerleader come back with us too! Pity the big guy don't let us take stock to the tents for some fun if we're selling them, but we'll have to see if ol' Wildy will let us have—"

The solid **WHAM** of the huge boulder Glimmer had once used for cover careening into the two bucks made him simply disappear to the right, out of Glimmer's perspective. A rush of air blasted down into the clearing behind it, as the enormous rock flattened the raider against the other slope.

Very slowly, a trail of red simply leaked out from below the boulder's new resting spot.

Both Glimmer and the remaining raider looked upward, seeing Coral with a furiously glowing horn standing atop the slope with a pained look on her face as each magical spark exploded off her malfunctioning horn.

The raider raised her weapon. Glimmer didn't give her the chance. She leapt past, grabbed Diamond's rifle, and aimed up.

"Ignore *this*."

Diamond's rifle barked louder than even the raider's hunting rifles, blasting the raider's muzzle clean off and spinning her around. Lacking a mouth, nose, or even eyes, the raider still wriggled on the ground, trying to hit something with brass hooves, making a sickening gurgle from an exposed throat. Standing up, Glimmerlight racked the bolt and aimed down again, firing once more to the still twitching body as those drugs took effect. That ended it.

Wildcard's raiders. I couldn't help but worry if we ever had to face any of them. Drugs scared me enough with what they could do to ponies without an entire gang of overdosed psychopaths.

Coral Eve hurried down the slope as Glimmerlight turned back to the fallen Diamond.

"It's Rough Diamond, Coral! He's hurt! We have to get him back!"

To my surprise, Coral hesitated.

"Glimmer, I told you about this..."

"Coral, he's hurt! Help me!"

Glimmerlight was trying to tear off her own hunting clothes to staunch the bleeding on Diamond's stomach. Grabbing his rifle, she tried to lift his frame onto her back. Coral looked unsure, casting her eyes at him and around at the raiders.

"I told you those tattoos of his were of gangs! He's in with raiders!"

"He's a trader!" Glimmerlight barked back. *"This isn't the time now! He's dying!"*

I sensed what was happening here. The start of their falling apart. Coral Eve stamped a hoof. I could see that authority in her eyes, the one I'd seen in my own time. Her stare met Glimmer's head on.

"Don't you see how messed up these drug crazies are? They didn't care that they had a knee blown off! What if they're harming their own to find us, huh?"

"I... no!" Glimmer recoiled, lifting Diamond onto her back more properly and already beginning to move. *"You've seen him before! You heard him talk! He's not one of them! Why would they be chasing him before they saw us?"*

"To lure us, Glimmer!" Coral was following, but looking increasingly unsure herself, although I lost sight of her when Glimmer turned around. *"They know you come out here!"*

"But why now? How would they know? He'd have died before we got here from the village!"

Glimmerlight rounded on her, meeting the stare hard. She stood up the embankment a little, looking down at her friend. I felt her eyes dampen as she pleaded, clearly fearing for somepony she cared about. Only, I feared I knew who was right here...

"He... he can't be a raider! This doesn't make any sense if he was! Coral, please help me! He's dying! They can't track an injured pony! We'll keep him in my home! Locked inside if that'll help! I'll blindfold him when he leaves! Please, Coral!"

There was a silence between them. I could feel my sister's face twisted in terror. The pony on her back groaned, shifting. A weak voice was heard.

"Who... help... they're... they're trying to... to..." He choked and I heard the rattle of blood in his throat. *"Get to Brim... stone... argh..."*

He gritted his teeth, delusional with pain. I felt Glimmer choke back a whine of worry as the warm sensation of blood trickled onto her back. Eventually, she seemed to come to a decision herself, struggling to get up the embankment again under the well-framed stallion's weight.

"I'm helping him! This just doesn't make sense! Even the craziest raider wouldn't plan it like this, the chances are just astronomic that it'd work!"

I knew that tone in my sister's voice. She wasn't going to give up on him. Just like she hadn't on me. Her mind was set on saving this pony.

"Glimmer..." Coral started to speak, seeing her friend move off back to the village. A few seconds passed, before the sharp sound of hooves came closer and I felt the weight eased as Coral helped lift him back. Her voice hissed, a horrible hint to the bitterness that I knew would swallow her someday.

*"You had *better* be right."*

What caught me out more on waking wasn't the sensation of returning to a substantially weaker body this time.

It was the sudden shock of being plunged into a freezing cold.

Wintry air snapped at me, sending my body shivering even before I opened my eyes and gasped aloud and the sheets of white before me. I was swaying back and forth in a land of endless snow, a sound of metal crunching and rolling coming from below me even as I grasped onto the only warm object I could feel near my hooves.

“Oof! Murky! Throat! Need to breathe!”

Finally, I got a sense of my surroundings, finding myself clamped onto Glimmerlight lying beside me. Squeaking an apology (About three words all at once. I was sure she understood me by now) I let go and instead dug myself into the blanket that covered both of us.

Only now, as I got my bearings on the real world again, did I really get another look at where we were.

The swaying and metal sounds were the train. We lay on the back deck of it, still caged in to prevent escapes, but open to the air with a view behind the train as it climbed and climbed and...

Okay, we were pretty high up.

I had to fight not to simply grab my sister again when I saw the sight before us. Since I had entered the orb with Glimmer, the train had moved far from Fillydelphia. I could see Filly far below us, down in the plains before the mountain and glowing red from the industry and flames within. That colossal crater shifted and warped to my vision from here, dominating the centre of the city. Yet even with all its sweating heat, the cold mists up here were almost obscuring it behind what looked like a veil of white satin. It was just one lonely city amongst the endless wastes that stretched out to rolling hills on every other side in the valley.

We were *far* from there now.

“You doing all right there, lil’bro?” Glimmer, recovered from the assault upon her windpipe, tucked in the blanket and rubbed my back as I held my hooves against the cage.

“Y-yeah I... j-just so high.”

It truly was. The train had meandered across various levels of hills, slowly gaining height on each pass to cross tall bridges. I could still see the bridges down the slopes below us, their curved, patterned metal supports stretching dozens of metres down the gaps between frighteningly sharp cliffs and jutting talons of rock. Those bridges were dark. Abandoned and forgotten in places wastelanders rarely came, but still providing a way for those who dared.

And of course, everything was covered in a glistening coat of fresh snow. It carried all the way to the hills shoer of the valley floor in patches, but up here it had fallen for weeks. Now it covered all, and hung in icy drifts that arched over the edges to ravines and clifftops. Some dropped away like waterfalls below us, others ominously hung like claws above us.

Around us, long drifts carried away toward mountainside forests. The snow was deep, deeper than I’d ever imagined it could go; sometimes coming up almost a quarter of the train’s height either side, with white sprinkles blowing off the top layers in the mountain breeze.

It was all so strangely tranquil, and the air felt cleaner and sharper up here. Yet as we passed around a rock face, strong winds blew away from the mountain before us, feeling like they were trying to shove us nearer to the edge of the tracks, where I saw a sharp drop suddenly emerge on the perilous route.

Glimmerlight sat up, moving beside me and casting her eyes across the spectacle. The train jolted and squealed on the tracks, leading us both to grab hold of the cage for balance.

"You're afraid of heights? I wouldn't have thought that'd come naturally to a pegasus."

I bit my lip. "Not really heights so much as not feeling in control."

The train weaved around a corner and rocked toward the near edge of a cliffside, leading me to squeak and shove myself away from it, directly into Glimmer. This felt too unsteady! I could see rocks falling from where we just passed! The floor angled as we began to climb again.

"I think I see what you mean. Well, just imagine what it'll be like when you can fly by yourself. All in control!"

She poked my side, yet I only looked back at her, confused.

"But Weathervane—"

"Screw what that old cook says. You're going to fly someday. If it takes us years, it will. I'll be your super sexy fitness instructor for those wings! The one pulling you out of bed before sunrise every day for more wing-ups and gliding lessons! Hey... there's an idea."

She stopped briefly, before looking back at me.

"You can you lift your wings, right?"

"S-sure." I spread both of them, still wincing slightly but finding it surprisingly easy now. It startled me just how natural it was beginning to feel. I couldn't deny a little spring of happiness inside me every time I just *felt* them move.

Glimmerlight looked around it, carefully toying with the feathers a little, her tongue poking out in thought.

"Yeah. That's a thing."

"What? What is?"

She grinned at me, leaning back again and holding the blanket open for me to snuggle in too. It was so cold out here.

"You can't fly right now, but who says you couldn't try gliding on those things?"

My eyes shot open. That was...

That was...

That was a *really* good point.

She obviously saw my shock, laughing and tugging me in close to squeeze me in a tight hug. "Now there's a little thing to keep you wondering away! Might even replace Pip in your dreams at night!"

I felt my face turn red. "I don't..."

"Murky, your ears twitch when you're lying. I *know*." She laughed and ruffled my mane while I simply tried to giggle it off a little. "It's something to hold close, Murky. Just think on it, okay? Maybe we can find time to see what you can make of it later when we're back in Filly."

Forget thinking on it then! I wanted to think on it now! I thanked her more than a few times for the idea, clutching close under the blanket as we watched the landscape roll by. Slowly, Fillydelphia began to disappear under the whirling snow and thick clouds that hung lower than the ceiling in the sky. I spent most of it imagining it! I could be swirling out there with the snow! Flying on the winds! Who cared if I couldn't gain height or flap right? It was more than I ever dreamed! I had to ask Weathervane about it! Maybe he knew something and just hadn't wanted to give me false hope?

I *wanted* something to look forward to again. This, perhaps, was it.

There didn't have to be any words between us. She no doubt knew from my somewhat clingy hugging of her that the idea had cheered me up from my fear up here on what, to me, felt like the edge of the world itself.

"So what *do* you dream about her then? Judging by what you said in the Roamer..."

With a gulp, I tensed up, searching for something. I knew what her joke was, yet there was still some answer I could give to try and, uh, deflect the topic!

"N-not that! I um..." I blushed. "Sometimes I dream of her coming and saving me from Shackles. L-like, y'know, shooting her way in and having a big fight with him!"

She grinned, prodding my shoulder. "Go on."

"Then um, well, she wins! She would, right? He'd fall down after Pip uses her magic to slam him into the ground!" I giggled, enjoying the thought. "Then she'd come over to me and break the chains he'd put on my hooves. We'd be trotting away from the body, but he isn't dead! He suddenly runs at us, all covered in blood and really scary! He'd shout that nothing would take me away from him, that I belonged to him!"

I bit my lip, staring out over the landscape.

"But she would just stop and suddenly turn, with a revolver raised and her PipBuck's um, Sa-targeting thingy on him! Then she'd say 'Not any more' just before she pulls the trigger one last time to make me free forever. Then I, uh, wake up, usually..."

"Storm the castle, kill the baddy, get the buck, huh? I like her style. Keep dreaming that one, Murky. Maybe someday it'll come true."

It was somewhat refreshing to hear her casually joke on it. I laughed with her. We talked of a few other things, but in time, I couldn't help but raise the topic. We had just been in an orb after all. I had to know how she was feeling.

"Sis', about Diamond and Coral..."

I felt her tense beside me, but her hoof stroked my mane.

"I know... I know.." I saw her bite a lip. "It's looking kinda obvious now what I did, huh?"

The words were flippant, but her tone wasn't. The train bounced, turning against the wind and sending a biting cold washing over us. Briefly, I saw a colossal peak still stretching above us, before the white mists covered it again. I turned back to look up at her.

"Well, um, we don't know yet, right?"

Something didn't feel right about it. Bonecrusher in the arena had mentioned it was *Wildcard* who killed Diamond. Just internal fighting in the Big Four? Or had it been something else?

Right now, I didn't feel right casting that shaky theory to Glimmerlight. Setting up the wrong idea at this stage would be awful. I had to speak to Brimstone, find out what he remembered about how they treated one another. He was their leader, he'd know.

"I guess it, hmm..."

Glimmer's voice trailed off. I did my best 'cute curious look' until I saw her giggle and give in, yet her eyes still looked sad.

"Sorry, I meant to say, I guess it wasn't really Diamond that got me there. It was seeing Coral looking at me like that. She was my friend, Murky. My best friend in Creaky. That might have been the last time we ever spent together *as* friends before the village was destroyed."

"She still cares, sis'." My voice felt weak and without much conviction, but I still tried. "When we were getting out of Ministry Station! I saw you and her helping one another a

few times to move. Coral wasn't leaving you behind."

Glimmerlight went quiet for a minute or so, her eyes trailing across the snowy rocks around us. After a moment, I realised where she was looking. West. This time, I knew what lay out there in that direction. Bucklyn Cross.

Her parents. How long had she been keeping *that* one down? Especially now.

Then it finally hit me. What it was that had drawn Coral Eve back toward her friend. At her heart, Coral was a very motherly kind of pony who felt responsible for others.

Coral Eve had just seen Glimmerlight lose her parents.

I knew Coral by now. No amount of bitterness and anger she held would stop such a thing crying out to her caring heart. As horrible a thing as it was, that event at Bucklyn Cross might have just given Glimmer and Coral the key to putting the past behind them. They'd both been hurt, they'd both lost almost everything of their past lives. Now that they'd found one another again. All the bickering between them must have begun to just feel, I didn't know, smaller by comparison, maybe?

Could such a thing ever truly fade though? It explained Coral's conflicted opinions lately.

Finally, Glimmer spoke again.

"Ministry Station, Murky. I can't put in words what that was like. I'm sorry if this sounds bad but... when I was there? I think I knew what it was like to be who you were before I met you. I didn't have any say! I couldn't choose anything for myself! It was just... routine. Doing whatever that *place* wanted me to do."

I saw her wipe an eye.

"It's only right it was *you* to save me from that, Murky. You're the only pony I know who'd *understand* it and have the right, I don't know, heart to pull anypony out of it. I spent so long trying to protect you and help you that I hadn't even considered how vulnerable I was myself. Thanks, Murky..."

She held me close. The pair of us hugging upon the back deck of the train, as much for the cold as for the meaning of the moment. I felt her ruffle my mane again, as though making up for lost ruffles in our time apart.

"I miss them, Murky. I know what happened and I know I maybe don't talk about it. But I really miss them." She sniffed. "But I've made it this far and I've not removed it from my mind. I was tempted. I almost did, once. But Coral stopped me and... I know I'm going to make it."

She paused, before saying something that almost made me want to cry on the spot, simply out of how much it meant to hear.

"I don't need the orbs anymore. I've got you."

We lay and watched the landscape for a while. Sharp formations of rock were interspersed by snow-laden trees that swayed in the harsh winds. Very soon, as we got higher, the blizzard's snow began to blow between the cage around us, this wind growing stronger. Below us, I could see the rails had changed from their solid pre-war design to a somewhat more ramshackle kind. Possibly made nearing the more desperate last few months of the war, or even by Fillydelphia under Red Eye.

We were nearing the destination, I'd heard Grizzly announce the time from inside the carriage; perhaps twenty minutes away at this slow pace we had to take now. With the cold

getting so much more cutting, we made the decision to head back inside.

The inner side of the carriage wasn't really meant for ponies. Storage crates filled with pickaxes, shovels, and other tools were lined up beside rolls of fabric that we'd taken to using as covers against the temperature. The harsh oaken floor and thin metal sides of the train really didn't offer much comfort to anypony.

Coral Eve lay near to the door we'd come in through. She had wrapped herself up warm and remained mostly silent for most of the trip. She hadn't ever said it, but I was happy to know she was 'with us' now, if only because our escape would help her in pursuit of her son, to bring him back to her. All the same, I saw her offer me a thin smile. I gingerly waved back as we passed by.

Brimstone didn't actually rest against a wall, but rather right in the middle of the train. In passing, I wondered if it was to avoid his colossal weight overbalancing the entire thing if he was leaning to one side. Surely that couldn't be the case? Either way, 'our' spot was just beside him, where Glimmerlight now settled down. The barred windows held no glass, and the entire carriage was chilly, sheltered only from most of the wind.

Old Grizzly and Ragini were nearer the top of the carriage, organising our various supplies between them. I saw numerous single-shot rifles or rusty looking pistols partially dismantled as they maintained them. Glimmer had offered her aid earlier, but the slavers seemed less than willing to have a slave doing so, particularly Ragini. The griffon seemed dark of eye ever since she had gotten her 'revenge' on the Shades, even more so than before. Protégé's words to her, whether it had been worth it, seemed all too telling now.

In truth, the bodyguard simply looked dissatisfied and angry. Trapped with nopony else to exact vengeance on other than perhaps Shackles himself. Very quickly, her plan became a bit clearer to me.

Well, I wasn't going to complain if she did.

There were a couple small crates of ammunition pried open beside them that contained other things too. Winter clothing, bandages, a crowbar, and healing potions glowing purple. There was even a small saddlebag with a couple sachets of Radpurge, meant for Glimmer and Coral. Protégé had sent Ragini to collect some before we left. Beside it, I saw a sack *full* of RadAway and couldn't help but feel the urge to acquire some, if I had the chance. That stuff was my lifeblood. A little shiver passed through me. It was never nice to remember what lurked in my lungs, just waiting for me to be vulnerable and without anything to stop it. I still sometimes had bad dreams of choking and drowning in my own blood until I awoke in a sweat, grasping frantically for my canteen.

Frankly, my breath came weak enough as it was compared to other ponies. This thin mountain air wasn't helping much. I was having to suck in air a little too loudly to be comfortable.

"Doing all right, squirt?"

Brimstone's deep voice rumbled out, clearly having noticed me shake. I nodded hesitantly and sat down on the blankets. I dearly wanted to ask him about Diamond. But not with Glimmer around.

"Y-yes. Just nervous."

"Average day then." Brim grinned and grunted, patting my head very carefully before he turned his head to keep me within sight of his eye. "Got that little spud gun of yours ready?"

My what? I cast a look to Glimmer for aid, but she was already toying with Coral's

lantern she bought a few days ago, trying to install a gemlight into it for greater brightness.

“S-spuds?”

Brimstone made a low noise. “That pistol by your side. Is it loaded?”

“N-no. They said we’d get bullets when we need them.” I glanced up the carriage. “Old Grizzly said so. This is still a slaver thing, I think.”

The big raider arced his head right around to see the crates of ammunition. “Just be ready to grab any if you need it. They know we escaped. They know what Protégé wants. If anything happens? Be ready.”

His tone went rather dangerous toward the end. Only now did I realise why he sat where he did.

He was being a barrier between us and the slavers. Allies or not, Brim wasn’t taking any chances. Even if Pro—

I looked up. Now that was something. Where was Protégé? The spot he’d occupied when I left out the back with Glimmer held only an empty rug, his revolver and (to my surprise) his eyepiece sitting alone.

Truth be told, I wanted an excuse to leave anyway. The constant clicking of bullets being fed into their housings were already beginning to make me uncomfortable.

“I’ll, um, be back in a second, okay?”

Getting up, I trotted toward the other end of the carriage. He must have went into the next one. Brimstone made to get up, but with a little glance from Glimmer sat back down, leaving me to go. Having to stop a couple times to keep my balance every time the train bumped or rocked I made my way past the slavers.

“You don’t like Shackles, do you?” Ragini didn’t look up from snapping bullets into the magazine.

“N-no.” I kept moving, pausing only at the door itself to look back at the griffon. One eye rolled up, her head side on to me. “Not, um, particularly.”

“Guess we got three things in common then, flightless. You wanna kill him, get in line.”

I gulped, my hooves pushing the door aside a little and feeling the wash of cold flow over me until my teeth chattered on the spot. “Y-you can g-go f-f-first. Fine with m-me.”

“Just so long as we got an understanding.”

That was more than enough reason for me to get through that door post-haste. Stepping out between the tracks, I had to quell the fear of the grinding wheels just below me. The sound made me wince. Every single grind of the connectors and sharp clacking of two carriages bumping into one another sent a spike of uncertainty up my spine. Hopping over, I shoved myself into the next carriage quite quickly.

Different from the thin, crude metal of the carriage we were in, this one was almost entirely wood. Fillydelphia’s trains often were simply a mish-mash of all the intact carriages they had to hand. Red paint peeled on the walls behind huge minecarts lashed to the floor on either side. Up ahead though, I could see a red tail protruding from behind one. Protégé.

He must have heard me slam the door shut. His voice was quite quiet, probably only easy to hear if you were me.

“Too crowded in there for you, too?”

“Well, maybe. It was just getting too cold outside and I didn’t really feel comfortable.”

Protégé wandered out to the centre of the train, in better view. I noticed he’d brought a rug with him that he now sat on. His eyes didn’t so much as look at me as just always outside the window.

"This place tends to do that. We don't see snow this heavy in much of Equestria anymore. Certainly not with the warmth around Fillydelphia in the ambient air. The cold takes some getting used to."

Trotting up, I looked out the large window myself and saw the treacherously sharp peaks misted in the distance, before settling down on the rug. Getting as comfortable as I could, I took out my journal and opened a new page. Sketch. That'd help me get my mind off things. Just sketch some nice things. Maybe Unity? I hadn't mentioned her much, not with Grizzly around. Only Glimmerlight knew. But I could still sketch her, draw that flowing mane of hers when it wasn't all scraggly and ruined by slavery.

As I did so, that all too recognisable sound clipped into only my ears. Since the metro, I'd had the PipBuck on near silent volume out of habit. I still felt the hairs on the back of my neck stick up if it went off too loud. The smell of those... *things* was still so memorable that I sometimes thought got a whiff of it from my nerves alone. It made me more worried than ever about making noise.

Beep!

I clutched the PipBuck close under me, watching Protégé to ensure he didn't look over. To cover myself, I simply kept sketching while I listened. Shapes. Yes, shapes. Make life from shapes, from curves and lines...

Beep!

Click.

Before anything else, I already heard the sounds of mining in the background. I recognised the picks hitting stone from the metro. There was heavy breathing close to the microphone.

"I... whew, it's Sundial... of... of course! There's so much to tell, I don't have time!"

The urge to hunker back and listen intently was powerful, yet my art was my cover to not look as though I was doing anything else. I just kept drawing, the broken charcoal tip in my mouth softly arcing to make the shape of her torso.

"We're inside the mountain, now! They brought us up through the night! They let me have a few hours to myself, and threatened us if we didn't return. I... I had to go see her. See my Sky. She had been so worried about me, even my family didn't know where I'd gone! I tried to be calm for her but I was the one more scared than any, because I could feel the temptation to try and run away from all of this! Just take Skydancer, my family, and just go!"

The flick of a tail, the wisps of a wavy mane. I had to concentrate, and not react to the sadness of his story, but just listen for information. I couldn't draw attention from Protégé.

"My dad's still out on deployment, he doesn't know yet. I don't know why but that makes it feel easier. He has enough to worry about. If there's anypony who doesn't need to see more suffering than he already has, it's him. But I got to be with Sky, that's all that matters for now. I needed it. She needed it. I couldn't explain much, just a cover story that it was all a misunderstanding! We lay on the roof together like we sometimes do and looked at the stars."

I heard him fight back a sob.

"She asked me, 'Why does this have to happen in our time?' I've asked that so many times to myself and I still don't know. I just held onto her tightly and tried not to let her see me cry. Why can't this all be over? I just... I just want to go back to enjoying each day when I see her! No more stupid Stable drill alarms scaring everypony! No more end

of the world hanging over us! No more... all of-of this!"

I had to bite my lip. Looking up, I saw Protégé glance over, as though reading my expression. I tried to smile and go back to my drawing.

"Whoever's listening... you'll know what I was like when I first met her. How I was all awkward, then you'll have heard me once I'd been around her. The banter we shared. The little jokes. How she'd tease me while I was recording. I'm so scared I'm going to lose all that. I need to do this. Get that money, get out of all this, and know we'll be safe! That's why I'm on this forsaken mountain! That's why I had to spend an hour waiting in the snow for them to get that little door on the mountainside open. Why I'm stuck in this gem mine trying to spy on a pony who is just as scared about this as I am."

I was really fighting hard now. The charcoal in my mouth was shaking, needing to be put to paper to steady it and draw the little flicks of her ears and the soft eyelashes.

"Even those few hours were enough to keep me going. We spent them together. Just the two of us. On the roof. Getting food. In her apartment... anywhere. Just feeling her beside me as we lay there in her bed, feeling our love, and for just a short while, being able to forget everything else. To hear her voice, her teases, and see that little smirk on her face. A little bit of magic to remind me what I'm fighting for. I just want this to end. To end so I can go home to her! I—"

"You will cease noise. Cease this talk of foalish worry."

I knew that voice. I blinked and sat up a little.

"Get back to work."

"Yes... yes, Doctor Heartcare."

Click.

Doctor Heartcare? That was who I knew as *Magister* Heartcare, the crazy ghoul from the crater! I felt like if I were smarter, I could have figured all this out a little more, but it was just one more piece of the puzzle. The refugees were being taken by Heartcare to work for the Zebras on... something that involved memory magic and learning spell orbs?

All the same, I just couldn't keep my mind objective for too long. Sundial and Skydancer; even just hearing him talk like that made me feel wretched. My charcoal dotted across Unity's cutie mark, before I spotted a little drop of liquid fall from my face onto the picture. Screwing my eyes shut, I wiped them and kept drawing. It was like a sense of sadness mixed with a stupid, childish envy I wished I could get rid of! Just the way that they treated each other. How he had her to fall back on, somepony more than a friend...

"Murk, are you alright?"

I jolted up. The picture below me being what I saw before even him. I'd drawn Unity, yes. But I'd drawn her looking right out the page at me with a little knowing smirk. The same one I could imagine that Skydancer had to look at poor Sundial.

The same one I bet she and her friend shared too. She was doing everything that Sundial was to help save somepony she cared about too.

"Murk? I asked, are you alright?" Protégé had moved over and I gasped, snapping back to reality and slamming the journal shut before he could see what I'd drawn.

"I-I'm fine! Just, um, being me."

"Something you drew made you weep?" He sat near me, looking genuinely caring, but I didn't much fancy confiding in him right now.

"No no. Just scared..." I searched for something to distract the conversation, "I don't understand it, really."

"Don't understand what?"

Frantically trying to think of a subject, I saw the untouched fields of glittering snow outside, and pointed out the window. "You bring slaves up here. Get them working on some mountaintop. But I know it wouldn't take any amount of sneakiness to just move out and away in this weather. Disappear into the night. No walls to keep you in. How do you keep slaves from escaping?"

Yes, good quick thinking, Murk. Ten points.

"Why?" Protégé grinned slightly, a rare smile from him since Ministry Station. "Getting tempted?"

I gulped, holding the word a little too long. "No..."

"Good."

Protégé shifted, turning more toward me. I could see his eyes were somewhat lifeless and sunken. Clearly he still felt the after effects of whatever that place did to him. I'd seen the same look in Glimmerlight at times. But I knew he wasn't wanting me contained here, why say that?

"Good, why?"

"I wouldn't want to know you'd killed yourself, Murk. This mountain keeps slaves in by being impossible to escape from other than via a train. Low visibility, sharp cliffs, far from anywhere, and with tundra-like temperatures even at the best of times, but that's not the real danger. It's the snow, Murk. Similar to the rain in Fillydelphia. Not acidic, there's no real toxins in the air up here, but it holds minor radioactive properties."

He saw the slight recoil I made away from the window, away from the suddenly very foreboding snowy landscape in the dark of the night outside, quickly waving a hoof.

Protégé shook his head. "Don't worry. We're safe in here, it's only a very weak trace of it below the cloud level. Just strong enough that if anypony spent enough time in it, getting covered in the snow while trying to get anywhere, they'd die before they got half way down the mountain without impractical quantities of medicine. You shall have to be very careful, Murk."

I huddled up against a crate. The beauty of that pure white, seemed starkly twisted now.

"Gee, now I feel *so* much more comfortable."

Protégé seemed mostly unconcerned, however.

"With any luck, we shouldn't need to spend any much time in it. I notice you have your canteen. We shall top it up before we leave and get you some spares that Grizzly acquired for all of us. That shouldn't be too hard. Guards will be light outside for the same reason. The real fight is inside."

As he spoke, I couldn't help but feel an ear twitch. I had heard a wooden thump from further down the train. I looked up at it, before putting it aside as just another sound of this machine moving.

"What do you think we'll find?"

Protégé sighed, actively lying down to avoid the cold air whirling through the open sides. "I'm not sure, Murk. Something pre-war. Maybe something that would ignite what lies in Ministry Station, judging by what they said. A key to that sealed room? Although I gather they got in already. Perhaps they can't really use whatever's in there. We already found that portal down there, I suppose. I presume you're happy with that result."

I bit my lip. It almost felt worse hearing him casually refer to our escape attempts than to be the stoic slave master preventing them. Now I didn't know *where* he stood on it.

“W-well, G-Glimmer said it wasn’t working.”

“Unless this mountain has the information. Shackles wouldn’t hesitate to own such a thing, the power it would give him to find slaves from all over the wastes. I don’t even know how it works. Maybe it needs something on the other side? Yet I sense it’s something else down there. Something else at the core of all those strange... things, and ambiances.”

I heard another faint tap again. If Protégé saw my worried glances, he said nothing. It stopped, and I tried to forget about it.

“M-maybe a megaspell orb creator? W-we found these spell orb thingys that let unicorns learn spells they didn’t know. B-but you know that, sorry. I mean, what if it were something that did that on a huge scale?”

I didn’t want to mention the healing megaspell Weathervane had used to save my life, but it certainly sounded plausible to me. Could something that scale malfunctioning have caused Ministry Station to take on that otherworldly feeling? It felt like memories were leaking out of magic itself down there. Oh, this was all too complex for me.

Then there was a third tap.

This time, I didn’t let it go. Protégé had been around me long enough to recognise when I was getting spooked. (Strangely, *most* ponies seemed to see me as some sort of early warning system now.) He didn’t say a word, but looked around as though expecting something.

“Down there.” I whispered to him, pointing further forward into the carriage. A cluster of supply boxes were affixed past the minecarts in this car. We moved toward it, me wincing every time his hooves came down on a creaky bit of wood. Did sneaking feel as natural now that I genuinely found it an annoyance to hear others not being as good as I was?

There it was again. Just ahead! Just... in the boxes?

I had to stifle a gasp. We had a stowaway! A spy? A *Shade*!?

I pointed with a hoof, before I saw Protégé lift an iron bar from beside the minecarts and take the box’s lock with magic too. We look to one another and I saw him mouth the words.

One.

Two.

I drew a sharp breath.

Three!

He yanked the box open! We both launched forward! I expected a shrill warcry of a raider! The swearing of a slaver!

Instead, I heard the high-pitched squeak of a colt.

“So sorry, Mister Protégé! So sorry! Sorry! Sorry-sorry-sorry! Please don’t be angry!”

I almost smacked my own face to check I wasn’t imagining it. Right up out of the box, came the little form of Chirpy Sum, covered in sawdust and wrapped in an entire box full of pristine blankets and wore one almost like a cape. He held his hooves together as he pleaded.

“I just really *really* wanted to see outside and around and they all keep telling me I’d be a really big pony in the new world but I couldn’t wait and it sounded like an adventure and here I made this cape and its what will let everypony know I’m out on a quest to see things and explore and be with you and Assistant Murky and Mister Grizzly and see what you see and learn so I sneaked out of the logistics place when I was bringing my homework to you when I saw you going to the trains with Murky and—”

He had to stop, taking in a gigantic breath.

“—and I—”

"Chirpy! What are you-" Protégé shouted the word to interrupt, pulling him out of the box with his magic, standing the foal before him. "Have you any *idea* how much danger you're in here? Master Red Eye would be livid if anything were to happen to you!"

I saw Protégé glance at me rather harshly. Oh dear, I knew there were going to be *words* about a certain pegasus putting ideas in the colts head.

That wasn't what worried me more though.

"But Mist—"

Protégé spoke over him, pacing back and forth, hoof on his forehead.

"We shall have to get you on this train immediately, when it heads back to Fillydelphia.

Ragini will accompany you the entire way to keep you safe. Blast, this will leave us one short..."

That wasn't what worried me either.

It was the worry that if there was *one* pony on this train who would, for once, hear better than I did to recognise the sound of a certain colt's voice and the sound of his name being shouted...

I could already hear the hooves galloping across the carriages, before the door slammed open behind us. It surprised me, how much of a panic I felt. Shouldn't I be elated? Overjoyed? This solved a problem!

Instead, I only felt worried for what would transpire.

Coral Eve stood in the doorway, snow whirling in from behind her. She was already breathing hard. I could see her horn was already glowing.

"Chirpy!?" She shouted his name, eyes training from side to side until finally she spotted him beside us. Then she was moving, rushing forward.

Chirpy just stood there, in shock, with his eyes widening. As what he was seeing caught up with him, his mouth split into a smile larger than I might have thought possible on such a small pony. He rushed forward, shoving his way past Protégé. Chirpy didn't have to gallop far, before his mother dove forward and grabbed him, her front hooves grasping and holding him against her chest.

I couldn't help it. I felt my eyes get a little damp at the sight. Seeing her constantly stroking his back and mane as though just to make sure he was *actually there* from second to second, or hearing his rapid-fire sentences that barely made any sense as he spoke with his face buried into her neck.

Behind them, I saw the others moving through on hearing the commotion. Glimmerlight's eyes went wide, her mouth gaping in shock as she saw who it was, and heard his shrill voice in the air.

"Mom! *Mooom!* You're back! You're back!"

"I am, my darling! Oh thank goodness! Thank goodness you're safe! I'm here now..."

Among the ponies watching on, I saw the reunion I had dreamed of for her. Heard her voice flow back to that caring pony I'd seen in Creaky Hollow as she rocked back and forth with her son, whispering and reminding him she was there for him now. I heard him trying to talk through deep sobs, saw her joining him with tears running down her filthy cheeks and drawing clean lines through all the accumulated dirt of slavery.

I wouldn't even dare Protégé to try and take him away from her now. The train wouldn't *survive* if anypony did.

Chirpy opened his eyes, looking over her shoulder as he saw Glimmerlight moving quickly in. He gasped loudly, pawing at his mother to get down and rush to my sister.

“Auntie Glim-Glim! You came with her! Auntie Glim-Glim!”

Leaping up onto her back, just as I’d seen him do to Coral in Creaky Hollow, he hugged her neck. Glimmerlight wiped her eyes and laughed, bending down to swing him around and grab him in her hooves.

“Good to see ya, lil’rascal! Geez, you’ve grown!” She laughed, cradling him and ruffling his mane. I recognised the way she did it all too well.

Chirpy just galloped from one to the other, back and forth, hugging and leaping onto them. Hyper as only a colt could be. Seeing the three of them, I couldn’t help but notice Brimstone back away into the other carriage. A wise move, if harsh on himself. Chirpy could have that explained later. But for now... wow, just...

...wow.

A little time went by. Protégé moved to collect his things before returning and sitting near the edge of the carriage, simply watching with a steely expression. Grizzly and Ragini stayed in the other car, while we ‘caught up’, as they said.

It wasn’t all good.

The look on Coral Eve’s face as she saw Chirpy’s cutie mark was a fight between elation and personal sadness. She had missed him gaining it and looking overjoyed for him as he talked about what it all meant and how he had been doing a lot of maths to become an architect was heartbreaking. She was putting on such a brave face for her son.

It was Glimmer, who really solved it. Announcing to everyone she would organise a cute-cañera (Whatever that meant) for both Chirpy and for myself. Allegedly, because I never got one. Really, I just saw it as her just trying to get me drunk again.

The motion helped ease the tone, to start from scratch, and let the lost past be at least recreated. Truth be told, I wondered if, while I had been the first thing to help bring them together again, Chirpy might be the glue to seeing the two mares into a better future as friends again.

I could hope.

Only I knew it was a ticking time bomb. Eventually, those three words just had to come up.

“And! And! And I got to learn how to shoot a laser gun! They let me fire one in the range because it’s got no kick to it so I could hold it in my mouth! It was red! Can I get one, mom?”

Coral sniffed, still almost in disbelief and pulled him in close with a hoof.

“When you’re older, sweetie. We’ll see about finding a blue one. You always liked blue, didn’t you?” She waggled her mane a little to him, making him laugh.

“Hehehe! I like blue! But I like red too! It reminds me of all the help Daddy Red Eye gave me when he taught me how to shoot it!”

Coral went very still, just staring at him. I saw Protégé look up from further away, no expression on his face. His hooves slowly started to backpedal.

“Mom?” Chirpy patted her chest. “Mom, what’s wrong? I... I’d like blue too. If...”

Coral lightly pushed him down, toward Glimmer and myself. Oh dear, I knew that look

She stood, shivering lightly with a deathly look upon her face. Without any warning, she spun, galloped forward, and swung her hoof sharply across Protégé’s face. The unicorn fell back, taken completely by surprise. She was on him long before Ragini got through the door behind us! A hoof held against his throat, she pressed him back into the corner, beating away the limbs that tried to shove her off.

"You look at me, you slaver!"

Her words snapped out, barking at him. She saw Ragini's rifle pointed, and her horn sparking into life.

"You dare make this into a firefight with *my son* in here, griffon, you'll lose more than your wings!"

The standoff was set. Glimmer and I pulled Chirpy back, putting him behind the pair of us. Brimstone threw Grizzly behind him, coming up behind Ragini and, standing ready. Yet Coral didn't care.

All the same, everything felt on the edge of disaster now. I could swear even the train was rocking harder.

"LOOK AT ME! What have you been teaching my son!? What evil ideas did you put in his head? Telling him his father was that *monster* in that city!"

"He—" Protégé choked on his words, her hoof pushing firmly down on him. "He was being... educated... kept safe!"

"Kept safe and *indoctrinated!* Do you have any idea what it's like to hear him call that beast who's did his level best to *kill me* for his slave industry 'father?' Do you monsters even know what that word truly means? *His father was a great pony! A pony taken away from him before he had the chance to know him!*"

I could see tears streaming down her cheeks. Ragini's finger closed on the trigger, gun levelled to her head. Yet that horn only grew in light, Protégé knew its power. I saw him waving to the griffon, trying to signal her away even as he twisted when she pushed her hoof down harder.

"I had to raise him alone in the wastes! The same wastes that took the pony I loved! Now I come here, find my colt, who was *all* I had left has been made to think some slave lord is his... his..."

I actually gasped in shock, her horn lighting more like a proper unicorn's should. The thought of what Coral could do if she could control that raw power was terrifying. Her eyes glowed for just a second, the pupils shimmering with light. Or was it just the reflection from the hanging lanterns above?

Those lanterns really *were* swinging more. Why were we speeding up?

"Let me ask you one thing, slaver..." She leaned close to him. "Do you honestly look on this now, see the reality of what you've done to so many parents across the wastes and think this is *right*? After *all* you've seen in that fu—in that Station? After what I saw it do to you too?"

Protégé's eyes were rather wide. I saw his mouth try to move. He had no answer, although lacking much breath was no doubt not helping. I couldn't look too much though, as the entire train bounced and rocked madly. Thrown to the side, Coral Eve fell off him.

Ragini's barrel turned, and I saw Brimstone the griffon aside, even when she made to fire, sending a shot whipping through the window. I heard them scuffle, saw her talons swipe at the raider. Protégé rolled to the side, falling into me.

Everything buckled again. The landscape was hurtling by outside! Even Coral seemed to notice it.

"Pro-Protégé! Should we go this fast?"

Ragini slammed past us, hurled into a minecart. I heard Chirpy shriek, and saw Coral get up and run to where Glimmer held him safe.

"No, it should not!" Protégé shouted, leaping to his hooves and pulling open the next

door. I followed him as we ran away from the developing brawl between raider and Talon, to go further up the train. Two more carriages were bouncing and hurling up from wall to wall. I felt the wheels actually lift off the tracks! Terror gripped my heart at the feeling of vertigo, before it slammed back down and briefly threw us both off our hooves. The clacking and roar of metal on metal was deafening. At the end of the train, Protégé turned and bucked open the driver's door.

"Driver! What is the meaning of this? *Slow down!*" He cried into the room as he struggled in.

I saw the corpses first. Two ponies lying gutted at the side of the room, lengthways. I had to choke back the urge to vomit, before my attention was taken by the driver who now stood there.

He turned back to us, lifted up his big, plaid cap and revealed a crazed smile and multicoloured mane.

"Why slow down? It's *fun!*" Wildcard cackled. "WHOO WHOO!"

He honked on the train's horn pulley as he spoke, pursing his lips and making train noises at us.

"Slow it down!" Protégé lunged at him. "You'll make it crash off an edge! Murky, get the brake!"

Wildcard didn't even have to struggle. Protégé went down in a flurry of hooves from the big raider, grabbing the unicorn's mane in his magic and holding him up, before shoving him away with his hooves. I saw Protégé try to lift a stoking rod with his magic, but Wildcard's horn fizzled, shocking Protégé with a magical charge, and wrenched the improvised weapon away. He danced on the spot, and bucked the smaller unicorn out of the driver's compartment entirely!

"You all said you wanted a faster pace to this journey, didn't you!?" He laughed madly as he cranked a handle forward.

I simply stood rock still in terror as those mismatched beady eyes glared right through me.

"Well be careful what you wish for! I'm *always* listening! Chugga-chugga! Chugga chugga! Round and round the big train goes, where it crashes..."

He snapped the brake lever off. I saw us heading toward a sharp bend through the whirling blizzard, one at the edge of a drop off the hill!

"...NOPONY KNOWS! BAAHAHAHA!"

The train shuddered and twisted, arching up before rolling off the side of the tracks with a shuddering impact. I screamed as I felt gravity disappear, and a sensation of my whole world being turned around when the entire train spun over and over. I saw *him* thrown around in my whirling vision, until I was stunned by the intense pain of slamming again and again against things I couldn't see, everything a noisy blur. I heard his psychotic laughter filling my ears, mocking me.

Amongst the tortured scream of metal, I felt myself being sent crashing through the windscreen of the train. Bitter temperatures washed over my already numbed body. My wings attempted to spread, desperately trying to catch the savage wind. Instead, they simply made me spin madly, as both the burning engine carriage and I were cast into a cold and dark void that dropped away over the edge of the cliff; my scream lost to the empty air.

A hard floor clanged beneath my chin as I tripped and went clattering across the ground. My hooves felt like lead, numb and tired. Everything looked blurry. Just a vague red and grey haze around me in... in a hallway? A street? Where... what was I?

Somepony nearby was breathing hard. Galloping. They passed by me, stopped... came back. Hooves wrapped around my neck, tugging me. I could hear somepony shouting in my ears, crying for me to get up and keep going!

Somehow, just *anypony* asking it of me got me up. They supported me, a soft touch yet so determined and eager. Their voice was just muffled. A mare's? S-sis'?

I could hear ponies behind me, dull drifting sounds of chase and bloodthirsty cries. An overwhelming fear passed through me. We were fleeing from something, knowing that to be caught would be worse than a quick death! Why did I know that?

Wha... what was happening?

We fell again, together. Holding onto one another as we tumbled and rolled, careening down something to a soft ground. We stood up, *together*, supporting one another.

So far to go. We wouldn't make it?

Make it where?

I felt the touch of another pony fading, felt the world drifting away as cold, sharp ice cut into my body and I felt my throat swell. Pain... such pain as it broke the ice and let me surface back to—

—*life!*

I gasped, convulsing and making spasms on the spot. My eyes flickered open to see darkness above. Fierce flames were spread around me in the thick of a heavy snowfall, their embers drifting with the cold white through the air in the pitch darkness of midnight. The train, devastated and scattered all across a deep snow field, was burning and snapping as the wood fell apart.

I felt so cold. So very cold. I'd landed in a snowdrift amongst the wreckage, half a foot below the surface with the falling snowflakes already settling over me.

The pain properly hit the moment I tried to move out of it. I cried out, a hoof going to my side when I felt a hot lance pierce through me. Daring to look down, I saw a shard of metal stuck into me. I was covered in bruising. A rib felt broken. I couldn't see right through one eye!

Panic. Panic from pain was rising! I barely even felt the sudden wracking cough growing in my throat until I sprayed a light mist of red across the deep snow drift that had saved my life, just as well as it was now slowly killing me. I had to move...

It made me cry. It made me whine and squeal, but I got up. The grappling hook by my side had stopped the shard of metal digging in any further. It was small, I could still trot.

Staggering, dizzy, and tired; I moved through the wreckage. I cried out for my friends. The carriages at the back looked more intact! They could be alive! There weren't any bodies around!

Convulsing, I fell to my side and crunched into the soft powder again. My lungs felt huge inside me, swollen and sore! The stabbing pain in my side getting worse every time I hacked and spluttered. Crawling, using the snow to grasp and drag myself along, I moved among

the fires, trying to find something! Anything!

There!

The carriage we had been in! I saw the box Old Grizzly had brought! Step by step, I made my way toward it, seeing that little purple glow sticking out of the snow. My hooves were already getting numb with my short size sending them deep under the top layer. The wind kept blowing my mane across my face. Outside of the fires, I could see nothing, no great vista as I had before, just a dark void punctured by the occasional shadow of a tree.

Almost falling, I grasped the box, tugging it upright to see purple objects fall out. Two healing potions! I forced myself up onto a length of iron sheared from the train to get myself out of the snow, and bit down hard on a piece of wood. This wouldn't be pretty, but I knew it *had* to be done!

"Come on, Murky..." I muttered to myself, gritting my teeth into the wood. "You're strong now! You survived being impaled in a Pit! You can—"

I reached down, pulling the shard free of myself.

In some time, I hadn't quite shrieked and squealed like that. Blood leaked from my side, my cries turning into a sick coughing before I greedily downed both potions, pouring a quarter of one onto the wound itself. I didn't care what amounts were needed, I just wanted all of it! I had no time to worry about rationing, if I didn't get enough in the first place, I'd never get out of this.

Quickly, the pain began to fade as the strong magic did its work, the tingle as my flesh reknitted into a tender, closed wound. That dealt with, I dragged my saddlebag open, grateful that it was still with me, so that I could down the entire contents of my canteen, about a quarter left.

With that, I lay back on the slab of metal. I had time now, time to think. Sweating from the fires so close to me, even while shivering as that very sweat tingled in the cold winds, I wrapped my wings and tail around me. What to do?

The front engine carriage was down here, shattered and burning. Looking up, I could see flames from others still at the top of some giant slope. The ones my friends had been in must have rolled more gently. They weren't utterly smashed like the front engine. There was some comfort in that. There weren't any corpses around, I smelled no burning flesh. This had been their carriage! My friends likely weren't dead! If *I* had survived that in the front car, they likely were injured but *alive*. If I waited here, I had something to keep me out of the snow and fires to stay warm! Wait till morning, find my friends! They'd come back to look here, I knew it!

Almost on cue, I heard movement nearby. Somepony spluttering as they shoved aside some metal. I stood up, wincing as I did and looked over toward the driver's cab. Protégé?

The sight of somepony came into view. A stallion. A large one. *Brim!*

Nope.

I thought it was just the snow, but that white coat began to get clearer the more I looked at it. I didn't want to be left alone with him! Wildcard had lived! He was right over there!

"I don't see any gorgeous little pegasus bodies!"

His head looked around. I crouched low behind the metal plate. The shape moved around the wreck, magic lifting a machete from near to him and tapping on every metal surface as he searched.

"That means we get to play hide and go scream! Come on little birdy!" He laughed gleefully, quickly looking around every bit of scrap, even those far too small for me to hide

below. I could see the horrible wounds, burns, and spilled blood across him. He didn't even seem to care!

I... no, I couldn't stay here. He'd find me long before morning.

Yet as I looked into that darkness, I couldn't help but remember what Protégé had said about this place. About the snow.

"Come out, come out! Come play with me! I said *come out!*" Wildcard's voice dropped, and he angrily threw aside some scrap. Fuming, he picked up the pace and stormed around. "You don't wanna play with me, huh? You little fucking rat! *Why not!? Everyone always plays with me, but you won't! COME HERE!*"

That was enough incentive to go. The murderous rage set him galloping around, squealing like a pig and stamping on places I might have managed to fit into! Turning, I galloped off toward the heavy plumes of smoke, trying to stay hidden as I got away from the site.

The snow sank beneath me, and I almost fell; my side hurt so bad. My chest did too, my bandages soaking through from Wildcard's last encounter with me. Gasping with the pain, I couldn't do anything but limp, galloping was too much for me. Every metre I would look over my shoulder, and see him moving around back there.

Slowly, I pulled myself away, heading into the black. I tried to stick to rocks to stay out of the snow, but it was so deep! Wildcard became a blur through the smoke. He stopped shouting, and I simply heard his blade sliding over rocks. My heart clenched in terror, I had no cover, I simply had to get enough distance before he came this way. His whoops started up again, echoing around.

I felt the snowfall pick up, but quickly realised that conclusion was wrong. I just was far from the fires that it wasn't melting in the air now. It got in my eyes, landed on my back, made everything damp! My fleece felt thick and heavy, and I had to pull out my goggles just to see better. Slowly, the fire got further away, becoming just a pale glow through the mist, as I simply headed *away* from wherever I heard Wildcard. He too was venturing out, squealing in the darkness, insulting me. Sometimes shouting that he saw me before I heard him hacking at a tree.

Gradually, his voice faded too.

Before long, I couldn't even see the fire.

I passed trees, worked around rocks, and moved into the mountain's landscape. I hadn't realised how *cold* it could get. The fires had kept me warmed but out here it was...

I couldn't feel my hooves.

Every step, they trudged right up to my underbelly. The pain faded on my side as everything began to lose feeling. My teeth hurt from chattering, my loose tooth shaking about. I needed a rock to get on to stay out of it. I had to.

Looking around, I realised I couldn't even see more than a foot in any direction. There were no lamps, no lights, no moon to show me the way. This was the deep wilderness, where night was absolute. Even my eyes, so used to working in darkness, had nothing to see by. Occasionally, I'd stumble across a tree, then a group of them. I realised I was nearing the edge of a thick forest, invisible to me until I was right beside the ghostly snow-coated trees.

Gradually, I began to feel a burning sensation in my throat. My rad-sores tingled, stinging on my snout and leg.

"Oh please, no, no..."

I had to head back. Wildcard would be gone! I couldn't survive out here! Then I realised I

didn't even know which way that was. I wasn't sure if I'd curved or not when running away from him. I tried to find my hoofprints, but the snow had already covered them further back than a hundred metres or so!

I was lost.

Unable to think straight, I tried to gallop. In a flurry of snow, I only ended up tripping. My whole skull felt thick and clotted. A headache began to pound so hard that against the low whipping of wind it felt like drums. A light cough started as my throat began to itch. My chest tingled.

"Glimmer!"

I cried out, before roughly coughing. I screamed again. And again after every minute or unsteady trotting. The snow was building and I was having to fight to stay on top of it. The wet slosh was coating my body as I struggled to find a way to... to anywhere. I tried to look at my PipBuck, Glimmer said the map worked, yet all I found was that it had been covered in a veil of slush. I couldn't see anything on its faded screen. Even wiping it off, it held nothing but blank surface up here.

"Coral! Brim!" I shouted to the mountain, expecting no reply as hope began to drain from me. The fear truly began to set in. I had to be a long way from the train by now. I was...

I was so alone.

I moved idly in a circle, hoping to find some sort of direction, but I found nothing but more trees, not even any fallen ones I could shelter under. Taking clumsy steps, I slipped and trampled my way along, accompanied only by the howling of the icy wind and the crunch of my hooves. I clutched myself every few steps, hopelessly trying to warm up, my head pounding. I couldn't even see right, my swollen eye making me half blind, as though this wasn't already impossible to see through.

Yet, eventually, as I rounded the edge of the forest, my hooves found an uphill slope. Perhaps I could make it to the sharper mountain cliffs if I headed up? I could find shelter!

Struggling, I heaved myself forward, trying to head upward. Every few steps I staggered, coughing and choking. I had to keep wiping my goggles with my sleeve as they misted up. With my little light on the PipBuck, I tried to see anything, but the snow just reflected the light back in and almost blinded me. Yet it showed me I was right, there was a slope! I had to go uphill and find rock walls, even if I realised I had no idea if where I'd wandered out to still faced them or not.

I had to try. I didn't have a choice.

The memories of my coma induced dreaming were faded, but I couldn't help but remember the feeling of an empty wasteland with nopony to meet.

Long minutes passed, time a mystery to me as I just kept trying to keep move upwards. To climb this mountain. It took me minutes to move a few meagre feet. Every step growing heavier, I eventually realised that I couldn't even feel the ground.

And then I didn't even realise that my body was shaking so much that I'd fallen over until I saw the way the snow was falling, my numb limbs idly kicking at the hole I'd made in my collapse. I couldn't see. Couldn't think. Lazily raising a hoof, I tried to pull myself onward with the snow beating down on my face. I felt so helpless, a million miles from anywhere I knew in a cold, forested tundra.

The feeling grew inside me, the fear moving with it. I knew the sensation by now. My stomach churned and grew hot, a strange feeling amongst the chill world. My chest thumped, and I found I couldn't breathe in. It erupted hard, a spasm of my entire body as I

fell again to my side, wheezing and coughing. I saw red fall onto the snow, again and again. It kept growing. My nose felt blocked, my throat running hot and bitter with metallic iron... I...

The coughs kept coming, a bubbling filling my throat. *I couldn't breathe!* I felt blood running back down my throat, clogging into me! Desperation filled me. I started flailing with my hooves, dragging myself up through the snow, inch by inch. Please, find something! I started sucking hard, trying to swallow down and get *any* air in. I sucked out of my canteen, tried anything.

In the minute and a half it took me to finally lose control of my body from lack of oxygen, I made it another ten feet, crawling before finally collapsing in the snow. It began to fall atop me, burying me while I lay twitching and terrified. I couldn't feel anything other than my burning throat as I laid my head down, only moving when my body convulsed, before lying still when all efforts to get any air failed.

A fever dream mixed in with a numbing cold. I dreamed of no true images, no ponies aiding me or Stable Dwellers shooting slavers. I merely felt enclosed, trapped; an abstract sense of being unable to move or breathe played out with every second feeling longer. It was like back in the crater, when I had passed out, only much, much worse.

Something was tugging at me, making my body shift and move uncomfortably. It hurt and I moaned loudly.

Then something hurt my ears. A noise. Somepony screaming in my ear for me to wake up. I felt something jammed into my mouth, an acidic taste washing into my throat and making me choke and retch. I vomited hot blood, falling back into the cold reality around me. The calm of the dreaming broken as snow lashed against my face and I felt that same object thrust into my lips again. Citric burning flowed down my throat, yet with it brought a calming chill, separate from the cold, that eased the harsh swelling within me.

The last barriers of unconsciousness shattered away.

"Murk!" Somepony screamed into my ear again, knowing it would be heard much more!

I grasped the sachet, my hooves lazily pawing around it. I choked and coughed again and again, the fight between RadAway and my sickness wracking my body harshly. Opening my eyes, I couldn't see much through my misted and snow-filled goggles, but I could see my own body, the exposed flesh of my wound pale as a corpse from the cold.

Hooves were pulling at me, just like in my dream. I felt myself being lifted and thrown over somepony's back. I wearily clutched around their neck. Finally, I dropped the empty sachet and tried to breathe, a thick and entirely unsatisfying wheeze making its way in. Any oxygen was a shock to the system.

The pony beneath me was moving, struggling hard as he moved forward. I clung to them, my back legs drooped to either side of their torso. Only with a flash of red and black did I realise who it was. I could see an eyepiece blinking, pointing back toward me.

"P-Pro..."

"Hang on, Murk. Just hang on!"

It seemed to take hours. It could have been minutes. He carried me uphill, in an entirely different direction to where I'd gone. We moved past clumps of trees until I felt the wind lessen, a looming rock wall growing ahead of us. Near to it, through my mostly blocked

goggles, I saw the black gap of a cave. Two figures were looking out of it. One ran out, azure blue magic carrying a thick blanket.

There had never been any sweeter feeling than seeing my sister's face as the warmth of a heated fabric was wrapped around me, carrying me out of the wind and into the cave.

Finally, in a better way this time, I passed out knowing I would be all right.

"It would have to be you, wouldn't it, eh?"

I sat shivering in a blanket, sucking deep on a packet of RadAway. Before me a fire glowed in the cave and kept most of the outside air's freezing temperatures out. Technically it was destroying my night vision to stare into it, but I just didn't care. It looked warm and I wanted to *feel* warm.

Glimmerlight sat beside me, a hoof around me and another blanket draped over her as well.

"If *any* of us were going to be the one who got thrown away from the rest and got lost, it *would* be you and your luck. I'm just glad you still had your PipBuck. Protégé wouldn't have found you otherwise."

Yes, Protégé. He'd saved my life for sure. Not just me even. His E.F.S. had been the one to detect spot most of the others and group them together until they found the cave. My sister, Brimstone, Coral, and her son Chirpy had all made it here. The mother and son were huddled at the back, Chirpy silent after the horrible shock to his system. He held close to his mother's chest, as she gently stroked his mane over and over. Her face looked as traumatised as her son after having to carry him through that. Brimstone was near the entrance of the cave, staring out into the black void and little wisps of snowy white in the air that whirled in the blizzard outside.

Of Grizzly and Ragini, nothing was known.

Protégé was near us, helping build the fire to ward off his own chill. Everypony looked weak. I saw a few empty healing potions in the corner, and yet most still bore a good few bruises. It turned out that Glimmer had protected Chirpy with her body in the crash, and taken quite a bad slam in doing so. Protégé had fallen back into the second wagon, explaining why he hadn't gone out with me. Thankfully, aside from the front engine carriage, the rest hadn't gone right off the edge of the small cliff like mine did, instead sliding and rolling after the twisted rail caught them. My friends had gotten clear either before the fall or had been thrown from the train in the crash. Only the one I'd been in had plummeted right away.

If I hadn't been thrown clear through the window...

"Here, keep drinking, Murk." Protégé lifted a purple potion to me. "Can you see through your eye again?"

"A-a bit."

My body still ached. I'd still been recovering as it was, and even after three potions it still didn't feel right. At the very least, I wasn't in any danger anymore. Vision had yet to fully return to my right eye and it all felt swollen. I felt worried, this wasn't the first time it had happened to my eye, yet the feeling of worrying about any long lasting problems felt trivial, given what slavery had done to my body over the years anyway.

"Yes." I muttered to Glimmer. "It would be me."

"Hey, don't feel down about that, lil'bro." She smiled and gave me a careful squeeze. "As I hear it, you got all the way back up from that lower part of the mountain by yourself in conditions that, by all rights, should have dropped you *much* earlier than it did. Hell, I'm impressed."

I blinked, looking up at her with wide eyes. "R-really?"

"Just the wild stallion within driving you on, Murky. You're stronger than you think you are."

All the same, I saw her looking a little worried. I'd been around Glimmer long enough to see it in her eyes.

"We'll get you out. I'm not going to lose you to some disease when we're *this* close. We'll make it. We will."

"I... I'll try."

"Just, hang on, okay?" She leaned down and hugged me. "I know it's getting worse. But we'll keep finding you that RadAway. Not long now, just *hang on*... please..."

She stayed close to me for a little, before patting my shoulder and getting up to go back to her work. She'd recovered a few weapons from the wreckage before they got away, and now spent time trying to keep them clean from all the ice forming over them. I simply tugged my blanket in closer and went back to sipping that foul orange juice to quell the burning in my lungs and throat. I had to go into the back of the cave twice already to throw up and I didn't much feel like it again.

Still, I managed to feel a little better from Glimmer's words. Coral nodded in agreement, before going back to coddling her son. The poor thing barely knew what was happening. All around me, those in the cave were huddling as best they could. It was freezing in here. The walls were lined with a thin layer of ice, and I could feel the hard stone floor numbing me where I sat. I'd tried to just sit quiet and draw with my journal open in front of me, but it wasn't any good. My teeth kept dropping the charcoal.

"S-so, what do we d-do now, Protégé?" I still chattered as I tried to resist the chill of a gust of wind. It swept through the cave past me, and whipped the fire to one side.

"We can't go back out there, n-not now." I saw him bite his lip, pulling fabric over himself, much like all the others. "We'll need to last the night first, and it's only g-going to get colder as the weather front closes in. In the morning, we'll make a decision."

"Colder!?" I squeaked a little, before coughing badly.

I heard Brimstone shift back from the entrance and stomp across to the fire before setting down. "Aye. The wind's getting stronger out there. Temperature's going to drop hard. Just keep the fire up."

Protégé didn't look up but simply nodded blithely, and prodded at the fire a little more. We had a small stack of wood drying beside it that Brimstone had brought in. He was the only one of us properly able to resist the cold out there for any length of time. Brimstone occasionally went for wood; Protégé worked the fire, and managed to produce a small book to distract himself; and Glimmer kept working on our equipment using said warmth. After a little time, she took my battle saddle from me to straighten out the broken parts of it. Seeing the mouthpiece all bent like that genuinely made me feel quite sad. It was *my* saddle I'd always wanted.

Instead of just simply sitting watching her, I moved over to Coral and Chirpy.

"Is he all right?" I spoke to Coral, sitting in front of her and looking at the shivering little foal.

"He's with me." She spoke flatly, as though that's all that needed be said.

Chirpy looked at me and, bless his little heart, tried to smile a little. "H-hello mister assistant Murky."

"Hi, Chirpy." I leaned over and stroked his mane a little. Truth be told, I was feeling a little protective of him myself. I didn't like seeing foals in hardship. "You gave us a little s-scare back on the train, in that b-box."

I tried to laugh with it, but he just quaked. "I didn't want t-to make anyone angry. I just wanted to help. You're not angry, are you, mom?"

Coral Eve took a second before shaking her head and clutching him close under the rugs they had over them. "No, darling, not at you."

"Is it b-because I got my cutie mark without you there?" The poor thing looked on the verge of tears, like he was suddenly afraid he'd done everything wrong these past months.

"No! No, it's not. Mommy's just... just missed you."

"I missed you too, mom."

I bit my lip, trying not to intrude. Yet, I could see how upset all this with Chirpy made Coral. If I could maybe even help a little to break the ice on it and help repair this.

"H-how did you get your cutie mark, Chirpy?" I attempted a cheerful tone, and winced internally as I saw Coral's glance at me. I hoped she'd see my point, and let him talk. It was better than nothing. It had to be.

The colt struggled and sat up a little, he looked to Coral as though to see if she agreed to him talking, and saw her nod.

"Well, I... I was in the classroom? We were learning things about how to build stuff, o-okay? All the numbers and angles and cool stuff like that! They were, um, using a lot of really cool things I didn't know yet! I learned to do trigonometry!"

Trigo-what-now? Oh great, there was a ten year old in the cave and I was *still* the least educated pony for miles.

Chirpy it seemed was getting more into it, looking at myself and Coral alternately as he spoke, gaining speed and volume as it gave him something to think about other than the trauma he'd been through.

"It was really complex and I had so much fun! The teachers s-said I was a natural. Then we did things like... um, like, weights and measuring how much materials could take or hold up! We got to make little things with clay blocks and bricks! Then we learned what makes archways stay up and how to make safety rails really strong!"

Forget it. That decided it. Red Eye was the best thing to ever happen to the wasteland if *that* last thing was what he was teaching kids.

It was about that moment, to my surprise, I saw the others were looking over too. Even Brimstone, albeit at a diplomatic distance on the opposite side of the fire from them, turned his ear to it all. Chirpy looked a little taken aback by the attention, before continuing.

"Well there, uh, there was this teacher who came in and he was doing architecture with us! We didn't like him 'cos he was stinky and shouted at us if we did it wrong. But, um, he marked my test? It was right but he said it was wrong! He was trying to say it's the big side squared that's equal to the square root of the other two sides squared! But it's actually just the length of the big side if you're square rooting the other two first! You don't square it too, if you have a square root in the equation already!"

Chirpy coughed, pulling his blanket away a little to show his cutie mark. "Then, uh, he sort of didn't say anything for a while as he worked on it, then this appeared and everypony

knew I was right.”

I saw Coral’s face flush with abject pride as she heard her little colt reel off things that I imagined neither her nor I got. However, I did see both Protégé and Glimmer grin widely and nod.

“Well done, Chirpy.” Protégé spoke warmly. “I believe I know who you meant too. I may have to remind him of that should I need amusement someday. When you next see hi—”

“Excuse me?” Coral’s eyes narrowed, darting up to Protégé’s. I saw the slaver flinch. Of course, that moment on the train had been cut rather short. The two shared glances, a tension growing in the room as I heard Glimmer pause her work and look over.

After a few seconds, Protégé turned away and went back to tinkering with his eyepiece between his hooves, clearly not having meant to say it, and regretting the habitual instinct. Coral Eve watched him for a few seconds before simply sighing.

“Well done, my dear. I always knew you’d be a smart colt. I’m proud of you.”

“Aww, thanks mom.” He bashfully leaned into his own shoulder, before he leaned up and hugged her tight. “I don’t know what made you angry. I just want everything to be happy.”

“It will be. It will be.” She stroked the back of his mane, mouthing a quiet ‘thank you’ to me.

Wow. Had I actually made the right choice in helping someone with words?

“Well, well...” Glimmerlight snapped the mouthpiece back into place on my saddle. “We heard your little story, Chirpy. We already know Murky’s too. Hey Brim, how’d you gets yours then?”

“For what reason?” He rumbled, looking out and guarding the entrance again.

Glimmer sighed and rolled her eyes at the rest of us. “Look, we’re all stuck in this dank cave freezing cold till morning. We can either sit depressed or have something to keep us going. So come on, how did *you* get that beast of a mark?”

Brim looked back, around at the rest of us and seemed to sigh in exasperation. I didn’t imagine his mentality dealt with tough times by sharing stories very much.

“When I killed my first pony. Not much older than the colt there. Father had broken the back of this town over near the Everfree, and we’d all moved into it. Looting, selling off prisoners; usual stuff. I saw this little green-haired filly, one of the villagers, trying to pull her toy back off Limb Hack. He one of the young bucks in the clan at the time, and son of my father’s biggest rival; till that rival became me anyway.”

He grunted and adjusted how he was sitting, his one eye staring into the fire.

“Hack fell when she pulled it back off him. He got his knife out just before I went for him. At the time, I only wanted to kick the shi—”

Brimstone paused at Coral’s careful cough.

“Hmph, fine... wanted to beat him up because he kept trying to push me around for being younger, despite being almost as big as him already. Quick grower, heh.”

I saw him smirk at some memory.

“Stomped him down from behind. Didn’t care about the filly, just wanted an excuse to take him down. Only after it was done, that filly thanked me and galloped off out the town. Dunno what happened to her. Got my mark after that. Thought it was cos I beat a rival. Father said it was.”

Glimmerlight trotted over, patting the side of his enormous shoulder. “But now you’re older you see what it actually meant. A shield?”

“Bloody, broken, rusted. Not something you’d see a hero carry. Fits me then. Figured it

out years later, but of course I couldn't let that on to the Clan. You don't show weakness. You don't show hesitation. You *rule* You *kill*. Only one pony I ever mentioned it to was in the late days when I was getting tired and old. The one pony in the Clan who I knew wouldn't see it as weakness."

I blinked a little at that. One pony? Hmm.

It was something of a surprise to me that Chirpy didn't seem afraid of Brimstone. He simply sat wide-eyed and listened to the story. Perhaps Protégé had explained things long ago? Or his mother and Glimmer had before I got to the cave?

"Mom, how did you get yours?"

That was that then. The thing to keep us all occupied and distracted from the rapidly dropping temperature was to be cutie mark stories. Slowly, we all ended up closer to the fire, sharing in its warmth as Coral told her tale. That it was off in another village, one far from Creaky Hollow, that she grew up in. How she had, even as a filly, been the one to watch out for the other foals she played with, and matured quickly to take care of them as the eldest of the children.

"Yet, it wasn't until somepony tried to take one of them away that I really figured it out, my first time properly using telekinesis that tore the colt from that slaver's grasp and back to me before we ran. That's when this thing appeared."

My eyes shifted to her cutie mark, that tidal wave shape. I wasn't sure I got it. Her magic only became like that after her horn rot damaged her control of it.

She must have seen me looking, for she gently explained.

"Water is life, Murky. At the top of it all, it's what takes care of us all as much as air itself. I realised then that it's because I wanted to help other ponies to grow. I felt responsible for them, because I wanted to see them be better than what the wasteland was offering them."

Glimmerlight nudged her on the shoulder. "And the wave shape to remind nopony to underestimate their power and start messing with them, just like the tidal waves!"

"I suppose you could say that." I saw a wistful look in Coral's eyes behind that calm smile. One way or the other, she'd lost a lot of what her magic could have been thanks to one stupid disease long ago. I knew how she felt all too readily.

I told mine again after that. My story of how I'd misinterpreted it. Protégé hadn't heard it, nor had Chirpy. My story had to pause every couple of minutes to suck on some RadAway or to shiver deeply. The cold was getting worse. I could see some of us getting paler and drawing everything we could to cover one another. Brimstone even sat right beside me to act as a windbreak, while I chattered my teeth and tried not to tear up while remembering that day on the rock farm. Yet, feeling them all around me, listening intently, I tried to cheer it up. I even tried to make a joke about how it had demolished the part of the wall that some of the other slaves had just spent time building!

A few little smiles grew amongst my friends. I saw Protégé chuckle lightly. The feeling at having said something to make that happen made my chest swell. Murky, the comedian! I could perform in Tenpony! Draw pictures by day and make everypony laugh by night, and be happy forever! Maybe I could even get a show on the radio and tell jokes to the whole wastes.

After about ten seconds, I began to realise everypony was staring at me and wondering why I was giggling madly to myself in my own overactive imagination. All except Chirpy, he was laughing with me, before stopping suddenly and looking around as he realised the 'joke' was over. Biting my lip and blushing, I tried to hide it under a cough and turned to

Glimmer.

"So um, how did you get yours?"

"Oh please." Coral chided, but I saw the little smirk at the edge of her mouth. "There are children in the cave."

"Oh come *on*, it's not that bad!" Glimmer protested back, putting hooves on hips.

There was a brief moment of staring between the two, before both just laughed. Oh how it warmed my heart more than any fire against the chill in the air to see that they were finding a little more common ground now. At least, until a whip of cold air surged through the cave. I saw everypony shiver and clutch close to themselves or somepony else. (I was just clamping onto Glimmer to warm *her*... yes, that was it)

"W-w-well." Glimmerlight ruffled my mane as I slowly let go. "It's n-not as crazy as my other stories. See, I'd been learning how to do orb work even as a f-foal. It just interested me! I kept thinking how it'd let me relive the best times of my life over and over."

I saw her clutch her rug tighter around herself. Somehow, I could guess it wasn't just from the cold.

"I guess that's not how it turned out, huh? But regardless, back then we were springing a surprise party for one of the other initiates. Only he stumbled in on it while we were setting it up! I was so disappointed. I'd even painted up a banner after 'acquiring' some paint from the stocks we weren't maybe supposed to touch. The birthday boy, though; he asked me to use my magic on him. To make him forget he'd seen it!"

Despite the cold, she smiled warmly.

"Th-that did it. H-he got a great party from the rest of the younger generation in Bucklyn. I did good with it, and gave him a memory orb of the day. Kinda what I want to do more for again. Like the one I made for you Murky."

"Hey!" Chirpy poked his head out of the veritable cocoon of fabric his mother had wrapped him in. "C-can you make one for me!? I wanna remember the time we went out and pretended we were saving a Princess from that cave in the woods!"

Something about seeing that look on Glimmer's face as he asked made me feel warmer than any fire. She laughed, agreeing to do so once we got back.

"So what about you?"

Glimmer had spoken again, her head turned toward Protégé. The unicorn looked up, as though surprised somepony asked.

"M-me?"

"Yeah! How did you get that big ornate cutie mark anyhow?"

I saw him look rather unsure, his eyes turning away. He sat a bit apart from anypony else, his dark coat making him seem a little faded in the cave.

"It's... not worth mentioning."

"Aw, c'mon!" Glimmer encouraged him.

"Really! I mean it!" His voice turned sharper, his head looking to the side. "Just... just while reading something about the past. It appeared then. Th-that's all..."

There was an odd silence. The awkward look on his face said a lot about how little he was describing about that mark he had. The mark of the circling Princesses, simplified as it may be. Yet overlayed with that unusual red eye in the middle. I understood how the past might relate to the Princesses, but that eye made no sense. He got it as a foal, but didn't meet Red Eye till long after. I had a few thoughts about the eye, none I wanted to dare ask.

My mane whipped up, and I heard almost everypony else gasp as a frigid chill raced

through the cave from the outside. The fire spluttered, almost blowing out; and without it I began to feel that icy creep of the temperature in the near pitch darkness. Chirpy squeaked and clutched in close to his mother.

"We must rest." Protégé stated it rather clearly. "We won't be any use tomorrow for this if we are all running on no sleep. We'll take watches, keep the fire going large."

"I'll take first watch." Brimstone rumbled and trotted to the side of the cave to cover it as much he could. "Pair up. Body heat will help more than anything right now."

To be honest, sleep sounded good about now. My body was weak and tired after everything in the last day and that horrid climb in the snow. I saw Coral begin to settle, pulling the blankets around her and Chirpy. Naturally, those two paired well. That sounded good. A chance to just close my eyes, staying warm next to my sist—

I saw her already beside Brimstone, grinning madly at me. I knew exactly why.

"Oh, you're *evil*." I hissed at her, trying to look as incredulous as I could.

"I *know*." Glimmerlight only smiled innocently back.

Well, nothing for it. I trotted over, dragging my blanket around the fire to sit down beside the slaver who 'owned' me. I could never really forget that fact right now. He was throwing some thin sticks onto the fire, before shifting back against the wall and drawing the blankets up with his magic.

"Are you feeling quite recovered, Murk?" He asked it quietly when I laid down beside him, each wrapped in our own blanket as his magic dropped another one over the top of both of us. I saw Coral and Glimmer do the same for their own pairs near the fire and settle down. Brimstone kept his back to the fire, one hoof protectively around the mare at his side to keep her warm.

Of course, I could see her peeking and very likely enjoying the sight of us lying beside one another to share warmth. She and I needed to have a very big talk one of these days.

"Y-yeah. Just a sh-shock. I know how Chirpy feels."

"Happens to the best of us, Murk. Don't worry about it. We'll g-get by, like in the metro."

There was a brief silence between us at that. The metro had been a nightmare for both of us, having to go through that place *twice*. More so for Protégé, and whatever it had made him realise about himself.

"I guess." There wasn't much else I could think to say.

"However, I am glad to see you are no longer the slave you once were."

That caught me off guard. I twisted to look at him, but saw only a serious face looking back from beside me.

"Y-you are?"

"I am. Even from the start, I had wanted to see you be more like yourself. Don't you remember what I told you when we first met? That you had to taste freedom to truly know?" He smiled thinly. "I think you're starting to."

I'd never really thought of it like that. Sure, I'd told myself I was no slave of my own mind any more. That I was nopony's property. But I'd never really felt that last step of owning *true* freedom yet. Hearing that from Protégé, well, that meant a lot.

"Now settle down, get some sleep. You'll need it, I imagine."

It didn't take long for most of us to drift off, despite the cold. I saw Glimmerlight happily lounged over against her protector, warm and recovering. Chirpy went out like a light, his mother taking some time to fall asleep as she just kept staring at him in disbelief. I could see

it in her eyes. The fear that if she slept, she would wake up to him gone again. It took her some time to finally relax.

As for myself, I didn't last too long even with the cold. The fire and being close to somepony else under the blankets was enough to let me rest, even if my sleep was light and filled with restless dreams of Unity and the fear of what would happen if I didn't use this opportunity to get her back.

Just hold on, Unity. I'll be there for you.

Just like you had been for me so many times before.

I found myself waking in the middle of the night.

Slowly, I shifted, opening heavy eyes to see the fire burning bright before me. Brimstone sat watching the cave entrance like some immovable sentinel. He hadn't woken any of us.

"Murk?"

I looked to my side. Protégé lay on his front there, tired eyes looking over at me.

"Can't sleep?"

I lay down on my belly, sighing.

"I can, or could. I'm just not used to feeling like this. So much happening, so many things; such, um, scale?"

"Scale is correct."

"Yeah, such scale of everything. I just, uh, can't settle for long. All my life I was always catching small naps and knowing nothing was really happening. Now everything *is* happening, and I just don't know how to switch off."

He nodded, turning his head to look back at me more properly. I could feel him shivering through the blanket. Clearly he was as unused to the cold as I was. Heck, he probably had the same trouble sleeping as I did.

"Just try to think on something that's a constant to you, Murk. Like your friends, or your greatest dreams."

"Mhm." I nodded, seeing my journal lying to the side, a thin layer of frost over it. "Protégé can, uh, I ask something?"

He looked surprised, before slowly nodding. "Of course, as always."

"How *did* you get your cutie mark? I mean, you wouldn't have known Red Eye when you got it."

Protégé went rather still, his eyes taking on a sad and faraway look. Slowly, I felt him shift and get his hooves below him to lay more properly.

"I did not feel comfortable speaking of it amongst all listening. I'm sorry."

"I, uh, understand?"

Protégé didn't acknowledge my words at all. "Speaking to you though, as somepony who understands what it's like, I suppose I might feel better about explaining. Suffice to say, you have made a mistake. Yes, my mark bears a shape similar to that of Princess Celestia of the sun and Princess Luna of the moon, their symbol from an old world. The red eye is..."

I saw him make a gesture not common to him: a nervous biting of his lip.

"Suffice to say, times were... different when I was brought to Fillydelphia than when you were Murk. Master Red Eye was still gaining much of his control over the slavers. A great number carried out the things they did before being employed. Ways of... identifying their

slaves.”

I felt a shoot of cold down my spine. It wasn't the temperature of the cave.

“That eye is not my cutie mark, Murk.” He sighed. “It's a brand.”

I didn't even know what to say. I really didn't. Of course I wouldn't have known. Protégé had been a slave here years before myself. Any others who had fallen prey to such a horrific practice would no longer be alive in Fillydelphia's conditions by now.

“I... I'm sor—”

He continued quickly. “Yet, scar or not. It is a part of me now. I signify it in my mind, wear it proudly to cast away the terror and loss of self that they sought to impress upon me. I feel no shame...”

‘Frankly, Protégé,’ I thought to myself, ‘you don't sound it.’

Yet at this moment, I would never dare imply that out loud. The topic needed to change. If it didn't, I knew I was liable to want to blurt some awkward pity. All the same, I couldn't help but lay a hoof on his shoulder through the blankets, just to let him know he didn't have to consider it a shameful thing to talk about.

“So, you said you read something to, um, get your *real* mark. What was it?”

He settled down and made a small smile again. “The old world, Murk. A book written by Twilight Sparkle herself. ‘The Elements of Harmony, a Reference Guide, Version Two.’ Covering the history of them till our modern day. Once I finished, I saw my own mark upon my flank. After reading of Celestia and Luna, the balance of that which was once great. Yet it was not reading of peace that brought me to realising what it was I wanted to recreate. No, it was the upheaval and restoration that stemmed from it. The tale of Nightmare Moon. When an imbalance brought the land into darkness, and there lay a terrible choice at the hooves of those who could save it.”

Eyes closed as though remembering it all, he spoke in a hushed conviction, as we huddled together and tried not to wake the others with our talk. If Brimstone heard, he gave no sign.

“The older sister, Celestia, she had to bring the world to the light once more, even if that meant having to sacrifice her own sister to the moon for a thousand years to do it. To commit a dislikeable, yet necessary act for Equestria to survive. Sacrifice, Murk.”

Lying beside him, I thought back to the things my mother had told me. The stories she had imparted to me as well. I knew these myths to some degree, if hazy on names and specifics. I tilted my head, speaking slower than he was.

“But... didn't Nightmare Moon return, and was defeated by six ponies coming together and using the magic of their friendship to make a more lasting solution? You said you finished the book before seeing your mark so, um, m-maybe you got it from, uh...”

There was a silence as he looked right at me, staring through my eyes.

“...uh, that bit?”

Protégé looked at me for some long seconds, clearly thinking, before making a dismissive sound, and lay down again.

“Try and get some sleep, Murk.”

“I...”

“There is a lot to do tomorrow.”

That was that. He turned away, lying with his back against my side as I settled down beside him again to try and daze off. It actually stung me inside, and made me feel wretched to look on him. To see somepony with as much courage, intelligence, and kindness so indentured. He could have been somepony so much greater.

Please, Protégé. Why do you have to follow him? Why use that loyalty you speak so highly of on *Red Eye*?

Morning didn't feel much better than the night before.

We had left the cave promptly, Brimstone having woken us at sunrise. The big raider had taken watch all night, not holding to his word to wake anypony else up to replace him. Somehow, I had a feeling that had been his plan all along.

After a brief inventory and packing up of our things, we left anything not immediately needed in the cave and moved out into the deep snow. Heavy mountain mist ghosted in the crisp morning air around jagged rocks and steep slopes of satin white. Coral and I had crafted our woollen blankets into things we could wear, sewing rough winter barding together against the icy air.

Our mission hadn't changed. We needed to find where the trains stopped up here, and get in. Using my PipBuck and his E.F.S, Protégé led the way by waypoints and maps. Glimmerlight came behind him, alongside Brimstone and myself. To keep me from the snow, I'd spent much of the journey on Brimstone's back much in the same way Chirpy rode on Coral with his little hooves wrapped around her neck. I really hated having to be cared for like this, but my sickness left us no choice. I'd burn every bit of anti-rad medicine we had if I were to wade in that stuff again.

All the same, while I had found it a land of haunting snowy trees last night, today it almost seemed like a new world. Stunning, clear views reached out before me every time the mist cleared in the immense, mountain range. Below, I could see the slopes leading to the valley that held Fillydelphia, a sight that had be *yearning* to stop and sketch. I contented myself with just staring wide-eyed at it all, seeing the world from a new perspective up here, so close to where the clouds started. Indeed, the top of the mountain on the other side went right through the cloud layer.

I wondered what was up there.

Even as I stared up, hearing Glimmerlight and Protégé discussing directions ahead of me, my eyes caught something on a ridgeline above us. Something dark and *moving*.

"*Up!*" I screamed, pointing a hoof! Weapons were drawn, Brimstone tossed me down below him, and I saw Coral's horn light up!

Above us, that shape dived from the ridge, spinning and landing upon a tree branch next to us. The impact shaking the snow from it, bending the trunk as a jet black griffon gripped it with her talons.

"Been looking for you lot all morning. Late risers?" Ragini smirked, before nodding more respectfully at Protégé. "Plan still to go ahead?"

"Indeed." Protégé holstered his revolver, bringing my PipBuck to his face again instead. "The mining camp shouldn't be much farther. I had been hoping you'd spot us around. What of Grizzly?"

"The old stallion's up ahead scouting out the camp. We found it last night in the storm before bedding down nearby. Was considering slitting a few throats out of boredom if you didn't turn up. Follow on, I'll take you to him. This may not be easy, given what we're up against."

"Then let's take a look. Lead the way."

A couple of sharp rises and falls later, our slow trek brought us to the outskirts of Grindstone and Shackles' mining camp. I heard it before we saw it; the sounds of slavery were recognisable anywhere. Moving chains, shouted commands, and the ordered crump of hooves in unison over snow. Yet as we reached the ridgeline and Grizzly's hideout beneath a fallen tree, I got my first look.

Nestled within a sheltered basin of a plateau, the camp was definitely not built after the balefire. Well constructed wooden huts still stood strong under the snow upon their roofs. In particular, I saw one building supported on stacked stones and cement beside a railway with small cranes and offloading facilities. Another long hut seemed to be a dormitory! This wasn't just some small refuge, this had been a full facility! My eyes travelled closer to the base of the mountain's peak and saw the entrance to the mines itself.

This was no small door. Over thirty metres tall, it was a colossal mouth on the mountain itself that yawned out from the rock face. Jagged at the top, like teeth ready to snap down shut, it curved around the sides to make a wide entrance that now bore multiple tracks of minecart rails and processions of workers going in and out! I saw carts *filled* with rock, metals, and even gemstones!

"This used to be a gem mine in the times before. Impressive?"

I felt Protégé shuffle up beside me, the thick overcoats we both wore rubbing in the tiny space of Grizzly's crudely built observation shelter.

"It's, uh..."

"I figured you did find it impressive. It'd explain why your mouth was open."

Trying not to squeak, I snapped it shut and shook my head. "N-no it wasn't. I was just yawning."

"Of course." He tried to grin, but on his tired face it merely looked forced around the deep worry in his eyes. "The peak mining facility was one that was set to be Fillydelphia's next major source of local material. Saves a ton on import fees, I'd presume. Only it got bought out by the Ministry of Arcane Science on account of the high gem yields found within. Not much other documentation, given it only went active and operational a few days before the world ended. I don't think the Ministry even got official confirmation that it was theirs."

And yet Aurora had been up here *long* before that, I would bet.

I felt myself squashed to the side, Old Grizzly pushing his unsubtle bulk into the post with us. Pressed between them, I could only squeak when either moved. The old stallion looked down at the station.

"You want to get in there, Protégé?"

"That would be the plan, yes. We need to find whatever it is they want from Aurora to get that door in Ministry Station open and keep it for Master Red Eye, not their little coup."

Old Grizzly shuffled back a little, turning to look at the younger slaver. "You really think this could become an all-out coup, kid?"

"Master Grizzly, you didn't see what was down in that metro. The old memory machines, the clandestine research, and the effect in the very air itself. The influence with such a facility would see them ready to make a claim for power. If any number of my theories are correct about that place, it would give Shackles a foundation to claim Fillydelphia in Master

Red Eye's absence."

"Very well."

Hearing Protégé talk of that, I could feel the shiver he made close beside me. I had to talk to him directly about that all. I was the only pony who could possibly understand it. Who had shared it all both in and out. Compared to the stern and confident slavemaster I'd known in the weeks before, it felt almost wrong to see him so fragile, no matter how he spoke or tried to hide it.

There was a shoving from behind. I whimpered and felt myself being shoved down a little as somepony else crammed in. Glimmerlight giggled and shimmied in right on top of me to get to the front, resting her chin on my head after ruffling my mane.

"See? Plenty of room! I've snuggled with more ponies in smaller spaces after a party in Friendship City!" Glimmerlight winked at the three of us. "So what we got?"

"I'd make a joke about three and a half ponies in a post I built for two," muttered Grizzly, winking at me, "but I think I count as two in my old age. Anyway..."

Grizzly cast a hoof out, pointing around the facility he's been watching.

"We've got the entire place rounded by a mesh fence topped with wire. Guard posts on each corner, a sealed gate, and ponies watching over the main entrance itself. Slavers trotting everywhere and an old bell I'm guessing they're using as an alarm. There's been some poor sod stuck out in the cold all night manning it."

I cast my eyes out over the camp itself, following each of the defences he had spotted. Grizzly was right, this was a pretty secure area up on the mountain. I could see a group of bushes leading up to the wire though. I knew at least I could have gotten to the fence itself if it were just me or maybe one other pony. I'd go along that iced up riverbed, stick below those rocks...

Yeah, I could do that. I wouldn't *want* to, but I was allowed to think of plans too even if I was too much of a coward to actually carry them out!

"Hey! Look lads and ladettes! Da boss is back!"

I heard the shout from the encampment below, shuffling forward a little from under Glimmerlight to stare down. A small group of raiders came pouring out of the dormitory, rushing across the snow toward the gate. Shrinking back a little, I saw the crazed form of Wildcard sauntering through, dragging a gutted mountain beast behind him. It looked like a tusked boar with thick fur.

"Brunch is on me! Carry it in! Get all the thigh bones out! I *hate* thigh bones! Leave the hips though! I *like* the hips!"

"Yes, boss! Dis is gonna be great!"

They were *his* raiders, like the ones in Glimmer's orb!

My sister stayed silent, hunching down low to watch them with me, and seeing those tattooed and pierced monstrosities that called themselves ponies stagger around. They worked with frightening speed to strip and skin the beast right in front of everypony else, like animals! Two of them poured alcohol over the still raw meat, occasionally drinking it themselves. or injecting and crunching more devious substances into both their own bodies or the carcass.

They were drugged into a permanent state of insanity, following the look of their chief, Wildcard. Even as I watched, two played some game with a knife stabbing around their hooves, trying to go faster and closer before it sank deep into the flesh.

The raider merely laughed instead of screamed, holding the limb up with the knife in it,

his other hoof pointing to it like a puppet as he made it jiggle.

"Kid, I'm not seeing a way in here. Harsh as it is to tell. If we'd been on that train then *maybe* in the night we coulda' slunk in but now? With all this in daylight?"

"There *has* to be a way, Grizzly." Protégé seethed, clenching his teeth as his eyes looked for a way in. "This is the only way in, we have to make it work!"

Grizzly snorted, casting a glance behind us where Coral waited with Chirpy, Brim, and Ragini. "Not going to be easy if we don't even know who's on our side."

"Hey!" Glimmer snapped, leaning over me in the tiny area. "That's her son, what did you *expect*?"

I looked from side to side as they snapped at one another. About who attacked who. About keeping it together. It was all above me, a distant argument as focused on the camp instead.

Something didn't seem right. Sundial had said he went through a *small* door. That was anything but small! I tried to look for a second way in, one that might fit his description, but nothing caught my eye.

Something else, however, did.

Some*pony* else did.

I almost shoved past the others, pulling Grizzly's binoculars from his hooves to look through them. He didn't even notice as he half argued with Glimmer and Protégé over how to go about this. I'd seen a whiff of orange and red hair! There, between those huts!

I adjusted the focus. A rather amateur attempt, but after a few tries I finally got something resembling a clear look.

Down between two huts, the colours stood out to me all too clearly. Chained to a doorway, lying on her side below a frayed blanket, I saw Unity! They had her up here already and she was still outside! I fought the urge to rush through with my own plan to sneak in immediately. She looked so cold! Shivering and dirty, her mane unkept and bedraggled. Yet I saw her defiantly stare any slaver that passed her in the eye.

I quietly muttered to myself with a smile, "You go, Unity..."

Behind me, the argument continued.

"If we go in one at a time, we'll get spotted early."

"Yet if we all go at once, we get spotted together."

I held a hoof up. "Um, I... I..."

"Brute force will only get us so far too, Protégé. Think a distraction could clear a way for some of us to go inside?"

"M-maybe if w-we, uh..." I tried to make myself heard.

"Yeah, and then who gets left in the killer snow, huh?" Glimmerlight looked at him seriously, "You need everypony you can get in there."

"Excuse me everypony, I'm so sorry but I—"

I realised they had all suddenly looked at me, and I felt far too much in the spotlight.

"...I mean, um, I might have an idea."

"Absolutely preposterous!" Grizzly hissed his words. "How are we meant to trust something based on a *nothing* that you heard in some diary?"

We all sat in cover, a few hundred metres away from the camp to discuss my idea. I hadn't

even finished telling it when Grizzly had spoken out.

"You want to sneak in there, get one particular slave, get back *out* again, and then locate something we don't even know exists!?"

"I trust him!"

"Trust *who*?" Grizzly threw up his hooves. "Protégé, our best bet is to wait for darkness. Find the next supply train and use that to sneak inside. There is no other method in."

"But there, um, *is!*" I blushed, almost falling back behind Glimmerlight. "And It's not all of us! It'll just be, uh, me. I'll sneak in and get Unity out. You all can search for the other way in! It's there, I swear it has to be! There must be something else near to the station, in the rock face or something!"

"If the squirt wants to get that pony out, then he's going to." Brimstone drowned everypony out rather easily, that empty eye socket staring down Grizzly. "Murky isn't the sharpest tool in the city with some things, but if he says he trusts something, I believe him."

I sat almost in disbelief. I'd never imagined Brim held that much faith in me.

"As do I." Coral spoke up, moving behind me. "It only stands to reason to try. You want to wait for nightfall so we can huddle down and barely survive again? Fine. We can hunt until then for this other door."

"Frankly, I'm not sure what you say is worth much anymore, pony." Ragini simmered from nearby at Coral, "After that stunt you pulled on the train. Attacking your master, you're lucky I don't just take you off and—"

"Just *try*."

Old Grizzly threw his hooves up.

"Enough! We need every pony we can get, distrust or not." His voice snapped at them both, and he stared them both down. "I don't like your tone, slave. You better learn your place, more allowing slavers present or not. But I equally will not have you throw this away on petty distaste, Ragini. Both of you understand? Just can it. Now, Protégé?"

I saw Coral sit without a change in expression. Grizzly began looking to Protégé as though for aid.

The unicorn sat quietly, before nodding. "Coral Eve is correct. It merely makes logical sense to search for this secondary door while we have the time to do so. What else would we be doing? However, Murk, I am concerned about this idea of yours. Do you really understand the danger? That is *Shackles'* camp now. If you're caught—"

"I really want to help her."

To my great surprise, he smiled. Standing up, he moved to the outer edge of the shallow ground we'd cleared of snow. "I understand, Murk. I witnessed your passion to help those you care about in Ministry Station. If you wish to do this, I cannot stop you. Given what you say about this mare, about how Grindstone seems to have appropriated her, it leads me to believe that perhaps she has a greater role to their plans than we may be appreciating. Taking away an asset to them could perhaps aid our own quest here."

That was a point. I'd never thought about that before, why they had lied about her stallion to get her again. Was it something to do with her special talent? I didn't even truly understand it yet. What was it she'd said?

"*I told you my special talent was bringing ponies together, Murky. This is how I do it. To create objects that forever remain as a link between ponies.*"

Create objects as a link. A memory? I toyed with that statue in my hands. It was true that sometimes when I held it, I remembered Unity better, I felt more honest with myself when I

remembered the times.

Did Unity know memory magic in a way I didn't understand yet? If even possibly true, she *had* to meet Glimmer. My sister would figure it all out.

Protégé nodded at me and the rest, clustered in our little hole.

"Get ready, Murk. We'll support you from the observation shelter and lay ready to give you two a distraction to get out. They have outlying patrols and buildings that I'm sure Brimstone and the others can bring some attention to instead of you. Meanwhile, Ragini and Grizzly? You two search for this additional way in."

"Hrmp. Fine." Grizzly didn't look too pleased, but stood and picked up his old Equestrian Army rifle, "If you believe this is the right idea, Protégé, I won't distrust you. If there's anything out there, we'll find it."

Ragini nodded, strapping her twin rifles over her shoulders and wing restraints. They headed off immediately, clearly itching to do *something* other than sit still.

"Now, Murk?" Protégé looked to me and handed over a flare, "Good luck. Fire this off if you need us to start anything."

I had most of my things on me already. Taking a swig of my canteen to ward off the ambient radiation in the snowy air, I made sure that *Rarity's Grace* was all loaded and that the grapple gun functioned right too. I had a few of our medical supplies in case Unity needed any. My journal and other unneeded items I left with Coral Eve to save weight, but I kept Unity's little statuette of Littlepip next to my chest. It felt right. Strapping on my goggles and wire cutters from Glimmer's tool kit, I felt as ready as I ever would be.

Actually, that was a complete lie.

The moment I stepped up, hopping over rocks to begin my journey, I felt the dread come down. Could I do this? I'd asked myself this question every time I had to do something myself, and I never felt any better. But this wasn't dark Fillydelphia with all its hiding spots and rules I understood and had in my memory. This was a wasteland, a mountain with horrible, drugged raiders and slavers who weren't playing by *anypony's* rules anymore! I couldn't...

"Hey, lil'bro. Shall we get going, then?"

She suddenly trotted up next to me, a lever action rifle slung by her side for easier movement. All geared up with her tools and Ranger Initiate robes strapped closer to her body in a more form-fitting style.

"S-sis!?"

Glimmerlight simply grinned and ruffled my mane. "You seriously didn't think I was letting you go into the shit alone, did you? After how far you came for me down in the metro? Let me get fucked over every day if I'm letting you do this without me backing you up."

Behind us, I heard Brimstone make a deep chuckle. "No change from normal then."

Glimmer's head bolted around, eyes glaring daggers at the big earth pony sitting with a wry grin. I couldn't help but make a little giggle myself, before being shoved by her hoof and saw her make a little pout.

"I try to act all 'wingmare' for you and this is what I get from you all? Psh... *stallions*."

I saw the grin on her face though. She lifted a hoof, and with a little laugh, I bumped mine against hers.

"Let's go rescue your friend, Murky. You and me, the dream team, huh?"

"Hehe, y-yeah..."

Both of us cantered off away from the group. Myself hopping from rock to rock to avoid the snow while trying not to over strain my weakened body. Gradually, we came to the top of the small hill and looked down at the camp. Through my binoculars (He hadn't asked for them back. By my logic, that meant they were mine now!), I saw Unity again, in the same place as before.

"She's still there, sis'."

"Then let's go get her, Murky."

Together, we dropped off the hill, sliding or sneaking down into the bushes to make an effort to *finally* have Unity back and with us as a group. They wouldn't take her from me again. I wouldn't allow it. Not after this time.

Not *ever*.

Tnk!

"They hear?"

"No... no. Do another."

Tnk!

Glimmer's cutters sliced through another little bit of wire in her magic. I was glad she was doing this. They looked complicated for hooves. Instead, I sat still and listened out for anything while she made the cuts. The journey up had been tense, but I felt a little surge of pride that the route I'd spotted had worked. We'd gotten to the fence completely unseen!

Tnk!

"Last... one... there!"

Tnk!

The square section of wire popped off rather sharply. We both froze. Looking up, I saw the guard post a dozen metres away behind the bush that obscured this section of wire. A rifle barrel protruded in the opposite direction.

Looking at one another, we breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly, her magic lifted the wire away, leaving us with a little hole to squeeze through. I went first, feeling the chill as I pushed my belly close to the icy rock beneath us, and wriggled my way in before quickly rushing between the two nearest huts. Behind me, Glimmerlight shimmied her way through, dragging the block of wire with her. As soon as she reached where I was, her magic settled the piece back roughly where it should be to cover up our way in.

"Hard bit done?" She whispered to me, grinning that grin. Oh how I was happy for that optimism along with me.

"N-no?"

"Pity."

The huts seemed to be mounted up on short legs to prevent them from being snowed over. Digging a little snow away with my hooves, I pushed my way under the one nearest to me. I didn't feel anything, but a few sips from my refilled canteen felt only the best idea. I'd have to *use* the snow to get around here in such broad light. Well, light by the wasteland's standards anyway. There was still enough dullness to just fade into shadows behind larger snow drifts against buildings, I thought. That could work. As I moved across the loose stones and hard earth, I heard hooves creaking the floorboards above me, maniacal laughter twinged with curses, and the sound of meat tearing. I gasped, this was the raider's cabin.

I shook my head. They didn't know I was here. Now, to get an idea of my bearings.

Hearing Glimmer squeeze under the hut too, I shifted toward the front and poked a little gap in the snow drift covering that end. A perfect little hidey hole to watch and observe.

A cart bumped past, sliding on the slush kicked up by so much movement in and out of the main place. Across the encampment I tried to look for Unity, but the place I'd seen her was out of sight. Somewhere further up the street. I'd have to knock too big a hole to stick my head out.

Thankfully, I had an old tool that had served me well still on my person. Shoving that little mirror into the snow, I angled it to see further up the street, simply praying it didn't glint too much in the white glare outside. A white mist drew down over the street and blocked my vision. Darn. Patience.

"Murky."

"Hm?" I looked back quickly to Glimmer. She was looking around the back.

"There are two guards moving down the fence. I don't think they'll see the gap we made, but I think they just came on patrol. They aren't leaving that area. Ah, *fuck*."

She hissed the word, clearly having seen them stop, cutting off our route back.

"Could we sneak past?" I bit my lip.

"Not a chance. Not even you."

I sighed, bonking my head lightly on a leg of the cabin. "You're right. F-fff-feathers."

She turned back, smirking as she had to adjust where she was lying under the low floor. "Still working on sayin' that, huh? Gotta come from down deep! Can't believe we've not got ya to say it yet."

Rolling my eyes, I turned back to my mirror. The mist was beginning to lift a little, a harsh wind blowing it away and carrying ice crystals like sharp rain. Blinking as some flew into my hole, I wiped the glass and squinted to see in it.

There she was!

A few cabins up, chained to a supporting beam, I could see her cream body protruding out from the meagre rug. Unfortunately, she was surrounded by slavers. One of them—

Oh no!

One of them picked up her chain, unhooking it from the post! They were...

"Glimmer, they're moving her!"

"Where?"

"I don't know! C-c'mon!"

We had to *move*! Even as I watched, the slaver started dragging her away, Unity with her head held as high as she could from the collar. Retrieving my mirror, I crawled under the hut and through the snow that had blown under. Let it irradiate me, I needed to get moving! Slavers wandered by the edge, their hooves mere feet from me.

"Hard to get good ale up here. I miss the Roamer."

"Don't complain. Alternate was to work for Slit. Hear she got given authority over the whole factory district now?"

"...point, mate. Point."

"Hey! Hey you!"

A third slaver ran up, a big one in somewhat nicer looking clothing. I waved at Glimmer to stop as I saw the form of Grindstone behind him.

"Has there been word from the Ministry yet?" Grindstone's voice was quiet and breathy, yet the slaves stood to rigid attention before him.

"Y-yes, master!"

"Anything on the orb experiments? I haven't received communication from the old prison in this blizzard."

They went silent briefly and could see Grindstone's leg step forward.

"Well?" He broke into coughing even as the shouted line was spoke, his apparent aid helping him stay on his hooves.

"Yes, they... they got through this morning and reported another failure, sir. The batch we used, they just can't handle what its showing them. They aren't coming out showing what we want. And they're, well, they're not really usable again after it..."

Grindstone stomped a hoof in the slush below him and grunted.

"Well then you radio them back and tell them to start again. Use some newer orbs this time, see if that helps. Her notes ended around about this stage of her work, so if you need to find more to test with, then you find more! And get teams checking the stallion in the Ministry again, see if there's more information in his memories, it got us this far to find her work, and that machine holding him won't last forever. So *get to work*."

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, master!"

The pair galloped off, back the way they had came. Grindstone sighed, waved his aid away, and passed by as I breathed a sigh of relief, waving for Glimmer to follow me. How many orbs must they be going through if they were having to find more matches of them?

Briefly, I recalled that the orb machines also required ponies to sit in them, and began to worry about exactly what they needed to 'replace'. He'd also mentioned that machine I'd found near Mister Peace; the thing with the stallion stuck in it. So it had been what led Grindstone this far? It explained why they knew things we didn't. Some sort of special memory orb machine maybe?

And that stallion. Could he be...

Unity *had* said that Grindstone was one of her masters, hadn't she? Or was I just making that up to fill gaps? No, it couldn't be. That stallion had looked too clean to be a slave. But what if it was?

Sighing, I knew I needed time to think.

This wasn't going to get easier either. Up above, the floor was cracked, rotted through and with a great many holes to the rooms above. There were...

"Hey how come the boss gives us this shitty room but those wankjobs who never give us no loot get the better one *and* get first choice of steak?"

I could see *raiders* above me. About half a dozen of them, three laid out on the floor quivering in spasms while the other three lounged on old seats. One was fiddling with some little rainbow-coloured powder on a table. Another was clamouring, angrily trying to coax more out of an inhaler. The last, the one who's spoken, had multiple bottles of alcohol in his magic at once.

"S-s-s-s-shuuuupp..." The one with the inhaler seemed to vibrate, grinning and scowling back and forth as he smacked the drinker on the side of the face, receiving an almost bestial snap of the teeth in return.

"I'm fucking *hungry*! That's what! I'm going over there!"

He got up, smashing the bottle on the floor. Shards fell across me and I covered my head. Thick hooves stomped above me before a door slammed, leaving me alone with the disturbingly twitching raiders. They didn't even speak, just laid there or partook in

substances I dared not even imagine the potency of. Glimmerlight shuffled up beside me and together we slowly crawled on.

We stopped almost immediately. They'd been talking like Wildcard wasn't there. He *was*. Just sitting in the corner staring at the wood. I could hear him breathing deeply, sucking in air through his teeth and shivering when it came back out. Not moving, just... breathing.

I tried to ignore him, tried to ignore the thought of that head suddenly turning to look directly at me. He'd know. He always seemed to know. What worried me was just how sane he seemed to be sometimes. Like somehow working out we'd be on that train.

Broken bottles, needles, spilled drink, and bones crowded along with us beneath the floorboards. I had to bite my tongue to not gag as we navigated our way through. I just prayed I didn't feel a little jab on my hide somewhere. There were worse things than sharp edges down here. Above me, I heard a raider scream and thrash, some sort of manic high kicking in before he laughed madly. These raiders were insane.

I almost squeaked out loud as he suddenly moved and rolled onto his back.

Glimmer nudged my shoulder, pulling me back to reality a little. I realised just how much I was shaking while peering up at him right above us, lying still near the other raider who was rolling back and forth on the ground like an animal. Cautiously, I put one hoof in front of the other again, drawing myself toward a gap in the snow drifts on the other side, feeling the wind churning in through it.

"Who's theeeere?"

We both froze. I saw Glimmer's eyes go wide.

"Boss? Is someone there? Who's there, who's there, who's there, *who's therewhosthereWHO'S THERE!?*"

The raider above us swivelled, getting up, his hoof near Glimmer's head. He leapt up and down on the spot. I felt Glimmer pushing me to *move*. Crawling heedlessly, I tried shoving glass aside with the thicker sleeves of my winter clothing. Dragging myself through, I inched toward the hole! Had he seen us?

"I heeear somepony! Somepony around here! Can feel the itchy mane and the twitchy hoof and all the little signs of a *sneaky thing!*" Wildcard sat up and started scanning the room, breathing deeply with excitement.

The other raider spun in circles, screaming. A half-brick smacked into his head from across the room.

"Shut it! You've 'ad too much o' that shit!"

The manic raider howled, charging his colleague. The table smashed apart. The drug dust flew into the air as they brawled. Others awoke, leaping into the melee. Soon, the floor was splintering and cracking apart as their weight and strikes tore into the rotten wood. Wildcard fell over, howling with laughter at the sight. His hooves banged near me. Sometimes his face looked down, but with eyes closed while laughing

Terrified of him opening his eyes, I hurried onward. We crawled, and crawled, rushing as best we could. I froze as I saw my hoof about to land on a sack of bloodied needles, whimpering when I had to crawl around a wooden post and press over half-rotten brahmin guts that had fallen below their sick den.

Finally, I reached the freezing snow drift and pressed through, biting my sleeve to stop the hyperventilating. Irradiated snow or not, I couldn't help but slow down and try to breathe in the cool air again, before helping pull my sister out. We stumbled through the deep drift to the edge of the building, before I poked my mirror around it, using the raiders'

saddlebags they'd left outside as cover for myself.

Unity wasn't hard to spot. She was in the middle of the camp, being taken toward that giant entrance! We'd lose her if she went in!

"G-Glimmer? We're not going to catch her."

"Yes we will, Murky. We'll—"

"No!" I turned to her, looking her dead in the eyes. "We're not. She's too far. W-we need a distraction!"

She stopped and nodded, understanding what I'd meant. "The flare?"

"We need that to get out. I mean another distraction." I turned away again to look around. "M-maybe something like them finding another fence cut? Or getting the raiders to fight each other out here? Or..."

"Or I have some fun, and give you a chance to get her."

I stopped and turned, seeing Glimmerlight leaning back against the hut wall, spilled raider packs beside her from scavenging and juggling a grenade in her hoof with a manic grin.

"Or... that." I squeaked the words a little, "Will y-you be okay? On your own?"

Glimmer grabbed the apple-shaped ball in her magic the next time it went in the air, settling it into a big robe pocket before drawing her levered carbine off her saddle. "Murky, sweetie? You just concentrate on reaching Unity. I'll give you all the distraction you'll require. I can be *quite* the mare of action when needed after all. Do remember where I grew up."

She winked, and I needed no further convincing.

"Good luck, sis'."

"Just be sure to fire that flare off the moment you get her and I'll come running to find you."

With that, she checked her load and turned to rush around the opposite side of the hut, disappearing behind a set of old minecarts. I had to remind myself to keep pushing on as I watched after her, thinking myself the luckiest pony in the world to have her as a friend.

"Right." I took a slow breath and lowered my head down, thinking it all through. "Right, let's um, do this?"

I looked either side of me, seeing no way out that Glimmer hadn't already took. I could keep sneaking under huts, but the snow would take its toll eventually and it was far too close. I needed a new way.

In front of the raider hut, a mass procession of minecarts started to trundle back to the mines after dumping their loads at the train station. Wheeling across the cleared concrete road, they passed in and out of the mist that was settling in again. I rummaged in the raider's pack, locating the whitest sheets or rugs I could before holding them around me. I *really* hoped that this would work. Who said I had to hide in the dark all the time?

The mist descended, and I ran out.

Clad in white, amongst a near whiteout while the mist passed over, I rushed toward the minecarts. Suddenly, a big form appeared through the whiteout conditions. A slaver! Dodging around her, I heard a shout. Please don't have seen me! Please don't have seen me!

While I darted amongst the crowds, I heard hooves move.

"Who was that? *What little weasel is out of line!?*"

She had! She'd seen me! The mist was already dropping, it had only been a few seconds! It was supposed to last longer! I ran among the carts, trying to run up the line. Slavers started

turning, heads swivelled. Slaves I shoved past complained. This was a really bad idea! The mist had got me into the line, but staying hidden as I inched toward Unity ahead of me was proving so hard! I'd gotten twenty feet, I only needed to go another thirty! She wasn't far ahead! How was I going to get her away from—

"You there! YOU!"

I didn't stop! Looking back, I saw the slaver spot me! She was coming! Carrying a cane in her magic, the slaver rushed for me, outrunning me in a straight line! I almost fell as I spun to shove though!

"What made you think you could leave the line?"

If I could just push through enough of the crowd and carts I could—

There was a sudden eruption of earth from across the camp. A deep and snapping explosion whipped into my ears, like a nail into my skull from the sharp sound that echoed off the mountain face. Tripping, I felt a slave fall over me, burying me under them until I had to squeal and roll out the way of a grinding wagon wheel, feeling it catch my mane for a second while it ran over it!

Chaos broke out amongst the slavers. They clearly hadn't expected an attack up here. I heard multiple whipping shots from the same direction Glimmer had clearly thrown the grenade. There were screams. Automatic fire barked from a guard tower. The slavers were all looking that way!

Up ahead, I saw the slaver taking Unity break for cover, dragging her after him into a hut to take shelter. That was better! From the distance, I heard the heavy retort of a revolver. I remembered that scope on Protégé's sidearm. I guess he wouldn't have just sat idle, flare or not. Amongst the running slaves as they all tried to get off the road and into cover, I sprinted directly for Unity, or rather the hut she was in! In and out! Smash and grab, Murky! Just... without the smashy bit! (Or the grab bit. I didn't think she'd like that, um...)

Ahead of me, I saw Grindstone burst out into the open, the donkey standing out amongst the others. His aid bellowed orders for the frail old slaver, getting the guards to organise and rush for the commotion. They didn't see me, but they were blocking the street!

Swerving to the side, I hopped up onto a barrel and dove between the huts. Well, if I couldn't go under, through, or around, I'd go up! Kicking out my leg, the mouthpiece flipped in front of my mouth, the aiming sight all nicely positioned. Firing my grapple above, I shot it up onto the roof of one of the low huts, using it to pull myself up there. I heard wood crack from the hooks under my weight, being drowned in snow piling off the roof in one massive wave from the impact. Spluttering, I bit down on the battle saddle's grip and felt the mechanism winch me upward until I could grab the roof with my hooves.

Gunfire erupted behind me, a group of slavers peppering a tower where a guard frantically screamed for them to stop. Glimmer sure had them in confusion, firing on each other! The whoop of raiders cheering it on from the sidelines, seemingly oblivious, only served to make the situation feel almost deranged. At least they were—*ARGH!*

A shot *slammed* into the roof beside me. On the ground, I saw a slaver screaming at me, the words being lost in the madness. The pistol aimed again, while I screamed and ran across the roof, trying to stay low. I didn't even hear the individual shot, but the hiss of air was as unmistakable as it was terrifying. I slid, almost falling over the slick roof and off it all over again as I galloped and leapt to the next one, disappearing into the deep snow that rested atop it. This was the one Unity was in!

The subtle movement all around me gave enough of a reason to take my mind off that as

the snow started to move from this roof too. Ooooh nooooo!

Taking me with it, the sloped roof dumped its entire load out the front of the hut. My throat *burned* from a sudden, hacking cough as some of it got in my mouth. Whether from rads or just choking on the snow, I didn't know. Struggling, I slammed my hook into the fragile roof, scratching deep into it as I slid toward the edge. I slowed, my grappling hook keeping me on the roof, albeit dangling off the edge until I could clamber back up. With it now cleared, I started to look about. I *had* to stay up here. I'd never get in the front door if it was locked! There had to be a way in the top in such snowy conditions, surely! What architect wouldn't think of that!?

Presumably, the one that created an acid refinery with no safety rails and silly doors that opened both ways, I reminded myself.

All the same, I saw a little trapdoor on the back end, padlocked shut. Switching my saddle to *Rarity's Grace* I took careful aim, praying nopony else would take a shot at me up here. Then, I bit hard and *fired!*

And... *fired!*

...fired?

Click.

The sound almost made me wince from bad memories, only cut back as I chided myself and kicked the safety off it. Pulling the trigger again produced that almost musically polite crack of the small rounds it used, and the padlock pinged off. I took one last look back to where I thought Glimmer was, seeing ponies sheltering from any direction, unsure where the attacker was. Grindstone strode amongst it, but the fighting seemed to be dying down. This was my chance.

Funny, that right before I was about to do it, I felt every weakness come back to me. The fuzziness in my right eye, the pain in my chest, the magically sealed splinter wound from the fall, but I *had* to do this. Just a little further to get her again.

"C'mon, you can do it Murky!" I willed myself, I had to be brave now! I had to be determined!

I turned, grabbed the edge of the trapdoor with a hoof, and opened it before diving right down into it. *Rarity's Grace* was ready! It wasn't that high! I even landed on my hooves, and stood ready to hold up the slaver! Legs spread, resolved and ready. I could—

I felt a sudden strike across the back of my head, before suddenly feeling very dizzy indeed... and sore...

Even before I'd gotten a look at the room, I collapsed to the ground.

Somepony was pulling me. Lifting me up. I heard a voice shouting at me.

Urgh, how many times had I gone down hard in pain lately. I hadn't passed out, but the world felt unsteady.

"...urk..."

The room was spinning. I saw only the haze of lights, blurry messes of colour that spun as I felt the floor again. Somepony grabbed my hoof, pulling me unsteadily up. I blinked a few times, trying to reassert myself.

"Murky!"

With a rush, my senses came back. Gunfire from outside, the crackle of a fire and its

warm heat upon my back, and the sight of a shape close to my face... somepony's eyes.

A few more blinks and I finally got my bearings. I was in the cabin. Trashed furniture lay around me as the battle restarted outside. My head *hurt*. I'd been hit with something like... like a...

I forgot all that, as I refocused to see who it was standing before me. Unity was bent over, trying to keep me from falling. I could feel her wavy mane brushing against me as she put a hoof around to keep me steady.

"I'm sorry, Murky! I'm so sorry! I didn't realise it was you! You just suddenly dropped in front of me! *What are you doing here!?*"

"I... I came to... wait..." I blinked, wincing as a hoof went to the back of my head, "... didn't realise it was me?"

Blinking more, I looked around. It was a prison cabin, with a thick cage to one side of the room. I could see a slaver lying on the floor, the one who'd been pulling her. He laid there, completely unconscious, with a snapped plank of wood over his head. The cage door hung open, a set of keys still in it.

Gradually, my mind put together the events of a trapped unicorn using telekinesis. Unity had—

...woah. So much for her needing *my* help.

Despite that, I couldn't help myself from turning in near shock to her, helping myself stay up by leaning on her. Unity shifted me to the desk of the prison, sitting me in the chair, a hoof holding my head up.

"Are you okay? I'm so so sorry! I really didn't mean to. I just—I was trying to get out and —"

"*Yes!*" I blurted it, "I... I came to get out—I mean you out—I mean out of here! Unity..."

Head hurting or not, I couldn't help but suddenly smile with a small laugh.

"...you're here! I finally found you again!"

I couldn't quite tell if it was just her bruises, exertions, or a genuine blush as she leaned forward and hugged me tightly.

"I'm so glad to see you, Murky. I saw you in that weird station with your friends! Just never thought I'd see you on this mountain. I've been trying to get out myself and get *away* from these weird places and what they want from me! It was all a trick, Murky! They never took me to Red Eye's Unity. Just straight to Grindstone."

Her head was over my shoulder as she embraced me, but I felt her suddenly quake a little.

"They said it'd been a lie. He wasn't there. He never had been..." Her voice was strained, clearly not having had anypony to let this out to. "I'm lost, alone again, Murky. I don't know where he is!"

I was no good at comforting ponies much. I simply held my hooves around her for a few seconds, allowing this brief moment of having somepony else friendly nearby, to share in warmth in this cold land. I had to fight myself from blurting out how much I'd worried. How many fears I'd had for her and the struggles since I last saw her. About what I'd learned about Littlepip not escaping or how I'd finally decided I was *not* a slave, but now wasn't the moment. I simply wanted to make her feel better.

Slowly, she let go and leaned back. "I heard the gunfire, Murky. Saw it as a chance to escape. We should go before whatever it is stops. They wanted me for my talent, Murky! I won't let them have it! We—we have to go, now. We—oh... oh Murky..."

Unity stopped, leaning back.

"Your neck..."

I almost shivered a little as I felt her hoof gently stroke around it. Over the dry, blistered and cracked skin from Shackles' radioactive collar. I *so* wanted to tell her all about it and just get it out to a friend, but we had to get going. I merely nodded and closed my eyes.

"It's been... been hard."

"I'm so sorry. I'll listen later, okay? I promise. We have to get out of here."

Yes, that was true. I nodded, wincing a little more at the pain in my head. I saw a frying pan on the floor and gave her a look after casting my eyes to it. She bit her lip nervously and shrugged.

"It... was just what I had to hoof. Uh, sorry again..."

For some reason, I just chuckled, casting away the pain of thinking about what Shackles had done to me forever. It was all so ridiculous to have *finally* found the first mare to ever help me, and she immediately whacks me with a frying pan.

An explosion blew in one of the windows. Snow careened into the cabin as we ducked behind the desk. Glass shattered above us, the door blowing open. We both looked out over the top, seeing slavers running around outside.

"What in Equestria's going on? Did you do this?"

"N-no, not exactly!" I took a few breaths, trying to think how best to get out of here.

"Then what are—"

A round blasted through the wooden side of the building, passing right above us and out the other side again! Bullets were more powerful than I thought! Unity pulled me down, asking again.

"What are you *doing* here if this isn't you?"

"L-long story! But I had to come and get you first! There's some g-good ponies with me! I just..."

I bit my lip hard, fumbling with my many pockets until I came across the statuette she had given me. I felt my cheeks flush a little.

"I just couldn't leave you. You saved my life with this."

Her eyes went to the little scrap metal model, widening as she saw I still had it.

"We're going to get out, Unity! We'll help you find your stallion, but we need to get out of here. I saw you all chained up and I couldn't just leave you after you did so much, and this statue meant so much to me to help me live when I almost died and... I wanted to come g-get you and—"

Unity's hoof lifted my chin up, stopping my rambling.

"After all this, you kept it?"

I gulped and nodded. She smiled warmly, lifting it in her magic.

"I'm so glad it brought your good luck, Murky. That it meant so much to you. That's my talent you see. To project a sense of memory into something physical. That it can help remind us of somepony we know no matter how far away they are. A memory strand bound to a small item to forever make us feel like we're never *quite* alone, so long as we still believe in them."

Her magic tucked it back into my fleece neatly.

"That tells me all the words you could ever say, that you believed enough to come all the way to the ends of the world up here to try and find me again. Now you drop in from the roof like that, huh? Pretty heroic for a stallion like you."

She dodged my side as we waited for a chance to make a move. I tried not to squeak in embarrassment. She'd called me a *stallion*. Not just a little buck! Had I grown up that much?

"I, uh, heh..." I gulped, "it isn't just me though."

"Still, zipping onto the roof to swoop in and try and get me out that cage? Pity I already managed it. Did you think you'd get to be my rescuing knight in shining armour or something?"

Unity giggled a little, clearly just glad for somepony else to be here to even share a joke with. Normally I might have just blushed and stammered, but I simply found myself laughing with her. It was true. I'd come all this way, through fire, snow, and darkness to find her and she'd already broken free *herself*. Just my life.

Wait a minute... dropped in...

Who said I couldn't go back the same way to get out again!?

I looked upward at the hole I'd come in through. It still lay open enough to fit two ponies!

"Unity, we have to go now. Up and out?" I started to lean upwards using the chair, trying to aim my grapple hook to the edge. "Hold on, I'll um, raise us out!"

"I hope you're better with that thing than when we last tried this, Murky."

She wrapped her hooves around me, holding on tight. While I took careful, aim, I heard her speak again.

"You know, when I asked your name you just said 'Murky', is that your full name?"

"It..."

Had I only told her that bit? I must have. Why did I do that? Probably I'd just been embarrassed.

I still was.

"It's... the only bit that matters."

That felt good to say. Throwing off another chain that bound me to what I was. She looked confused, but let it slide. Holding myself still, I bit down on the saddle to let the hook rock out. It flew right through the hole, into the sky above! I'd missed!

Outside, I heard somepony shouting in.

"Retcher, you got that mare? Grindstone wants her in the mine! Safer! Come on, move it!"

Oh dear. Up above, the hook kept flying up. I tried to bite down hard to make it zip back to try again, but that'd take a few seconds!

"Retcher! Come on, buddy!"

"Murky." Unity hissed into my ear. "Come on!"

I'm trying! The hook came tumbling back to earth, before with a little stroke of an idea, I hopped to the side a little, making it fall and drag back into the roof, catching on the ledge of the trapdoor before it came through! I didn't waste time, biting down to raise us both up slowly, the wire taking our weights fine, if a little sluggishly.

"Retcher you swine, I had to get across under fire to tell you this. *Come on you lazy—HEY!*"

A slaver ran in the door, rifle at the ready. He saw us lifting toward the hole, almost standing in surprise before the gun raised! Unity's horn lit and I saw his magazine fall out of the weapon, the tug on the weapon causing the one round he'd already chambered to go wild into the roof beside us! My hooves reached up, grabbing the edge of the trapdoor and struggling with all my little might to pull us through, my chest and side stinging badly

under my bandages! Crying out in pain, I flopped onto the slick wet roof, feeling Unity roll out after me. We had to get a breath after that, just to—

Crack! The roof exploded into splinters beside me! Then another hole, closer! I shrieked and rolled over again, as Unity went the other way, both of us coming to our hooves. He was firing from below! Clearly a bit dumb to shoot at the mare his master wanted!

“Murky! This way!”

Unity immediately galloped over the roof, trying to keep her footing, leading the way to the edge before simply leaping off! Trusting in her, I did the same, diving headlong away from the wood being carved up by rifle rounds. Dropping to ground level, I landed in the same snow drift she did, sinking deep into it. Spluttering and flopping my hooves around, I strove to get out of it as fast as I could! Was it just my imagination to feel my chest tighten so quickly? The stress? Breathing shallow and fast, I crawled out of it, fumbling for my canteen. Unity popped her head out of the snow, her wavy mane soaked and hanging straight down before clambering after me.

Both of us were shivering, Unity in particular since had no proper winter clothing. Between the two cabins, we could see ponies still firing toward the outskirts of town. Presumably, somepony had spotted that shots were coming from Protégé’s position. I heard a guard crying in pain nearby, begging somepony to help him from a gunshot wound. The others had to be ready by now. It was time to meet up, to fire the flare, but this was a really bad place to do it! We needed better cover.

“Wait, wait! I can call for help, but we need to find someplace safe! Do you know anywhere?”

Unity stroked her chin for a second, her other hoof trying to wipe any snow off of her. “There’s a small storage area near the fence a couple dozen metres from here, I think. Big iron boxes! Would that work?”

I nodded. Not wasting time, the pair of us galloped off around the back of the cabins together. Slipping on slush or huddling in small places as slavers rushed past, even the short distance felt lethal. Bullets whined over our heads, the slavers firing at their attackers. There were no griffons, Shackles presumably unable to garner any from their loyalty to Red Eye, so the slavers lacked any kind of eye in the sky. Something I imagined Glimmer and Protégé were exploiting for all they could in the thick, mountain terrain.

One cabin was on fire, sending embers floating in the snow toward us as we ran past it! Up ahead, I could see the storage area she meant, a collection of strongboxes for mining equipment. That’d be perfect. It was like a little bunker for anypony of smaller stature like Unity or I. Waiting for a lull in the fighting, we darted toward it. I hadn’t gotten a few feet before dust kicked up around my hooves. I heard Unity yelp as more impacted before hers. We almost fell into one another, rounds dancing off the ground as somepony aimed at us! They were trying to hit us!

Thankfully, Unity had apparently more calm than I did under fire! A slab of metal lifted from the storage area in her magic, whizzing out to stand between us and incoming fire. Small indents bulged near my head as rounds hit it. Some flew right through it and narrowly missed us! I felt splinters of metal shoot off the back of the floating plate, stinging as they pinged and cut at us, before we both leapt into better cover. We both stuck low, and I fumbled with my saddlebag. I needed that flare!

In the distance, I could hear voices shouting. Wildcard’s whoop as he rushed out somewhere. I dearly hoped it wasn’t for my sister.

I couldn't help but keep trying to force down the feeling that I hadn't heard Shackles around here yet. I knew he was here, hopefully just inside and not waiting to pounce again out here.

The last time I was escaping him, it had been to get Lilac away.

I never forgot the heartbreak he had caused in me after catching me escaping.

No... *not this time*. Not ever again! Not with *Unity*!

I felt that flare inside. It would call in *my friends*! I wasn't alone this time and they would help me get her out of this nightmare for the last time! Unity was going to join us and *this was the moment when it happened!*

Drawing it out, I finally got a good look at it. Long and red with Pinkie's grinning face on it. Amongst the madness of a firefight, I could have sworn it winked at me. Pinkie, not now...

A round sparked off the cover we were in. I heard Unity cry out and duck down. We huddled together, the fire kicking up around our hooves as others got closer. I dropped the flare! There was so much fire! We needed help now! Screaming to try and make myself brave (It made sense to me!), I dove out, grabbed the flare, pointed skyward, and *pulled* the ignition string!

With a magical crackle, sparkles collected around the tip, before half of the stick rocketed up into the sky. I lay on my back right below it, watching it soar into the sky. Beside me, Unity followed it up with her eyes as the glowing, crimson projectile flew higher and higher before erupting into an intense glare of light! Exploding in the air, it made the shape of a grinning pony, before falling into becoming a lit beacon hanging in the wind to fall slowly, casting a haze across the entire mining camp.

"I sure hope they can help, Murky! Your friends looked powerful last time I saw them in that metro station!"

She pulled me back into cover, as I glanced over to see those firing at us stop to look up at the light. I heard in the distance a sudden, all too recognisable, warcry. A half-ring of snow fired into the air outside of the compound after it. Brimstone and Coral were doing their work. I felt myself grinning. My friends were coming. I'd gotten to Unity, found she was safe, and now we only had to get out!

"They will!" I smiled and shouted to Unity as we lay beneath the sparkling hue of the flare above. "My sister, she's coming! Glimmer said she'd come to wherever the flare went off from! She'll be along any minute!"

Nearby, I heard a sudden crack of a rifle. Was that her trying to get to us now? A small gunfight broke out, then died off again as somepony hid. Then a few more shots... and another, getting closer! That was her! I could recognise her short-barrelled rifle's sound!

"Your sister you told me about, huh?" Unity smiled widely. "Glad to get to meet her if she's the one coming to bail us out!"

"Oh!" I felt my face flush as I heard Glimmer's voice in the distance coming closer while firing. "You'll love Glimmer! Such a great sister! She's really kind and sweet and caring and really funny and just so nice to everypony and—"

Glimmerlight suddenly emerged at the gallop through the snowy mist, screaming at those she shot at.

"Thought you could take a damn shot at me, huh!? Have some of this then, you fat-assed, inaccurate cunts! Hope whoever it was that skiffed my fantastic flank gets a bullet through his dick for that, you fuckers!"

Glimmer raised her rifle and cracked off two more shots, her magic leveraging the action rapidly, before diving headfirst in and rolling up between the two of us. She was grinning wildly from the exaltation of a battle, her adrenaline high.

“Oh hi, kids! You *see* this, Murky? That bastard almost got me! Look!”

She twisted, proudly showing the side of her flank near her cutie mark to myself and Unity pretty bluntly, the small seep of blood from a very minor wound across it. She seemed to miss my aghast expression as she pulled her robes back down again.

“How fucking *wrong* is that? That’s like a buck I once knew wanted me to put on his cousin’s dress while he did me over his desk! Like hell! Just what kind of sicko shoots at somepony’s *ass*!?”

Unity cast a sideways glance at me, her slight grin saying it without even having to speak a word. I just blushed and shrugged.

After a few seconds, my sister looked from one of us to the other and rapidly shook Unity’s hoof.

“So Murky found ya, huh? Good to meet you, Unity! I’m his big sis! Betcha he’s told you all about me. He’s sure told me all about you!”

She cast a little wink to me, before looking back at Unity. I tried to hide my face in my hooves.

“Oh, has he? It’s... lovely to meet you, Glimmerlight.” Unity blew a strand of her mane from her face and shook Glimmer’s hoof back. “I can’t wait to meet the rest of his friends. Shall we perhaps, y’know, go do that? I’m all for bonding and the friendship of Equestria but...”

“But not under fire?” Glimmer accentuated it by blind-firing over our heads to keep the slavers back.

“Rather.” Unity nodded a little. “Got any ideas?”

“Always.” Glimmer smiled widely. “Not all them exactly *relevant* but I’m sure I’ve got one that works! This way!”

For all her joking, Glimmerlight was pretty serious about getting us moving. Her magic tugged me up, shoving me ahead as she gave us cover. Unity and I ran behind the cabins again, swiftly followed by my sister. Up ahead, I saw a guard out of a back door. He was turning this way! With a flip of my hoof, I brought up the saddle’s mouthpiece and bit hard, firing the remaining two shots from *Rarity’s Grace* down the line between the huts! Pings off of the wood and stone signalled I’d missed, but I saw him scream and leap back inside again.

“Can’t say I ever imagined you to be the shooting sort, Murky!” Unity got back up from the gap she’d hid behind.

“I’m still not, really!”

Glimmerlight leaned around the hut behind us and fired again, before rapidly reloading, her magic doing all the work.

“Lil’bro! What’s up ahead?”

Leaning ahead, I poked under the raised huts. I couldn’t see any hooves running nearby, but there were some up closer to where we had come inside! They were going to come this way!

“Sis! They’re coming in a second! We’re trapped! The way under the wire’s blocked off!”

“Ah, *shit*.” She swore deeply, looking back up herself to see, and pulling a grenade from her pack again. “Maybe if I...”

“Wait!” Unity cried out, gently taking the grenade from Glimmer and moving to the wire

nearer us, showing the grenade under it. "Get behind something! We'll blow a hole under it in the soft ground! It's just all dirt up here under the snow!"

Glimmerlight shared a glance with me as we ducked behind cover, Unity joining us a second after setting the grenade to go off.

"Hey, seems the damsel in distress is rescuing us, Murky!"

I rolled my eyes, hearing Unity chuckle. "Not the first time."

Covering my ears with my hooves, I cringed and waited for the—

The sudden blast of the nearby explosive sent a shock of pain shrieking through my body. Dizzied, ears ringing, I felt Glimmer lift and pull me along with them through the hole under the wire. I saw snow kicking up from rounds as everypony looked toward the explosion. I saw one smack into the side of Glimmer's saddlebag and deflect off something yet still bowl her over with a cry. Amongst my silent, deafened state, I only felt my mouth moving as I screamed something to her, Unity and I both tugging her along, trying to get behind some rocks outside the compound's perimeter.

We were pinned. We were outside, but unable to move! Shaking as sound returned, I tried to look for any help. The fire was coming from a guard tower. I saw ponies trying to re-angle a fully-blown *machine gun* to face us! I felt panic rise, we couldn't dodge that!

The pony I was looking at had his head evaporated.

The one beside him screamed, covered in blood, before his neck exploded, gurgling as he went down. I could still hear his hooves kicking at the tower walls.

"Up here, you stupid ponies! Come on, flightless! *Move!*"

Ragini rushed down the rocks, scoped rifle in talon as her other arm waved us away. Glimmerlight choked and grit her teeth, getting up to move on her own. Unity and I helped one another, pushing up through the snow toward the crest of the hill surrounding the camp. If we could just get over it! Ragini took a couple more shots, before switching to her energy rifle, firing scything, red blasts toward the camp that snapped and hissed as they struck snow-covered roofing.

I could see Old Grizzly up ahead. His eyes lit up as he saw Unity, one of his 'favoured' slaves. The big earth pony was aiding Ragini, firing with his army rifle to support her as she too pulled back.

"You were right about that other entrance, kid! Come on! We'll lead the way, it's not far! Was some old emergency exit from the mines or something! Not actually hard to find!"

He pulled Unity over the rocks while Glimmer and I struggled over ourselves. I was struggling to breathe. I'd clambered through snow the whole way. The radiation wasn't so bad, but it made me wheeze, combined with my lack of air at the best of times. I sat sweating in the cold as I fought to suck air down.

"Where's... the... others?"

"Distracting that lot on the other side. Follow us, we'll get you there!"

Old Grizzly and Ragini didn't hesitate, moving off immediately. Looking down the length of the hill, I could see Protégé in the observation shelter, using the scope on his revolver as best he could, Chirpy hidden down beside him. Closer to the compound, I saw an old, rickety building *explode* as Coral shattered the entire small structure, a couple of slavers going with it! Brimstone's warcry was somewhere in the distance. I saw Ragini wave to her master, who then waved down to Coral. The signal was out, we were pulling back to the entrance.

So began a series of terrifying ordeals. Slavers were chasing us as we fled across the deep

snow. We took cover behind thin trees and small rocks as best we could. I caught glimpses of Brimstone, always at the back, hurling things or making counterattacks toward them. A true example of his fieldcraft at work, brute strength being only one of his talents. He kept engaging them amongst rock formations, or when they crested a hill he was waiting below. The cold intelligence he bore to slow their advance was as fascinating in its operation as it was terrifying to behold.

Coral Eve carried her son, galloping near Protégé. With her child, she took no chances, rushing as far as she could instead of sticking around to fight. Glimmer and Ragini took her place, stopping to take potshots or snipe as slavers made their way toward us. Three times I was pinned, with no cover other than having to dig into the snow itself and pray they didn't shoot near me. Three times I had to gulp the remainder of my canteen out of fear of the radiation in the snow. Unity was sometimes with me, other times with Grizzly.

Five long minutes of terror, fleeing and worrying for everypony around me as I felt my energy reserves rapidly drop. Unity was flagging too, not exactly having been treated well in their hooves. It stung me to see her look as dirty and bedraggled as any slave. She deserved better.

The slavers eventually seemed to cease the chase as the weather closed in. A heavy snowstorm kicked up with mist to match it. Strong winds tore at us and drove the fighting apart. I heard Grizzly shout that we were close, but his voice faded into the distance. In an instant, I found myself rather isolated from most of them, only the nearby Glimmer and Unity with me.

"Glimmer! Unity! D-don't wander!"

"I won't, Murky!" Glimmer moved closer to me. "Stick together here! I... it's gonna get colder again as this mist comes down! K-keep moving the way we were."

"C-chin up, Murky. We'll make it!" Unity tried to smile, but shivered all the worse. I saw Glimmerlight drift a thicker coat to the almost bare slave, providing at least something to protect from the wind.

This mist was getting worse, visibility was disappearing faster than we could move. Snowfall got in our eyes. We had to be close now! How much farther was it? Passing a tree, I saw it bending and tossing so hard that it looked like it wanted to tear itself from the ground under the wind!

Then we heard something echoing amongst the mountains. An animalistic howl. Another, then another. Pony voices mimicking the cries of wolves. I froze just as Glimmer did. We shared a glance. Both of us recognised them from earlier. From a memory.

"Wildcard's raiders."

They were on the hunt. I could hear them whooping nearby. Just like the lands near Creaky Hollow, the drug-addled psychopaths were bounding, heedless of the cold, through the snowy forest. I heard screams of finding tracks, bloodthirsty promises, and even the occasional gunshot into the air. Sometimes, I thought I saw dark shapes moving amongst the trees. They had overtaken us!

"Keep moving Murky. Just keep moving. *Keep moving!*"

She sounded as scared as I felt. Holding close to one another, we staggered and tripped over hidden trunks and rocks in the snow. I felt ill inside, my chest tightening for sure this time. I struggled not to cough. Not now.

We just couldn't see! I even tried to check my PipBuck but it hadn't been anywhere near this entrance to maybe spot it on the map. At least not without the indicator. Only an E.F.S.

would give me to locate things!

“Tracks! Yeeeeeah tracks! *Followfollowfollow!*”

“Coming to get yooooou!”

They barked and sung behind us. It was definitely our tracks! Pulling at Glimmer, I whispered into her ear.

“We can’t outrun them. We don’t know where we’re going. They do!”

My sister thought for a second, looking around. Then she suddenly galloped up an incline toward a large rock sitting precariously, settling down behind it.

“Then we ambush *them*, Murky. Just like in the memory. Only this time, I *win*.”

We waited.

Without really intending to, the three of us somewhat crowded together against the cold. Unity was between the two of us given her lack of winter clothing. I could feel her shivering as much as I was and hear the chattering of her teeth. She gripped my front leg and pulled me into a small hug.

“I n-never said thanks, Murky... for coming.”

“It’s, um, okay.” I muttered.

“Really. I just... I didn’t know what was happening. I don’t know what’s going on anymore. I just... can’t remember. I don’t even know why.”

She sank her head down, but Glimmerlight lifted a hoof and rubbed her back.

“Hey, hun?”

Unity lifted her head, and Glimmer smiled.

“When we get away from this forsaken mountain, give me a chance. Memory’s my thing. Whatever talent you have, those slavers wanted it. I’m sure you saw in that station that all this is to do with memory magic. Maybe that’s got something to do with it?”

Unity nodded, her head shivering badly against the cold. So was I. The snow was beginning to form around us.

“Just give me a chance,” Glimmer continued, “I’ll take a look into your mind, see if I can maybe draw out anything forgotten into an orb. Then we’ll see.”

My sister looked at me and smiled.

“Get to use my talent on something good for a change.”

Softly, I leaned in, hugging both of them tightly.

We’d figure it out. We’d figure it *all* out. Together.

There wasn’t much opportunity to enjoy the moment, unfortunately. My ears twitched, a sound coming in across the nearby area. There was somepony coming.

Seeing my ear perk up, Glimmerlight swivelled around, weapon aimed. I hunkered down, closing my eyes as Unity and I held close behind the rock, trying to hear from where and who! It was soft... just tiny steps... and crying?

“Wait a minute...”

I stepped out from behind the rock, hearing Glimmer hiss for me to get back. This was no raider! I rushed down the incline again, into the mist to the area we aimed to catch them in! A small shape was forming through it all. A very small shape, a foal!

Chirpy!

I found him staggering forward, crying his little eyes out and turning pale from the cold.

Shivering as he stumbled through deep snow, the little foal collapsed as he saw me. I rushed forward, catching him only to find little legs pulling into my neck.

"M-M-Mister Murky I... I lost her! W-we fell when they shot at us! I can't find my mom!" He wailed into my neck. "I can't find anypony else!"

"Ssh... ssh..." I stroked his mane, turning to carry him back. "Auntie Glim-Glim's up there. We got you."

The name I hoped would calm him, somepony he dearly loved. I just heard him cry more, worried for his mother. I knew the feeling. I—

More sounds came to my ears. More ponies galloping around. Coming this way! I realised starkly just how close they were by the sounds they made! I heard them froth and scowl, a horn blew. They really were thoroughbred hunters beneath all the substances!

Turning, I tried to get going, to run! But they were so close, I wasn't even half way back before I heard one scream.

"There he is! He's got the little morsel!"

Screaming, I tried to run, but carrying another pony when I felt so numb and weak was never easy. Behind me, out of the forest, there came three raiders. Whirling nets above them and drooling openly below slack mouths they quivered and charged at me.

Glimmer's rifle rang out, and I saw one drop, his knee exploding. Immediately after, a second shot slammed into their chest. Glimmer had learned her lesson. She wasn't allowing those pain-killing drugs that Wildcard's bunch used to have *any* chance to help them!

I dropped to the ground to give Glimmer clear line of sight, but found the raiders had opened fire at her instead. Rounds whizzed and cracked over my head and chipped off the rock. I lay in the middle of the gunfight, quivering and holding Chirpy beneath me.

I heard Glimmerlight shift to the side, moving away from her position in the mist. To my luck, with the threat of Glimmer out there, the raiders avoided me, seeing where I was as a killbox for any other shooters.

"Don't you worry little buck! We'll come for you soon enough! Chomp-chomp! Wildy wants you again! He doesn't get to kill many ponies *twice*!"

My hooves rattled against my own head as I shook and tried to drown them out. No, I'd not allow that, I wouldn't!

Nearby, I heard and slightly saw Glimmer suddenly raise from behind bark, rifle aimed. But even from where I was, I couldn't see the raiders. They had dropped down behind old, dead vegetation.

"Shit." Glimmerlight muttered to herself, before looking at me.

I nodded my head toward a set of bracken I could hear some sounds from. This close, I could hear their wheezing breaths. Glimmer suddenly span her rifle and fired into that location. A raider cried out in pain, and fell out of cover, clutching her neck. Glimmerlight fired again, and again. The shots slammed into the raider's sternum twice, but she simply kept moving. I saw her fumbling with a series of needles, unable to gather the concentration to use them. Slowly, I watched her bleed out.

Behind me, Glimmerlight moved cautiously forward again, keeping behind any bracken and trees. The waiting game was on again. Only, Glimmer had to use so many shots on these raiders that I knew she only had a couple rounds left at most. Thankfully there was only one left.

Near to me, the raider she'd first shot twitched, then rolled over, laughing. He kept rolling until he fell into a ditch, a missed shot from Glimmerlight ripping into the earth

where he was.

I heard her curse, and knew why. With her lack of rounds, and now two of them to deal with, the odds had just swung back. She had to reload soon, then they'd just rush her. How had that raider survived? Seeing him sit up and roll with such wounds was just *wrong!*

I had to move. Had to give her a way to know where they were! I had to get Chirpy out of there too! Slowly, I started trying to crawl away from the fire lanes while it was quieter, pulling Chirpy with me. If I didn't get away from this skirmish quickly, they'd use me as—

“Don't move, little morsel!”

A sudden burst of gunfire threw up the snow in front of me. Squealing, I froze. Then to my horror, both raiders began to simply stand up. Glimmer's shot whipped forward and snapped one in the shoulder.

The raider kept coming. She didn't care. Simply standing back up, dripping with blood from her shoulder and nose, the tattooed nightmare kept coming! She strode over to me, looking out at the bushes.

“We know you're out there! How many shots left? Want a gamble? Can you shoot both of us before we shoot *them?*”

I saw the barrel of a gun point at Chirpy. I tried to hide him, to put him behind me! The thought of putting myself in the direct firing line terrified me, but I had to.

“We liiiike a gamble. Likes it, likes it!” The male raider squealed happily. I could see numerous needles in a bracelet. Each was filled with various colours of liquid.

There was no reply from the snow around us. Glimmerlight has disappeared.

“Wanna play, girl?” The raider looked around. “We gots you all caught up! We know you can get one of us, we don't give a shit! Thrill of the gamble, y'see? Wildy's gang likes that shit! C'mon! Try and kill both before we pull the trigger! Which one of us bites it before your runs do?”

I didn't want to imagine what Glimmer was feeling. She was a good shooter, but not *that* good. I could hear her trying to reload silently, too quietly for the raiders to know. I simply hope, pleaded that Glimmer be good enough... please. I just didn't want them to shoot. These murderous drug-takers didn't even know reality from the dream. They'd not hesitate to kill Chirpy too, after they'd had their fun!

Yet no shot came immediately. I didn't blame her being unsure over whether to try.

Both raiders made a disappointed sound.

“No show? Well in that case, we'll—”

The boulder we'd hid behind earlier *thundered* past my vision, blurring through the air to *crush* the female raider. I heard bones splinter and an eruption of red sprayed upon the snow, as the rock carried the broken body ten feet away and struck the ground like a meteor. Everypony around looked up and across. A haze of unbridled and uncontrolled magical power *surged* around where it had last resided, linked to where it now lay.

“Oh my...” I breathed, as I turned, and saw the source of the monstrous power.

“*Don't... you... dare... point one of those things...*”

Coral Eve *burned* with magical power around her horn, a second layer of magic throbbing around it, her eyes glowing with light, focused entirely on the stunned raider! I saw the rock start to vibrate, as though it were nothing but a pebble.

“*AT MY SON!*”

The boulder didn't fly at the other raider. The magical energy coursing through it simply *shattered* it under the sheer pressure of Coral's telekinetic push, with a sound like an artillery

shell going off. The storm of fragments snapped trees and dug deep into the ground, while followed by the concussive wave that tore the snow from the ground, and snapped bark. A tremendous *crack* of air pressure, like a thunderclap, rolled across the mountain valleys, blasting a sphere of empty air around us from the snowfall. A hundred fragments of heavy rock, and an impact like a sledgehammer in the air hit the raider, and I saw no more of them behind the rush of suddenly red snow...

Gradually, as the snowdrops began to fall again in our area, I looked up. Around us, I saw twenty feet of devastation from the rock, heading outward in a cone; trees having fallen to their sides on all sides. Slowly, the mist itself that had been blown away began to settle around us again. At the centre, Coral simply stood panting. Smoke drifted from her dangerously crackling horn, her face a mixture of sheer anger and horrid agony.

And then, there was absolute silence.

No pony even knew what to say. I could see Unity speechless behind Coral, mouth agape. Glimmerlight emerged from her hiding spot, gun held slackly by the sling. I stood up slowly, shivering so much I could barely even stay upright. Chirpy, beneath me, simply began trotting toward his mother, rushing to her side when she fell over on her side. Using magic cost her dearly. This had drained her utterly. Perhaps even a burnout.

Chirpy clambered up the incline, falling against her side and hugging her neck tightly. Slowly, I saw her hoof raise and wrap around him, holding him close.

Any tranquil moment would have to wait. Through the trees, I heard more raiders. More shouts and commanding voices. Looking from pony to pony, they saw the truth. We had to keep moving. I heard others coming behind Coral, before the huge shape of Brimstone Blitz arrived.

He was, as ever, right to the point.

"Entrance this way, move *now*. There's a huge hunting party coming this way. Brutus among them."

I heard him growl the name of his old subordinate. But the name filled me with a fear. The *minotaur* was coming in the distance. Glimmerlight and Unity went with me, while Brimstone lifted Coral and her son onto his back. If she held any complaints about it being Brim, she didn't say them or simply couldn't.

Behind us, a howl came through the trees.

"I hear you all! I can smell ya like a gumdrop on Hearths Warming Morning, rascal! Wildy's comin'!"

Wildcard was in the forest himself now. If I wasn't already freezing, I'd have felt a chill.

We galloped, and fled into the lessening mist, disappearing as fast as it had come. I could start to see shapes behind us, a growing mass of darkly clad ponies rushing to catch us. A rock face was ahead as we passed by some buildings. Just small outhouses and shelters, likely how Ragini found the way in. Then suddenly ahead, a small but thick metal door into the mountainside. A rough construction of logs surrounded it, but the metal behind seemed strong enough to deter an army. Grizzly was still pushing it open, with Ragini and Protégé galloping out to help us in. Chirpy leapt onto Protégé's back, while I helped Coral down. Ragini picked up Glimmer, my sister beginning to flag, the bruise on her side growing from the impact earlier.

Even as we stumbled those last few feet, I heard Coral trying to speak to me.

"Just like once before..."

"I know, ssh..um, save your strength?"

She groaned and I pulled her upright. It wasn't far, but I could hear the raiders leading the charge behind us! Some shots cut through the air above us!

"Helping Glimmer again, she..." Coral coughed, "she deserves it. Even if she needs to... to sort herself out. I still care for her..."

"I *know*, Coral! Please. Hurry!"

I did know. I'd known for a while, but to hear her say it, that meant a lot. No matter what truths we found out, I knew they would endure the reality and the arguments about it. I had confidence in them.

Hard metal under my hooves told me we'd made it, before passing Coral to Grizzly as he helped her inside to the dark interior. A rock cave with a mounted cage walkway through the middle of it, held aloft by scaffold, even though it was only a foot above the cave floor.

I went back for Unity. I needed to make sure she was fine. There was only her and Brimstone still outside, staring back at the rushing group coming. Ahead of them all, I saw that cybernetic monster with his eyes glowing and pistons whirring as he sprinted implacably through the snow, kicking it up in his wake. Behind it, I saw Grindstone hobbling with the remainder of the slavers, his eyes meeting Unity's and my own.

Wildcard came out of the trees on our left, twin machete's cutting lines in the snow.

Behind them all, atop the hill far back, having been aiming to cut us off if we had gone downhill... I could see that huge silhouette of a massive pony. I knew only one slaver it could be.

He was looking directly at me across hundreds of feet. I couldn't tell any details, but I could feel his eyes burning into me. Slowly, I saw a hoof raise, a collar dangling from it.

Shackles, Grindstone and Wildcard. They were all out there. Yet we had escaped them for now. They couldn't get to us before we closed the door behind us and blocked it. We were safe.

Slowly, we both turned away from them, Unity casting a disgusted look at Grindstone before she went. The two of us trotted together to go inside.

Yet we both turned back as the roaring voice carried across the hills.

"Brimstone Blitz!"

Tinged with electronic noise, the minotaur had finally spoken in a deep voice, carrying a strange accent. That unique tinge to his voice making him sound almost unearthly, inexplicable. Brimstone stopped before being about to pull that door shut once we were through.

"Brimstone Blitz!" The shout came again. **"You and I, old Warlord! We shall settle things! The Legend of the Bloodletters! My rightful throne remains to be claimed!"**

Those massive metal claws snapped shut, sparking as they each took an entire tree down either side of him in one pincer-like cut!

"Atop this mountain, when the time comes, we shall lay to rest a grudge and story! A duel of titans beneath the sky! You and I, Warlord! You and I!"

Brimstone only stared back, before turning away without a word. I saw on his ruined face a distant look. An old pony almost beyond caring for such 'legendary duels'. Slowly, he simply trotted away without saying anything in return, holding the door ready, and ignoring the taunts from behind him. Unity and I rushed in, getting inside before he slammed it shut, and cast us all into darkness.

I'd done it.

We'd done it.

We had come up here and gotten Unity back.

She was with us! Finally, *finally* with the rest of us after so long. After so many times being torn apart. I had been through darkness, fire, and ice to find her at the tip of the world, but now after all that, I could only think four words.

It was worth it.

Now we had a real chance to rest in shelter for once before whatever happened next did. Whatever secrets we'd find in here could wait until we were ready again, yet the race was still on. Sleep was beyond the time we had. Indeed, there was scant enough to get off our hooves and take some food and medicine.

The way in led to a small system of tunnels bearing scaffold platforms. Nothing exactly impressive, yet the way the tunnels expanded said a lot about what might lie ahead. In this dark, blank area we simply found spots and took a chance to breathe.

Or at least, try to breathe in my case. Glimmer had seen the truth, but I didn't much want to think on it. The snow was making it worse up here! I was shivering, and feeling hot in my chest. Now more than ever, I felt scared for it claiming me. Not after I'd come so far.

Not only had the scale escalated around me, so had the stakes. The more I found to love, the more I felt I had to lose.

I forced the thought down. I didn't want to think on that now.

To be fair, we were *all* shivering. The cold of the snow and wind outside had set deep once the adrenaline had worn off. Our clothing was soaked through, and our hooves numb. We each just found our own way to try and take our minds off it for now.

Brimstone Blitz sat silently as ever. Watchful of the ways in, guarding them ceaselessly. He hadn't said anything since Big Brutus had shown up.

Coral Eve lay recovering with her son, Glimmerlight aiding her. Her horn sometimes sparked on its own, lighting the darkness with a thin, blue haze. According to Glimmer, she hadn't burned out, but it had caused her a lot of shock. I hoped she'd be fine. We might need her power. A power I'd been *sorely* underestimating.

Ragini and Grizzly did some looking around, while Protégé joined them, sometimes. He mostly spent his time with that small book he'd somehow still brought.

Unity and I meanwhile... we simply found somewhere quiet to catch up. She told me of how they had dragged her down to the metro, about the same ambience she had to resist and of how they intended to use her as some sort of 'memory signal projector'.

Finally, I knew why they wanted her.

"My power, you see..." She drew out my statuette that sat between us, atop the page of my journal we'd been looking at, "I told you it's to bring ponies together. It's like I put a little bit of myself or somepony into something simple, like this statue. Not, well, literally. Just a replica, a sensation. A little magical field of memory, so they'll never feel alone or separated when they have it. I used to sell them in Friendship City on things like photo frames or treasured items, mostly for those whose lovers went on long caravans. It's like a magical signature. Everypony has one, not just unicorns."

"So, Grindstone wanted you to do that for something else?" I couldn't help but feel horrible for her, such a beautiful talent to be so misused.

Unity looked down. "Yes. I don't know on what."

She leaned against my shoulder as her magic flipped more pages in my journal. We went rather quiet. I just didn't know what to say more on it. Gradually, she moved back through the pictures I'd drawn since she had last looked, before looking at how many pages remained past where we'd first met.

"Murky, what's in those earlier pages?"

My heart dropped a little. "J-just... old memories. Before I m-met you. Bad times. I didn't draw happy things then."

"I'm so sorry."

There was another soft silence as she respectfully avoided them, instead looking at the ones I'd drawn of my mother, or even herself, and smiling a little. My nerves relaxed somewhat, seeing her chuckle happily at the ones of me flying. Just anything to feel friendly, to calm down.

Soon, I heard somepony trotting up. Protégé moved around the corner and looked briefly at us.

"Unity, I regret I did not get the chance to say hello." He nodded his head. "Are you quite alright to accompany us?"

Unity nodded, not really coming off my shoulder as he spoke. I sensed that it was similar to Coral and her son. Unity and I were just afraid because of how many times we'd been split apart. My very first friend was finally here with us all.

"I'll be fine, really."

"Excellent." Protégé's voice was quiet, weaker than normal. "We'll be moving out soon, you two. You did well back there. We've come this far. Let us push just a little further. See what the source of all this madness truly is."

He stood there silently for a second, looking at us, before turning and leaving to return to his book. I just couldn't shake how sorry I felt for what he was going through right now, especially as he kept it so private. A determination to succeed for his master, yet his own mind was showing him how vulnerable he'd been to orders and suggestion. Now he just felt so... distant. I'd always thought him a lonely soul. Every time I visited his office in the past for a 'talk', he had always looked suddenly happy, like he craved company. Just like he was deeply missing... some... pony...

My eyes crept back to Unity for a few seconds, watching her look longingly over my drawing of a handsome stallion with a beautiful mare, before looking back the way Protégé had gone. I felt myself wanting to say something, as thoughts gathered, scattered, and revolved in my head for a few seconds of rapid worry.

Hmm... nah. Couldn't be.

Old Grizzly's voice was curt, but authoritative.

"Alright everypony. We have to get going. This game isn't won yet, even if we hold more cards than they do."

Gradually, we began to get up. I reloaded *Rarity's Grace* and settled everything on me again, my soaked fleece feeling icky to get into. Unity and I had almost fallen asleep against one another, before being roused to get moving. I could see Coral Eve back on her hooves again. Everypony (and griffon) was ready.

Time to see truly what this was all about. The answers to what this all meant lay just

ahead.

Answers that would define what would certainly be the most important few days of my entire life.

“You seem to talk of this mountain like it’s... special. Like it’s something really defining to you.”

Yes, you could say that...

“...why?”

Well, it’s simple, really.

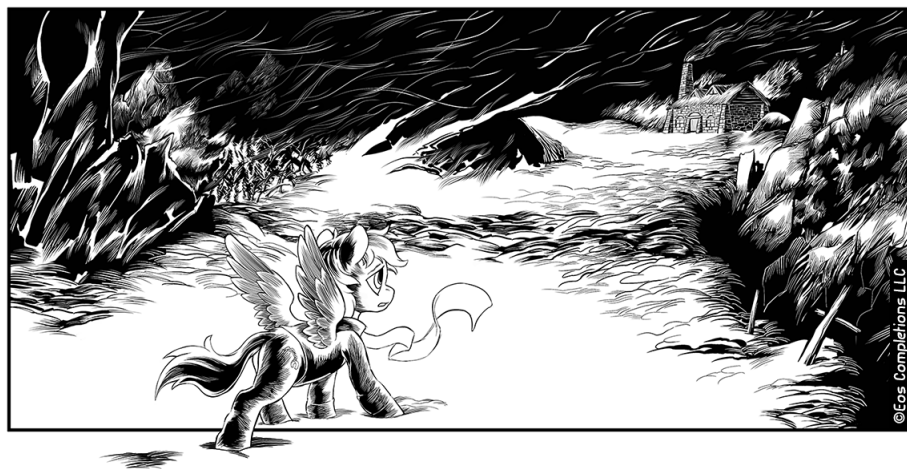
By the end of it, we would know the truth.

“About what?”

Everything.

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Just That Little Further – The end is in sight. Everything stands against you and you feel like you’ve got nothing more to give, yet you still find the energy to stick it out just that little bit longer or the heart to endure just that little more to perhaps just make it. You may sprint or perform other physical tests for a quarter longer than before.

The Legacy of Aurora Star

“Ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?”

“What’s it like to be so close to finding a long-sought truth?”

It’s hard to get the scale of how it felt into words. I’ll... I’ll try.

This had started long ago, when I stumbled across a PipBuck while being chased through the FunFarm and... wait, no... before that, even. Shackles had been hunting since before I’d even come to Fillydelphia. He and Grindstone had plundered the Ministry of Arcane Science’s secrets, its inventions like tools and salistoosers—

“Sanitisers.”

Yeah, them too. This had pre-dated any ‘story’ of mine but, for me, this began the same day I’d learned to think for myself. Every time I’d wondered about what that PipBuck meant or any small curiosity that had caught my attention in the Stable or... or in records that Glimmer read, I’d felt something building. Then of course came Pinkie Pie, who slotted it all together for me, told me that I was right, that I’d stumbled into being involved in something that had been going on for a long time... so much longer than I’d ever known. Or lived.

Something that had been going on for two hundred years through the ghouls who were once involved, and others who had picked up the pieces before me. Chance, or perhaps fate, had placed my life right where this centuries old story was coming together. Just ahead, I thought, lay every answer, and I... I... just couldn’t help but feel I’d missed something. Some vital clue.

There were the refugees disappearing into what I now knew was Ministry Station. Taken there by Doctor Heartcare, the pony who would become a maniacal magister of zebra-obsessed ghouls.

There were the memory machines, like the ones in Aurora’s Ministry, being replicated in some abandoned asylum, and integrated with the same memory learning technology found

in the spell orbs from Stable Ninety Three.

Skilled arcane workers like Aurora and Sundial had been drafted and forced to build... something for the zebras, who were entering through a secret portal.

This all fit together somehow. I could see some threads, I had some ideas, but the grand purpose remained tantalisingly out of reach. Red Eye's slavers wanted it for him, while Shackles' loyalists wanted it all for themselves to take back the power he'd once had over Fillydelphia!

Within all that, there was us. Six ponies, six slaves who wanted nothing more than to escape. Pinkie had assured me that the way out lay in what we found there. Maybe she meant the portal, maybe something else. Whatever it was, though... we had to own the knowledge for ourselves. We had to reach it *first* and take it. We had to know how it was this worked, so it could be used to grant freedom, not to take it away.

Of course, there was one problem with that plan.

"Protégé..."

Mhm. We *were* still slaves. Protégé still *owned* me. By his allowance and by his aid, I had rescued my friends, but only at the cost of having to help his side of the conflict! He'd be with us every step of the way, to an end that both he and I knew would leave us at odds with one another. He fought for Red Eye. We fought to escape our bonds.

He, Grizzly, and Ragini were with us on this. Right beside us. Already once on the train had we shown how close our titles of 'slave' and 'master' were to breaking. I knew where Protégé's loyalties lay.

All the same, I couldn't help but feel I had to somehow change how Protégé saw all this. That I had to get him to see the potential he had.

He *knew* all this was wrong. I knew he did! Nopony could go through what happened in the metro and ignore it. Yet, I could see the denial on his face whenever confronted by the realities of the city, and what it had done to him as well! I just hoped I could get him to see there was another way. Increasingly, I began to pity him.

This wasn't our final 'battle.' There were grander events to come. But this would be one of those defining moments. We six slaves had to work together, like the legends of those six ponies in the past, to achieve something any one of us alone could not. I had Unity back, and now finally we could do what we'd both wanted. Help one another!

She was a braver mare than she looked, but I couldn't help but feel a deep concern for her. Unity and I would have to stick together, we were the two ponies that weren't as strong as Brimstone, weren't hotshots like Glimmer and Ragini, and weren't dangerous magic users like Coral Eve.

Yet, even if everything around me was riddled with these momentous events filled with magic, history and incredible potential, I couldn't shake that one familiar feeling. That even at the end of what we'd find in there, I'd feel some slaver ready to stop me at the last minute.

"You mean Shackles? Grindstone? Old Grizzly?"

Nope...

"Oh..."

Beep!

Beep!

Click.

"I've got to try and leave this on as much as I can. Anything from now on is worth recording, anything could be some... some sort of evidence to take back to Pinkie! They're taking us in at last, down into the... well, whatever this place is. They still haven't told me why they want us here."

A sound of curious accents, distant shouting, and harsh tones.

"That's them. The zebras. There's three of them, but I've seen at least twelve so far between here and the metro hideout! They've got two dozen of us or so, just kept us waiting in here for so long in the dark off the mountainside. It's... it's so cold. I still can't feel my hooves, and my clothes are soaked through. There's an odd warmth from up ahead though. I hope we move soon, for all my fears."

A gasp, before the shouts passed down closer. Somepony sternly ordering them to move.

"I hope it still picks me up. They're moving us in! There's metal platforms in this cave, just off the ground. Like a maze unto itself! Wait, is... is that...?"

A female voice, young and nasal.

"Must you so stiffly order them around? They aren't slaves. They are still ponies. Ponies who volunteered for this, I might add. They're helping you. Why not show them a little respect?"

Then another, heavily accented.

"They will get reward, Aurora pony. Until then are workers. Until then are tools by own wish. Cannot have dissent. Be quick. Be clean. Be efficient. They will do purpose. As will you, as agreed."

"Don't forget what you need me for. You couldn't hope to do this without me, or without them and their skills. They are as essential to this as anypony. Perhaps you should show a little more gratitude to—"

Sundial gasped at the sound of a hoof striking somepony, accompanied by Aurora's yelp of pain. Sundial shuffled forward, drawing closer to the sound of the yelp.

"Zebra do not show gratitude to ponies. Zebra do not show gratitude to traitors. This was your choice. Now live with consequences. Until reward, you ours. Will find another way if you need removed."

"Alright... fine..."

There was a long period of heavy breathing, and somepony reasserting themselves. Then slowly, Sundial's voice. Quiet and careful.

"Aurora Star..."

"You know of me, then? I can't imagine what you think of me for this."

"I..."

It was all too obvious how much he wanted to help her. To let her in on his purpose.

"I know of you... yes. Are you alright?"

"I'll survive, hopefully. Whatever drew you into this, whoever you are, I am so very sorry..."

"It's, um, Sundial. I kinda got dragged into it. I really don't want to be here."

Aurora was silent for some time.

"Perhaps once I thought differently... stay safe, Sundial. Keep that PipBuck with you if you can. Just do what they want, what they tell you to. With enough work, maybe we can all get out of this. I... I just can't believe I..."

"You what?"

“...nothing. Dwelling on what’s been done only makes me keep questioning one unfortunate thing.”

They were back on their hooves; I could hear the sound of a pony trotting on metal. The procession was moving again, going deeper, farther in.

“What’s that?”

“What Twilight would think of me now...”

From the sound, she clearly moved on ahead before seeming to halt.

“Sundial?”

“Y-yes?”

“Just be ready. Please, no matter what happens in here, no matter how crazy things get, no matter what I end up doing... keep your head down and get out of here. Get back to your dancer in the sky.”

A sudden sound of galloping. She took off. Sundial started forward, his hooves sounding like he was really rushing.

“Wait, how did you know—”

“Get back in line, pony!”

“But—”

“Get back in LINE!”

He stammered, sighed, and no doubt shrunk back. A zebra huffed somewhere in the background. Entire minutes passed, the longest recording thus far by some distance. Then finally, he spoke again with his words tinged with light sobs.

“Now I’m just scared all the more. How did she know that?”

He sniffed.

“Seriously, how did she know!? Look, whoever’s listening to this? Somepony either tomorrow or... or in the far future or whatever... I don’t know what’s going on. It’s like I’m playing with forces I don’t understand! But... but...”

He took a deep breath.

“But her saying that made me feel like I can do this. I always knew I was doing it for Sky, but just having somepony say it... urgh, what am I even talking about? This is freaky. Can she read minds? I... oh my... wait, we’re coming up to something.”

Hooves clattered to a halt. That same zebra voice barked some commands in their own language and a sound of pistons was heard.

“There’s... there’s a door up ahead! A big one! Not like a Stable door from what I saw in those horrid drills, it’s square and lined with brass. I can see gemlights on it... we’re coming to something... something big... they’re opening it! I swear, I’ll find the truth about this. For Sky. It’s... it’s...”

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Ah! I... nothing! Noth—”

Click.

Slowly, I put down the PipBuck, biting my lip. I felt Unity place a hoof on one of my front legs, clearly seeing the worry on my face.

“That poor buck... he sounds only a little older than us.”

“H-he is...”

We were sat against the cave wall. This journey was only taking us higher since the train, farther away from the world I knew. Even inside, I could sense the sheer scale of the mountain around me, like an ancient warden of the world itself.

"I found his messages just after I first met you. He's been trying to help the pony he loves. A pegasus called Skydancer. They kept calling him to rush to the Stables with the Balefire sirens in drills and... and it made him worry. Every time he thought it meant he was being taken away to live while she died. It drove him to do this... to... to try and get her a ticket. He didn't feel he had a choice, he—"

"It's all right, Murky." Unity interrupted me with a gentle smile. "Of all ponies, I'm one who'd understand doing something like that for a pony I care about, remember?"

We shared a little smile then and there. Unity was right. She did know. And if I were honest, I could feel that knew it a little, too, when it came to my friends. I'd help her help him. She didn't have to be alone like Sundial had.

"And... got it!"

Behind us, Glimmerlight pumped a hoof with a 'Yes!' when the gemlight lantern she'd found on the way through these caves finally sprang into life. A hazy, somewhat glittering red spread across the walls, reflecting from wet rock and casting back shadows. I saw the forms of the others waiting around us and couldn't help but see the lush depth it gave Unity's similarly coloured mane.

Frankly, it made me wish I could draw in colour. I had to turn my head to cover my blush.

Yet, turning my head was what led me to see it.

Before us, hidden in the dark until Glimmer's lamp had given more light, lay a gigantic square door. Heavy, lined with dull brass, and bearing the indents of gemlights that no longer worked across it, we saw the doorway that Sundial himself had once passed through. I felt Unity stand up beside me and heard the others move up.

"Like a little turn of fate for us to find it, Murky?" Unity muttered quietly. "We must have been sitting right where he was speaking to his PipBuck."

Behind us, Protégé hurriedly marched up and cast his eyes over it. Leaning down, he began running a hoof along the edge.

"This looks important, to state the obvious..." His voice was quite thin. "Brimstone, Ragini, Grizzly, can you get it open? It seems that we may have found what we're looking for."

The two biggest ponies and the large griffon with us moved up in the darkness. It took them a good five minutes, straining and tugging hard, to get the rusted hinges moving. As it opened, I saw a strange glow emanating through the hole they made, that grew and grew! It lit the passage we were in. The light drowned out Glimmer's proud new lamp and cast across Protégé's face, glinting off his eyepiece. Slowly, the three pulled, and it finally swung open, revealing what was behind it.

Unity and I stood right before it, just beside Protégé, to get the full view of what lay within.

Sparkling, multicoloured light danced and played amongst a *titanic* cave. Hundreds of feet high and wide enough to fit an entire small town in, it stretched so far that it fell into darkness before any end could be seen. I felt my jaw hang open even as we all trotted into it. After an hour or so spent in cramped darkness, the enormity of this vast space was shocking. Moreso when I felt its unusually warm and gentle air, after the icy mountainside.

Every wall, ceiling, and even the floor, was riddled with jagged crystals of all colours. Rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and... and... whatever the purple ones were called! They pierced the rock, standing higher than a pony and glittering in the light from strung up lanterns hung long ago. Twinkling, they formed a starlit sky in the darkness above us, casting a haze like moonlight around the cave.

Yet, what lay at the clear centre of it all was what drew every eye.

We'd heard it was a gem mine. That had been right...

They hadn't said what *else* lay in here.

Ahead of us lay a stone platform held up on a terrifyingly thin strut of rock sticking out of a deep ravine. Upon it lay gold. Gold and silver and gems mixed with treasures, jewellery, and chests. A pile larger than an entire house was splayed across the entire platform, with slopes showing where it had once spilled haphazardly over the sides into the deep crevices around it.

Atop this pile lay a pile of bones bigger than any creature I had ever known. Bigger even than the balefire phoenix that had so terrified me at the start of my journey. A ribcage I could have trotted into was attached to a serpentine spine that led into an open-mouthed skull capable of devouring a pony in one bite! It spread over the gold and gems of its final resting place, startling every sense I had.

This wasn't just a gem mine.

It had been a dragon's lair.

"By all that is good in Equestria..." Protégé wandered forward, and I found myself following him automatically, my eyes wide as I stared at the spectacle before me. Looking down into that chasm where the golden pile spilled, I could see the pit was filled beneath us. Like the dragon's storage for whatever wasn't on his own pile.

Glimmerlight couldn't keep herself from looking longingly at the pile in the middle, pulling Chirpy to her side with a hoof and patting his head. The foal was mimicking my own wide-eyed look.

"See that, lil' rascal? That's the treasure you've wanted in all those adventures we played at."

"This explains quite neatly why Shackles and Grindstone are so interested." Old Grizzly shuffled up near us, combat rifle hung ready by his neck. "Bits aren't worth as much as caps now, but this? Now it all adds up."

No, it didn't. It might explain why in a simple sense why Grindstone originally took an interest in this place, but this wasn't the answer to it all. I knew that deep down. Shackles wasn't interested in riches.

Along the outskirts of the cave I could see more huts and buildings. Minecarts lay near the pile, filled to the brim, but clearly not moved for hundreds of years. Mining tools lay in piles while a vast array of overhead beams and pulleys looked like that were once used for lifting ponies carts to the dragon's otherwise unreachable platform. There was an entire mining camp in this place, just as Protégé had said. The perfect cover for Aurora's work deeper in.

Speaking of which, I could see a rather large entrance just before the cave's size faded into darkness. It bore the symbol of the Ministry and had carts of gems waiting outside it.

I'd bet my front right hoof that had something to do with it.

Not literally of course. I liked that hoof. It was my favourite one!

I saw Ragini creep forward to the edge before I perked my ears up and realised why. Both

her and I waved at the others to get down around the same time as I heard shouts and sounds coming from somewhere.

Below us.

Shuffling up beside her, I poked my head over and squeaked lightly at the massive, looming drop below. Ragini merely rolled her eyes.

"How would you *ever* cope with being in the sky with fears like that, flightless?"

"I... I'd learn?"

"Sure. Now, you seeing what I do?"

I sure was. Below us, down toward the dragon's pit full of gems and gold, I could see more platforms leading into it with ramps and track systems. There was another entire campsite down there on a lower level! Around it, I saw ponies start to march in and take up positions for a shift. Slavers organised it, many of them seemingly wearing trinkets they'd found.

Suddenly, the reason why Shackles commanded such respect from slavers made a *lot* more sense. It may not be his end goal, but having this place would give him a lot more to hoof out if needed. Knowing this, I imagined 'bonuses' for those in his ranks were pretty high.

"Right there, laddies! Let's see that get movin' fer the next train. Ye don't got the time after all that ruckus back there!"

I felt my skin crawl. I hadn't sworn much even in my mind, not even as much as I used to, but I'd never enjoy it. It the sneering accent that I had come to associate with incoming grief.

Below us, Sooty Morass was directing things. The marketeer was no doubt *very* interested in all this. Beside him, I saw Grindstone and...

"Oh no..."

Shackles.

"Your profit is permitted, trader. However it is not our primary concern. That **runt** and those carrying him along are up there somewhere!"

The massive slaver pointed up and I curled back quickly from the edge. I felt a hoof on my back, turning to find Glimmerlight near me. Unity stood nearby too, biting her lip.

"Aye, Mister Shackles... but let's not miss out on a wee opportunity if I says so? Ye see, dragons store the best under themselves, so's I reads last night, y'see? I got a mind to head up there meself anyway, if you're going."

Ragini motioned back, signalling to Protégé and Grizzly rapidly with a talon that they were coming up.

"**Fine**, trader. Accompany myself and Grindstone, bring your workforce. They will **not** reach that place before we do. That, and I have a slave to reclaim."

Grindstone's voice sounded so distant, and so old. He truly was growing weaker by the day. "I will have Brutus go with you. He has been eager to work with Wildcard to hunt down the old Warlord. He will prove a capable asset. Everything he's done when not in my service has been to become the beast to kill Brimstone Blitz. I don't think I can order him to stay back much longer. Just be sure to bring the mare. She *and* the pegasus are important."

I felt myself shiver. Brimstone was the only pony strong enough to take on something like that monster, yet now I simply felt fearful for Brim's life. He still wasn't as strong as he once was after the Pit.

Shackles nodded slightly, turning back to the slavers behind them.

"Then get moving. Trader, do not delay. We cannot lose that runt. On your head be it if

you get in the way.”

He stomped off, bellowing for slavers and slaves to assemble. Immediately they began to move out to a ramp leading into a curved way around the chasm. One I could see would eventually lead up here. Fear began to creep down my back as I saw Sooty giggle with glee upon hearing me mentioned, and he called for his own assistants. The force they had coming up was not small. I saw perhaps fifty ponies, slavers and indentured slaves.

Protégé saw them too. He made a quiet sigh before sitting back.

“I suppose that’s it then...”

He looked to the same Ministry door I’d seen earlier.

“...the race is on.”

‘She *and* the pegasus are important...’

What did he mean by that? I knew Shackles wanted me, but... it didn’t sound like he meant that as simply as it seemed. The sinking feeling of what Shackles had said in Ministry Station settled home, that he had more reason to want to own me than just his personal amusement.

It didn’t take us long to traverse our way across the mining camp. Ragini led the way, bounding much faster than a pony could canter and climbing atop obstructions to check the way ahead. Twitching her head side to side with that freaky method of griffon staring, she watched for anything untoward before waving us forward. We moved around a giant crystal springing from the rock floor, naturally polished enough to reflect all of us as we passed, and clambered over raised wooden platforms. Very rapidly, it became clear just how large this chamber truly was. A dragon’s lair, big enough to contain such an impossibly huge beast. My eyes kept drifting to the side, onto the massive skeleton that seemed to be looking this way.

I wondered what had killed it. The thought of perhaps being caught in a balefire blast and limping home to recover before dying of its wounds atop the riches of a thousand-year-long life came to mind.

Gradually, however, that Ministry door was nearing. I could see it had remained open. There was just enough space for a pony to squeeze through and get a grip. Brimstone didn’t hesitate, galloping up to it and throwing his back into widening the gap. Even while he strained, I could hear the slavers moving closer, coming higher. They were still some time away, but voices carried far even if they sounded tiny in this vast interior space.

“We don’t hesitate in here,” Old Grizzly stated as he turned to us all, “we go in, we look around, and we get out again however we can. This is on the clock now, and we can’t come back this way. I’d say if they don’t stop, we have at most fifteen minutes before they make it up here. Hopefully there’s another way to the mountainside we can find to escape and get back to Fillydelphia. Everypony helps look, but if you find anything do not remove it. Only myself, Ragini, or Protégé will take anything. Call us over first.”

Glimmerlight cocked her head to the side, raising an eyebrow. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you are a slave.” Ragini snipped with far less diplomacy from behind us while scanning with her rifle. “Don’t think we don’t also know what you all really want. We’re not stupid. Anything found in here is for Red Eye’s purposes. One of us three will take them. If

you try to take anything, well, just don't."

I saw my sister merely roll her eyes. "You've got two memory-magic-capable unicorns, and you want to restrict them in a situation like this? Fine, fine..."

I glanced at Protégé as we went in; surely he understood that we could help!

Yet, I saw him merely look back at me and nod. He was agreeing with them.

"Let's get moving. Time is of the essence."

The door finally shifted farther open. Brimstone cracked his neck and stood aside to reveal the dully lit rooms beyond and—

I heard something. Somepony *talking!*

Waving my hoof, I tried to warn them. Everypony rushed to the sides of the door, while I crept up beside it and poked my mirror around. Hazy blues and purples flickered and throbbed from ancient gemlights across a sort of reception that had been crudely built into the cave. Behind it, a more proper tunnel had been built, curving around out of sight.

"What's got you, flightless?" Ragini had crept up to me, standing over me to poke her head around. "I don't hear anything."

"I... I did, I swear!"

There was nothing now. It had faded away almost as quickly as I'd heard it. The noises of Shackles, Sooty, and Brutus approaching from behind with their small army of slavers wasn't making it any easier. Sighing, I shook my head.

Protégé glanced around. "I don't have anything on E.F.S. There's nopony in there, Murk."

"We can't wait." Old Grizzly motioned inwards. "Better a possible threat in there than sitting in the open when that lot comes up behind us."

I'd been overruled, but Grizzly was right. With Shackles' slavers gaining ground, we had little choice. Truth be told, I'd have preferred if it were just Protégé with us. Briefly, I wondered if Grizzly had come because he didn't trust just Protégé and Ragini alone with so many of us, especially with ponies like Brimstone and Coral.

Protégé led the way, turning and moving into the reception with his revolver already drawn. With us all following him, I found that it dropped sharply in temperature compared to the stuffy, warm dragon lair behind us. Perhaps the constructed walls offered some sort of air conditioning system? I could see the occasional vent bolted to the rocks above us, so it still running wasn't impossible. Arcane systems could last a *long* time, I had discovered in the past. Heck, I wore one on my right foreleg that had survived a balefire explosion.

Yet, this felt discomfiting on the skin... a deathly cold. Little bits of frost twinkling on the walls told me that this was more than just some climate control. This area was open to the outside world in some way.

That meant a way out ahead of us, I guessed. Who said I was stupid?

Ragini brought up the rear, taking a second to pull the loosened door shut behind us. Unfortunately, the lock was long destroyed, but Brim pushed the reception desk in front of it. Anything to delay them a bit more.

I trotted beside Unity, taking a little comfort in her presence. No matter how out of depth I felt, knowing she was there helped me at least feel like something was going right. Going by the look on her face, she felt the same. That similar look of nervous anticipation. I'd filled her in on most of everything that was going on, leaving out only the part with Pinkie Pie. I wasn't too keen on making her think I was some crazy pony just yet.

Then I heard the voices again, and swiftly reconsidered if *I* thought I was crazy.

No! I had heard something! Mumbling, and a mixture of tone, like different ponies. I

knew it!

Waving to the others, I ducked into the side of the corridor. Despite not hearing anything before, they all followed my lead. Ragini again cocked her head to the side, before finally nodding. She'd heard it too.

"It's like faint buzzing and voices in the distance. Around this bend." She spoke quietly, unslinging her rifle again.

More voices. Some overlapping each other and some falling silent. They were so faint, clipped with buzzes and rasping gargles of sound. I heard one cut out mid-sentence, another broke into a long, droning hum. The hairs on my neck lifted as Ragini and I crept forward to look.

The curve of the cave didn't last long before we came to another opening. Yet, only when we got closer to it did I see that it opened out again into another large chamber. Not as large, but filled with the tinny scent of metal and crisp air. Like that of a workshop or a machinery floor.

The colossal room was crammed with arcane technology. A fully equipped laboratory, easily on a par with Ministry Station's cruder constructions, with rows of worktables, terminals, and numerous large machines, the purpose of which I could only guess at. The sparkling glow of memory orbs lying across the floors and surfaces glinted in the cave's dimmed light, beneath a pale blue aura. Gemstones littered the walls, while large hanging lights were chained to the ceiling far above. I saw memory machines of varying designs and sizes. Long blackboards were covered in symbols and words that I, in my limited knowledge, could never hope to read, but many didn't even look like Equestrian script. Around the lab's edges, I could see further doorways leading into tunnels.

This complex stretched much farther than this main room. At the back, I could see a spiral stairwell heading up to a ringed balcony that was lined with bookcases and desks, a central supporting column that soared all the way to the roof itself. At the centre, towering above all other machines, there lay a kind of... of altar? It was made of metal and wood, holding numerous orbs on arms that looked as though they could turn. Maybe it was—

"YARGH!"

I screamed, leaping sideways and clambering behind Ragini. I'd seen a pony appear from the side of the entrance, galloping right to left! Shimmering like static, barely a comprehensible form, it faded into nothing before it reached the end.

"They're coming!"

Bursting into sparkles, the form faded. The lights that had formed it fell to the ground. It... it had looked like... no, it couldn't be.

It had been like the projection orbs. Twilight, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie... the ones I'd found. This was like... like something really similar to that, but really dirty and crude by comparison! It—

The pony ran by again! Appearing from the right like static feedback in the air itself, it fizzed and broke in the air. Only the vaguest shape was there, but I could see a terrified face looking backwards, before it exploded once more into nothing.

"They're coming!"

"Murk, that's like what we found at the orphanage." Coral moved forward slowly, her stamina still low and her eyes sunken.

Ragini half kicked me out from behind her and advanced inwards, around the bent to see where the afterimage had come from.

I bit my lip as I saw the ghostly pony once again, desperately trying to do something at a table. Whatever they had been touching was long destroyed now... but allegedly when it had been recorded, the table had still been in the same place. After a few seconds, they yelped and sprinted toward us, phasing through Ragini as they went into nothingness.

"They're coming!"

I couldn't help but swallow and try to contain myself as I now saw an old and gooey-looking skeleton, still somewhat preserved, lying not ten feet away from where the form had been running.

"They" had gotten the pony.

Unity wandered closer, seemingly more intrigued than immediately repulsed, before pointing at something. Near the table, there was a little shimmering orb. It *was* a projection orb! Its light was much weaker than the ones I'd seen, but the sparkles returned to it and ejected every time the poor pony played out those moments. Either side of me, I heard both Glimmer and Unity gasp at the sight. An master's display of memory science.

Gradually, I felt my ears perk up a bit. Against the static of the pony, I could hear other voices faintly. Little blue glows within the machines and in side rooms hinted at others out there amongst the labs, too. Eternally repeating over and over...

Old Grizzly cast his eyes around.

"Beyond my ken, this is. Right then, split up. Forget what I said, just grab what you can, and we'll search you before we leave. Make it quick. We don't have long to discover what all this is and how we get whatever it is you think we need, Protégé..."

Behind us, I heard a sudden shout. A whooping howl. Wildcard's raiders. Everypony jumped around, looking back the way we'd come. The noise had been far off, but much closer than we'd ever thought they'd be by now.

"Fifteen minutes was a bit optimistic, I think..." Brimstone rumbled, turning his head around to pass his eye over Grizzly.

"Agreed, warlord." The old slaver hummed for a second, before stamping. "Everypony go now, get into twos. You all know this stuff better than I do, so I'll go hunt for a way out while you search. We *need* to know we can get the hell out of this place if we have to. Don't dither."

As if to accentuate that, another scream warbled up the tunnel, echoing off the walls and finding its way to us, followed by a snorting bellow. That of a minotaur.

The orb phantom rushed ahead of us, away from that tunnel entrance.

"They're coming!"

Ragini stuck with Protégé. They hurried off among the machines, apparently happy for us to look on our own, at least. Old Grizzly insisted on remaining near Chirpy, yet allowed Coral to carry her son upon her back as they took the opposite direction, galloping off toward the spiral stairs. Glimmer was rather excited to dig into this, cantering forward with a grin into the centre of the room to quickly disappear behind a huge spark generator. Brimstone went with her, the watchful protector.

That left myself and Unity. Picking another way from Glimmer and Brim, we began our own hunt.

Really, we both felt small amongst these big machines and long rows of tables. Neither of

us were the largest ponies around, and (by my estimation) pre-war ponies must have been bigger anyway, for everything felt slightly too large for us. The fear of a ghost image suddenly appearing near us played on my nerves every single step. Something about it just... just didn't sit right.

Were these ones just prototypes? Earlier models? Aurora had mentioned they were hard to make. I couldn't have imagined those six projection orbs she mentioned to Twilight just came into being without a few hiccups along the way.

"Where do we even begin?" Unity cast her head around, picking up some schematics with her magic. They didn't show much other than how to create a random part for something neither of us knew.

"I... um... I really don't..." I felt myself stammering, put off by the quiet of this place. It felt like I was disturbing it by speaking. Everything was so still... so ancient and without understanding. That huge altar at the centre did nothing other than loom in the dull light, offering no explanation for its presence. Even the occasional noise of a phantom pony in the next row, obscured but still hissing in the air, didn't seem to break up the silence as much as make it worse.

Every so often, the sounds of that small army approaching behind us came as a reminder that we had to speed up. The quiet lab mixed with the stress of being hurried was more nerve-racking than I might have imagined. I could pick out individual voices and words, now. Grizzly's estimate had been *way* off.

The mere fact that we occasionally stumbled across the remains of somepony didn't make things any easier. Shivering, I stepped around where a pile of bones lay next to racks of polished quartz plates. They had been hiding from something.

Our search found lots of tools, empty memory orbs, and workbenches for cutting gemstones. Many of the precious stones *gleamed* from where they'd been polished and shaped into all sorts of wondrous things. Other tables seemed to have been used in the process of putting them into constructions of metal formed by a motley collection of crafting machines near the wall. I could see lathes and drills, all bearing the marks of the Ministry of Wartime Technology's construction. Briefly, a pony appeared and bent over a lathe.

"Mark four? I said Mark three! It needs to be smaller to do this safely. One crack and we lose the range on—"

They cut. It didn't repeat. The glowing orb that lay on a small shelf beside it went back to vaguely glowing. Maybe they didn't all restart instantly? I just gulped, but Unity seemed more willing to trot over and glance at the orb itself.

"Creepy... but it looks like you were right that they were stealing from all the ministries, Murky. There's even an old spritebot over there!" Unity was looking over at the same things before turning back to move deeper in. "Kind of feel jealous I was just sitting in chains while you went off and found all this old stuff..."

She cast me a little grin over her shoulder, and I felt myself blush as much as shake my head. How could she grin *now*?

"It... it wasn't worth being jealous of. A lot of it wasn't nice..."

"You had your friends, though. They saw you through it. That's what friendship's for." Unity slowed down until we were trotting side-by-side. "Call me old fashioned, but I still like to believe that a good group of friends can accomplish *anything* in this world. I think my mother brought me up on too many stories of a certain six ponies..."

That made me giggle. So had mine. I just hadn't been free of thought enough to really understand at the time.

"I... I think so, too..."

"Then let's put our trust in all this. As friends, with the others too. We'll find everypony we want to. Who I'm looking for, those two fillies you mentioned, and... Sunny Days, was it? Surely if we all work together, we can find a way out. A way to go home."

That made me smile. I really liked it when she spoke as optimistically as she did. Unity had a way with words that just made my heart lift. A certain innocence. She really had been born in the wrong era, more so than *any* of us.

Then she actually laughed, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Sorry, I'm so ridiculous. Listen to me, like something from a child's storybook..."

"It's... it's not..." I bit my lip, before hesitating to ask, "but why are you, uh... crying?"

Unity paused, passing a hoof to her eye as though surprised there had even been a tear. Gradually, I saw her look ashamed, or embarrassed.

"I... I didn't realise, sorry." She looked around. "Just this place... there's so much magic in here. I... I don't normally notice it but..."

I saw her hesitate, looking back toward two phantoms huddled in a corner, looking terrified and not speaking, simply clutching one another.

"I can... can *feel* them..."

"Huh!?"

Twisting back to look at her, I could only look confused.

"Murky, I can create replica signatures. I've told you that, but to do that I have to be able to recognise them. But a pony's own magical signature... it doesn't just end. It remains in all the things they do. All the things they've touched. I could pick up a librarian's favourite book, and I'd probably know how to recreate their signature from it with my special talent."

Okay, *that* was a whole new level to Unity's magic I hadn't even realised. I found myself looking around in bewilderment to check if anypony else heard.

"You can sense ponies?" The question felt dumb, but it was my first thought.

"Oh... no. No, I could never know that much for sure. It's just a... a feeling. Like a subtle taste on the tongue. Just like the signatures I create for trinkets, it's a subconscious thing. Just, there's so much in this place... so much magic used... so many signatures all melding together that it's so strong and... and..."

She suddenly whimpered as she saw the phantoms again. Unity was a tender but resolute mare; I'd never heard her make such sounds.

"These orbs... they give context to it! I can *see* what I'm feeling! Their signatures left behind just enough to show me who they were. It's terrible..."

"I'm sorry..." I didn't know what else to say.

"It's... it's alright, Murky. This is worse, but I've had to deal with it before out in the wastes. Abandoned homes and old public places, mostly. I'm just glad all of you are here. Your friends are good ponies with strong hearts. Even in just a few hours, they've shown me that. I feel like they'd help me as much as I'd want to help them, and I can't tell you how good that is to know after being alone for so long. Let's... just keep going. Sooner we find it, the sooner we can leave, right?"

Unity grinned weakly and tapped the bump of the statuette in my chest pocket.

"Just hold on to the feelings of those that mean something to you, and we'll get by this."

I couldn't help thinking of how incredible it was, what she could do. Her talent was so

subtle, yet so deeply meaningful.

Just like her.

Even as I went to reply to her, my eyes caught something. Behind her, through a row of memory extractors, I saw a flickering light in one of the side tunnels around the edges of the big chamber.

“Unity, over there.”

I pointed, and she looked where I’d seen it. It took a second, but I saw her nod as well.

“Lets go.”

Cautiously, we approached, and I poked my head into the tunnel, waving to Glimmerlight before we went. I wanted somepony to know where we were going. Three or four small rooms lined the sides, two to my left and two to my right. I could see one was an office with a simple desk and terminal. But the light was flickering from one to the left. With a look to one another, we moved in.

It was a small room, but every wall and ceiling had been cut from the stone to a smooth finish. Below us, the floor became tiled, and I realised that a sliding glass door could close it off entirely. At the back were shelves of folders and bottled stones. In the middle, there lay a single table with precision cutting tools on it. One crystal sat there... the most *beautiful* crystal I’d ever seen in my life. It shone with a rainbow of colours refracting out of it, casting a spectrum across every wall of the room every time the light flickered through it. Sitting upright, it had a few spires of its own, yet was rough around the base, like it had just been cut from the cave wall.

There was an orb on the table. I was about to say something, when it suddenly flared right in our faces. I heard Unity yelp in shock at the two ponies appearing right in front of us. I cried out just as much, jumping on the spot.

We took a few seconds to let our hearts calm down. Only then did I realise we’d both grabbed hold of one another. With a little nervous grin, I let go.

“Better me than the griffon, huh?” Unity smirked at me, “At least I won’t kick you.”

“Ah, heh... yeah.”

“Really?”

Our eyes shot forward again to the two ponies standing before us around the table, whether mares or stallions I couldn’t tell. They seemed to flicker in and out of reality, their shapes indistinct and constantly changing colour. Translucent and fluctuating, the shape made horrifying gurgling noises that pitched and squeaked before settling into more normal voices.

“*Why this thing?*”

“*Aurora said it’d be handy. We need to test them anyway for her project. Might as well do it here.*”

I could properly see what these were now, with this longer recording. It was like the memory projection orbs, only much less refined... and really bad quality compared to the stunningly lifelike ones of the Ministry Mares. I could barely make out the features, and the voices sounded robotic. If the ponies made any more than a slight turn, then they faded into a wreck of magical sparks that fizzed and popped until they stopped moving again.

Really, it made me feel quite unsettled. Two phantoms standing where they once did, a replay of the past. The chilly air made our breath visible, and the puffs of mist made the memory projections warp and bend whenever they crossed over it.

“*Okay so... so entry number what?*”

"Doesn't matter. Recording first crystal resonance testing. We've discovered some of the purest forms of crystals we've ever seen in this mine. Normally, gemstones all have some degree of contamination in their makeup, but these ones are remarkably genuine. The magical amplification we're getting from them is astounding! The possibilities for orb research with this stockpile of crystals are endless!"

"Endless? Hardly a scientific term. Now, connecting the charge plates... shall I do it?"

"Feel free, my friend. We shall make history someday."

The shapes fuzzed out of focus, before juddering and reappearing near the end of the table. They were working around something that didn't exist. I presumed that the crystal in front of us was not the one they meant. The position was different.

"Casting a basic light spell and... woah..."

"Woah, indeed. The orb won't pick this up, but the crystal has lit. It has amplified the light spell's potency! Common gemlights would be obsolete if crystal this pure was used instead! See, gems make up the basis of Equestrian magical technology. Think of them all, spark batteries, gem packs for energy weapons, and talismans. They all use gems. But what if these gems could boost the power of something?"

"Now, now... you know it won't work on a wide scale. It's too impractical to—"

"Never mind, Aurora has to know it worked. She'll want to get started right away. This technology is too great to miss out on. Those ideas she had? What our benefactors want? This could let them create new, more powerful orbs! This little recording one might actually work someday! Imagine, not using this for what they want, but proper projection orbs and—"

Unity suddenly yelled and leap back. Turning, I joined her, as another form suddenly walked into the radius of the orb, passing *through* Unity on its way. Static and wild glimmers solidified into the shape of something a little different from a pony. A zebra.

"Has it worked?"

"Oh! Yes, yes, sorry! We were just excited. It... um... never mind!"

The orb suddenly flashed again, and they seemed to reset.

"Really?"

"Why this thing?"

"Aurora said it'd be handy. We need to test them anyway for her project. Might as well do it here."

Gently, Unity reached out with her magic and plucked the rainbow tinted shard up. The deep red of her magic sent the crystal into a wild cascade of colour that shone off our faces and reflected all around the room, passing through the light forms before us and warping them even more.

"Higher-yield crystals for those fancy orbs you told me about. That makes sense. It would take something greater than any normal substance to do such a thing. It's takes a special talent like mine just to even give a feeling of somepony from an item. To make somepony actually appear takes..."

She shook her head.

"Aurora Star must have been somepony truly amazing to have created such a thing."

My mind thought back to the memory orb I'd experienced in her office. Sitting near those masses of light green or cream orbs that strewn her floor, I had seen life from Aurora's perspective. Seen her brilliant but naïve presence as a Ministry Hub leader. Nasal-voiced and

forgetful without orb help, she wouldn't have been somepony I'd have clocked for a revolutionary memory magic scientist. All the same, life had taught me that the most unusual of ponies could do things no one expected.

"Well, we can't take every crystal in the mountain with us. Think we should just move on, Murky? I don't really imagine we have time to waste..."

Snapped back to reality, I found Unity had trotted nearer the door. Nodding, I followed her back into the side passageway we'd found. I noticed some of the gemlights were growing dimmer or more inconsistent the further they got from the main chamber. The air grew cooler every foot we travelled, the frost on the walls growing thicker until I was shivering all over again. We kept going, exploring this abandoned part of the laboratory, seeing the roughly mined-out caves formed into crude rooms and areas containing many shards of crystal. Books lay on the floor, and we stepped over glass from shattered windows into the rooms either side.

"H-help... somepony... help..."

We both stopped. Just ahead, I could see a dim light from the door on our right, near to the end of the hall. It was just ahead of a large frosted-over door, one I guessed likely led to an open cave. Weak and spluttering, it made the same fizzled sounds as the other phantom projections. Near it, a vent was blowing icy wind into the corridor; the chilly cutting drafts felt piercing on my body.

What was below it drew my eye. There was a long stain of blood that ran from below a duct on the wall. Its cover had been torn off, but judging by the clean vent within, they hadn't gotten inside. Instead, the trail led into the room with the glowing light.

"They killed us... they killed us all when we were done..."

The light faded, before springing back into life. We shifted forward, knowing it was just an orb, but feeling a dread creep into the air all the same.

Within the room, there lay a skeleton collapsed against a bookshelf. Covered in white frost and fallen tomes, it had clearly been knocked back into it. A dark stain covered the floor around it, leading to a silvery orb between its legs. The orb flickered, before sparking into being. The shape of a pony gathered around the skeleton in the same precise shape of how it lay, reforming the poor thing over and over for centuries upon its own corpse.

"H-help... somepony... help..."

"Oh, please no..." I muttered to myself, a hoof on my mouth, and I struggled to keep my eyes dry. I could feel them welling up as I saw the dark stain across the bookshelf behind them and recognised the punch of bullet-holes in the wood. They had been hunched there helplessly when someone had stormed in and... and...

They'd left this pony to bleed to death.

"They killed us... they killed us all when we were done..."

Unity gasped quietly as she saw it, stopping in the doorway, while I passed inside. Behind me, her voice was tiny.

"I'm so sorry..."

"Huh?"

I looked around, but she silently slid past me, kneeling near the figure with a look of mourning.

"I can really *feel* this one. He activated this orb himself."

Her magic gently picked up the orb, momentarily setting the image to warp out of position before she dropped it right back in the same place with a gasp. She fell back,

dropping onto her hump like she'd just been shocked. Quickly I jumped to her side, seeing her face blanch.

"Fear..."

"What?"

"So much fear... like I could feel what he went through when he set the orb going. Oh goodness... I could feel it so clearly. And... and seeing him here, and sensing it all... I just. I... I need to do something else!"

Unity pushed up, stopping just short of shoving past me as she went to the rest of the room, clearly looking to distract herself. I was left for a few seconds gazing at the last orb this pony ever used. before regrettably moving away.

Carefully, I tried to see if there was anything worthwhile around the desk in here, but with Unity reading for me, it became clear that this pony was nothing but a logistics accountant for the mine. Just some innocent worker who'd gotten swept up in all this. Saddlebags with binders lay on the floor beside an abacus and a few holiday magazines. I imagined this was a very lonely office.

"There isn't much, Murky. The most I can see is some papers detailing how they tried to hide the findings in this mine. They must have made any special orbs here before sending them to Ministry Station for, well, whatever they were doing down there."

She read a little further, biting her lip in a clear attempt to fight past what she'd felt in here. I felt distinctly helpless, poking my head back out to the corridor. I could hear Grizzly shouting for an update. Time was running out.

Her willingness to push past the horrors in this place of death gave me a whole new respect for her ability to get through that which troubled her. I knew now how she had withstood Ministry Station.

"They keep mentioning components... comparatively few orbs. Components for... something. It's never mentioned. It used a lot of crystal, though. Any ideas?"

"H-help... somepony... help..."

"N-not really..." I gulped, "Probably whatever it is at the centre of Ministry Station. The crystals let them store more power, though? Does anything mention where they went?"

Unity rifled through more documents before lifting a paper with a symbol of three butterflies on it.

"Yes, actually. The Ministry of Peace signed for a... Doctor Weathervane? Pre-organised deliveries of orbs for megaspell research? It was Aurora Star who signed this one out... and another for six ordinary memory orbs."

That *had* to be the healing megaspell that had saved my life! Aurora Star had sent some to the Ministry of Peace, and tried to give one to Twilight and all the Ministry Mares too. They hadn't been 'ordinary' at all. One made a megaspell with the purest crystal and the other created six *functioning* memory projection orbs!

Why was I getting the feeling that she'd been trying to cry for help this entire time? Trying to get somepony to see she was hiding something? What kind of maniacal surveillance did the zebras have that she had to hide these subtle calls in the logistics footprint? That she had to rely on ponies who might realise that those orbs *weren't* normal without her saying a word. Had it been so bad that she couldn't have just told anypony? Did they really watch her that closely?

Or... maybe she was just trying to hide the paper trail from Pinkie. Was I giving her too much credit? Sundial seemed to think she was just a scared pony like all the rest of us.

We didn't stay there long. Taking the papers with us, we slowly and respectfully made our way out, before dashing back toward the main room.

I didn't need a special talent to feel the sadness Unity was battling the entire way.

"They killed us... they killed us all when we were done..."

"Come on! Hurry up, all of you!"

Ragini's shout carried across the room as we emerged. I could see the griffon by the entrance we'd come in, watching the corridor. Seeing the pair of us enter, she waved a talon.

"You found the big fancy secret yet?"

"N-no!" I shook my head as Unity kept going, moving into the centre of the lab.

"Well then get moving. They're on this level. The dragon bones distracted them, but we've got a couple minutes at most before they come this way!"

"They're coming?" Grizzly voice boomed across the room. He was up on the balcony above us. "There's a way out up here, I believe. The stairs keep going higher. Everypony, find what we need and then *get up here!* Murk and Unity, you two get onto the balcony and start hunting those rooms opposite me! *MOVE!*"

He proceeded to direct Glimmer and then Protégé from his vantage point, I couldn't see them amongst the barriers and tall cabinets, but I heard their responses. Soon after Glimmer did appear briefly, carrying a small bag of orbs She had her lever-action rifle readied up and pointed, and gave me a quick, encouraging grin before darting off toward the back of the laboratory.

"Hey, Unity!" she called, "Keep him safe!"

Gee, thanks sis'.

"Oh, I'll keep him out of trouble! Had to do that enough with somepony before!" Unity laughed, nudging my side. "Aww, doesn't she love you?"

"Oh great, there's two of you now..."

Just hearing a friend laugh was such a welcome relief in this place.

"Oh, we mares gotta stick together after all. Say, Murky, think your grapple could reach that balcony?"

Unity was right. With a little aiming, I managed to nail the overhanging room above and whizz us up to it. Ragini stayed below, watching the tunnel entrance. With no safety railings in place (I stifled a groan), it wasn't particularly hard to get onto the upper floor and see the many research chambers laid out before us.

We were on a clock. Slavers, minotaurs, and raiders were coming. We were in a creepy lab filled with orb phantoms. Yet somehow, we found time to smile at one another.

Sticking together, we advanced into the rooms. This was no longer time to edge about carefully. I could see everypony starting to hurry below, and we did so, too. Tossing books carelessly aside, we hunted the workbenches and drawers to find *anything* that might tell us what all this was! What that thing in Ministry Station was!

Two offices... three, then another lab of crystals and orbs. I almost screamed as a phantom appeared in the middle of a table the moment I ran in. It was more broken than any thus far, glitching around and moving its head as though writing in thin air. Behind it was a massive blackboard, the chalk long faded from it. Casting my eyes over it, I saw sketches of the altar at the centre of the main room surrounded by orbs and numbered

ponies. A line was drawn between them and a machine that looked like the one I'd seen in the Ministry, the one with the buck stuck in it. Another line went to the machines that extracted memories... which led to the altar again... then back to the ponies and... urgh...

This was all so *hard*.

"Hey, what are you doing in here!?"

Shrieking, I spun with my back to the board. My shout startled Unity more than the voice itself, making her drop an orb from her magic. It rung on the floor like a tiny bell, rolling beneath the table. Before us, an orb phantom shimmered and fizzled its way in through the door. It was little more than a wash of static in the air, before quickly forming into a more solid, and surprisingly high quality image of a pony.

It was Aurora.

The one we'd been near already perked up, sparking.

"I'm... I'm recording what we've been doing today, Ma'am!"

"Sparkler, you know what I told you. Don't record too much on paper. Use the orbs I gave you all. Not that it matters, you should be gone by now!" She advanced closer to the table.

I shivered as she looked directly at me, before realising it was at the blackboard behind me.

"I... I am using the orbs, Ma'am! It's just over there. But I find it easier to write, gets it all straight in my head. This is all such complex stuff, it's like we're advancing years in a few months. How could I leave?"

"I know. The team downstairs still hasn't gotten the memory nexus to focus enough power to really activate it, so we're looking into some sort of tandem power source. If you want to stick around then you'll have to tell the zebras I demanded it. You know what they think about not sticking to their plans."

Unity trotted near to me, mouthing the words, 'Memory Nexus?'

"Hey! I can hear them coming, get ready!"

Ragini's words shouted up to us.

"Get down now! Get to the stairs! They're coming!"

Unity and I looked to one another. I saw the same look on her face. This recording *could* maybe find something! Without a word, we both nodded. A silent decision to wait this out and listen.

"But, Ma'am, do you really think we'll get what we want now? I'm getting scared, Aurora. They are getting more eager, more aggressive. I know you told me you wanted to —"

Aurora's form hurried forward, a hoof going to Sparkler's lips.

"Hush. Not on an orb. You've been saying too much on those audio diaries already. Listen, we finish this quickly, we get back to Ministry Station, and we'll take care of it, okay? This can still be saved, for all our mistakes. Now get down and help them. The Nexus is projecting on its low settings, but it's lacking... something. The test spell we put in it just isn't sticking in anypony's mind longer than the old spell orbs so it's just one big inefficient method, as usual. Maybe a—"

"A signature!"

Sparkler interrupted so loudly his phantom warped and distorted. That wasn't what made both of us jump though. Below us, we heard a gunshot.

Ragini had engaged them. They were here.

"Get moving! Over here!" Grizzly screamed to everypony. We wanted to go, but this was so close to telling us!

"Aurora, I had been thinking on that. Everypony has a signature, you know that. A magical signature to their bodies. Well, you know how you were toying with being able to replicate that once? I thought... the Nexus isn't projecting properly, right? Maybe it's because the memories we put in it for those spells. They don't have a magical signature, they're just orbs. Nothing but literal data, and ponies forget 'data' all the time, that's probably why it fades. But with a real magical signature or even a replica of one, maybe it'll—"

"Watch out!"

A deafening bang sounded from below, shaking the floor beneath us and making the phantoms go haywire. Ears ringing, I realised I'd fallen. Unity galloped outside, looking over the balcony. This room we were in, it was directly above the entrance to the lab Ragini had been watching. Unity turned and shouted back to me, a sudden look of worry on her face. Holding my head, I waited till sound started filtering back in.

"—a grenade, Murky! They're coming in! Right below us!"

Staggering forward, I saw a black mark on the ground floor right beneath where we hid, around the entrance. Ragini was sprinting away from it as slavers poured inside. I could see Old Grizzly hoisting a thick metal desk near the top of the stairs to use as cover, firing down at them. One slaver cried out, going down and being trampled by the raiders coming in behind him.

They clutched mostly melee weapons, but a couple sent a chattering hail of submachine gun fire toward Grizzly's position while on the run. Wildly inaccurate, but still making the big slaver pull his combat rifle back into cover behind himself as shots sparked and flared off the surface he hid behind. Just what did they make that table out of? Well, Grizzly wouldn't have chosen it if he hadn't been sure it was thick enough.

Behind me, I heard the conversation continuing. Against my better judgement, I spun to look at it again as I saw it begin to fade off.

"—genius, Sparkler! We'll get right on that. This could do so much... so, so much. I know that's not what they want. Listen, they don't want to stop at spells. They want to try and make ponies—"

"I know."

"Okay. Come find me in my cottage upstairs if you manage anything. I need a little time."

Aurora moved away, her form passing into nothing. Sparkler seemed to sigh, before breaking up on the spot and vanishing.

Cottage!

Upstairs!

That was something! Her own place! We had something!

Below me, the skirmish was unfolding dreadfully as slavers stormed the entire laboratory. I saw Ragini taking what cover she could behind the altar, snapping shots with her energy rifle at the slavers and raiders. One raider took a hit that burned the bottom of his jaw off. He kept going until Ragini had to pump another shot into his face. Even then I saw the corpse twitching, some mad drive forcing them to try and crawl.

The return fire was intense. Driving Ragini back, they forced her to take cover and relocate immediately, scrambling and diving to get behind a memory machine with a

ricocheting bullet pinging past her tail. A war cry howled into the air and Brimstone emerged from the left side of the lab. In his huge hooves he held what looked like a... a safe? Straining, roaring, he hurled it toward the slavers and sent them scattering as the heavy item crushed down among them. I heard multiple voices wailing out. A quick glance saw their legs trapped beneath where it had landed.

The unusual attack gave my friends time to fall back, find better positions, and meet up.

From behind the slavers, Wildcard charged into the lab, laughing maniacally at the violence erupting around him. With his presence, the firepower they started to put out below us all became overwhelming. Grizzly was pinned, Ragini was huddled down as the gunshots and energy sparks flew around her. The noise echoed around, becoming a crazed firestorm as more and more slavers hurried in. They crouched in cover, using mouth-held guns and magically lifted weapons. Raiders started rushing around the flanks, their muscles straining and desperate drug-fueled eyes glinting with delight. I saw three of them meet Brimstone and break into a melee as they swarmed onto him without an ounce of fear. Coral Eve appeared near the back, trying to get her son up the stairwell before shots clattered into the spiral's metal frame. The unicorn yanked Chirpy back, falling in beside Grizzly. I even heard Sooty Morass shouting orders to the slavers, trying to get them to avoid hitting some machines.

This was madness, a whole battle condensed into such a cramped area.

My friends needed help, somepony in a better position. They needed something to... what was the word? Cover them?

Apparently, Unity could think faster than I could. I blamed my head ringing from the sounds hurting my poor ears.

"F-follow me! I've got an idea!"

She galloped back into the lab, her telekinesis widening out to every one of the cabinets and tables, grabbing every orb she could. Phantoms went wild as Unity picked each one up in her magic, activating them. I noticed that even as she moved them, the angles at which they projected went crazy as the alignment of the orb was disturbed. One ran upwards through the ceiling.

"Murky, help! This is... this is a lot!"

Her voice sounded strained. I thought it was the limit of her telekinesis, before I realised it was something else. She could feel every one of them! All the signatures. All the sensations of a pony's individual unique magical taste on each orb came to life around her as phantoms whirled, screamed, laughed and cried all around the two of us. It was overwhelming her. It had to be, it was enough for me!

"Murky!"

I rushed over, finding Unity staggering with watering eyes. Her magic flickered a couple times as I helped her over toward the doorway, a great mass of phantom orbs following us in the air.

"Right ahead, Unity! The balcony is right there!" I guided her through the door, before feeling her hoof push me back. Her face was pained, tear stained, and hurt; but her eyes bore a harsher glare.

"They hurt you all."

The phantoms swept and faded, spiralling around her.

"They *killed* you. I feel it! Your fear, your regret. They wanted to use the beautiful things you made for *evil*!"

Slowly, I backed off. This wasn't the Unity I knew. It was almost like she was embodying it all, letting the feelings wash into her, and push her to the limit.

"These ponies want to do the same two centuries later! Just replicas or not, let this be your chance to fight back against what you once couldn't! Give those who want to save your legacy a *chance! Go!*"

With a great cry, she flung every single orb. They careened out onto the balcony, over the edge, and rained down. The orbs went everywhere, falling, bringing with them an invading storm of ghosts. I heard slavers suddenly scream, never having seen these strange and disturbing sights now dropping on them from above. From my hiding spot, I saw the terror in their eyes, as dozens of spectres ran around them, fizzing in and out of reality. They flurried around the slavers, reaching toward them and failing to fall when shot or swiped at.

Faced with the ghostly attack, many of Shackles' band turned and outright fled. Others fell to the ground wailing. Some slashed and shot at them, hitting their allies. The first phantom we had seen also ran across the entrance once more.

Amongst the chaos, their fire lessened. Protégé appeared near Ragini, firing into their ranks with six quick shots from his revolver, overcoming his astonishment at what had happened to the slavers. His eye caught me looking over, and he quickly waved toward the stairs.

Wildcard appeared below us, chasing after phantoms. Swearing and screaming at them, he slashed and turned into a frenzied blur as they refused to react to his attacks. Stopping amongst them, I saw him screaming with them, rolling onto his back and kicking his hooves into the air as he fell into the madness of their presence, even as his raiders became disarrayed around him, and slavers howled and ran into alcoves, or back the way they'd came.

I saw Glimmerlight able to get moving out of cover from the distraction. Brimstone got her moving toward the back, followed by Protégé. Unity's idea had worked. It had worked perfectly. Grizzly had gotten up the stairs, followed by Coral and Chirpy. It had—

Below me, the ground suddenly splintered up. Gunfire from below sheared through the wooden balcony floor and sent both Unity and I dancing back and forth to avoid it. I felt her pull me, before we were galloping away around the long balcony. I caught a glimpse of a pony far enough into the room that he'd seen us and was pulling the trigger again and again on a long rifle pointed at us. I screamed, running just ahead of the furious gunfire until both of us leapt through a broken window into a darkened room.

The solid stone floor I landed on stopped my thoughts rather harshly. Unity fell in afterwards, landing atop me and knocking the air from my lungs. Every part of me stung, my chest most of all, and I felt my right eye swelling again. Behind us, the fire washed across the window as we held each other down, being peppered with glass and bits of broken stone and wood. Finally, it stopped, yet at Grizzly's bellowed command I heard those on our side pour shots into the slavers. I could hear the distinctive crack of Glimmer's rifle, and the deeper, powerful shots of Protégé's revolver. Thanks to our distraction, they'd managed to mostly hold them at the cave entrance, at least I thought. I heard Wildcard's laughter turn to a blood curdling and animalistic howl. Brimstone shouted back. Were those two fighting? I couldn't see what was going on in the main lab from in here.

Slowly, I got up and helped Unity to her hooves. The poor mare was already tired from her time with Shackles and Grindstone, looking as shaky as I felt. I couldn't see well in here, just the vague shape of piles of something in the corners and against the walls. Something

about it made me stop and stare.

“Oh... oh no.” Unity’s words were quiet. So quiet I was surprised I heard them against the gunfire going on just outside.

Turning, I saw her eyes wide, looking directly ahead but not at anything in particular. Around the edges, I could see the glint of tears. She had been heavily drained by the effort of that move back there, left vulnerable.

“Unity? What’s wrong? What is it?”

“So many... so close... I... I can feel them all.”

A blue light flickered around us. An orb at our hooves lit to form shapes.

“Oh... no...”

It wasn’t just a pony this time. It was *ponies*.

Many ponies.

Around us, it lit piles stacked in corners. An orb sickeningly left active where ponies had been... been...

I heard Unity retch, almost throwing up. I nearly joined her, my mouth dropping open and twisting into a horrified grimace with unblinking eyes.

All around us, there lay piles of corpses. The zebras had gathered them here, executed them in corners and rows. A dozen, no, two dozen, all lay lifeless. Their last resting place held in suspended orb magic. Some had open eyes, lifelessly caught in their last scream. Slowly, the orb flickered, leaving nothing but piles of bones and blank skulls staring back at us from every side in the same poses. It lit again, covering their bones in illuminated flesh to reveal the sickening sight. Then back again... and again... never ending.

My mind reeled, and I staggered against Unity. I didn’t know which was worse. My mind just couldn’t adjust. Couldn’t comprehend it!

Corpses... bones... corpses... bones...

A massacre held in perpetual imagery for all eternity.

Every which way we looked, some new face looking back.

“There’s too many! It’s like they’re all screaming, all at once!”

Screaming faces.

“They just crammed them in and opened fire! All of Aurora’s team...”

Dead bones.

I could see her face lit every time the orb played and knew she could see the same horror in my eyes. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to break down and cry at it all. Just let the nightmare that had happened in this room for the dozens who had been massacred play out until I finally found the strength to flee.

“Murky, let’s get out of here...”

“I... I...”

I felt her hoof take mine.

“Murky, I don’t want to be here. *You* don’t want to be here. Let’s *go*.”

I’d thought she was the one feeling it worse, but I realised I was frozen. My eyes locked on each of theirs, changing as the orb lit and faded each time. I felt her tugging me, pulling me along.

“I’m sorry, we can’t help them now! We can still help your *friends* though!”

That did it. I blinked, gasped, and turned back to her. She was weeping openly too, but trying to move me toward the window again now that the incoming shots had died off. She looked oddly calm for a second.

"I've always felt it bad, seeing these things. I always felt it more than others. He, I mean, you know who I mean, he... I think he always felt sad for me whenever it happened, but he helped me as much as I helped him to get by it. Let's get out of here now. I don't want to see this... or feel this."

I knew that feeling all too well myself.

Trying not to look around once more, trying to keep ourselves from thinking about leaving them all behind, we turned and made for the exit. Tripping over the window frame, we got back onto the balcony rather surprisingly out of breath. Just leaving the room was like stepping back into the land of the living.

I hadn't ever grasped the scale of it. This wasn't just a few scientists and workers in isolated rooms. The zebra extermination had been a slaughter, a massacre of ponies who'd been forced or coerced into this.

Very quickly, I began to realise just how much of a horror all this had been in the final days before the balefire. Somehow, I found myself hoping Aurora or Sundial hadn't seen this.

Gradually, I sneaked up to the edge of the balcony and peered over to gauge what was happening, trying to fix my thoughts back on the present.

Below us, the battle for Aurora's Lab was falling heavily in favour of the slavers. I could see some of Wildcard's raiders stomping on orbs and smashing them. With phantoms popping out of existence, the distraction was beginning to falter. Wildcard looked disappointed, almost hurt at them disappearing before a fury came across his face. I saw his expression snap, changing to a childlike glee as he looked at the battle in front of him.

I just didn't get him. Not at all. He scared me as much as he confused me.

They had the numbers. They had the raiders. They had Wildcard pushing into fire, strangely seeming to dance and bounce gleefully around shots while *singing*. He would get around a flank, trying to distract my friends in a terrifyingly sane and fearless tactic. Out of a side room, Brimstone launched at him, tackling the insane raider so hard his machetes skittered out of his magic.

They brawled, Brimstone slamming Wildcard's head against a table. Merely laughing harder, Wildcard turned and *bit* at Brim's neck with frenzied abandon. Crying out in pain, the old Warlord hurled Wildcard away from him, back toward the slavers.

I could swear Wildcard shouted '*Whee!*'

A shot flew near Brim, forcing him to rush back while holding onto his bleeding neck. Protégé and Grizzly gave him some cover. I could see Coral Eve now up beside Grizzly, sheltering her son behind that thick table at the top of the stairwell. Below us, perhaps a dozen slavers lay dead, their casualties even I could tell were simply because they had little cover coming in here. Even as I watched, Protégé leaned out, took aim, and fired a superb shot that struck a slaver on the back leg even while galloping between cover.

Slavers or not, a couple of his comrades laid down fire on Protégé until they could get out and pull their friend back into cover. These ponies weren't all merciless, they were trying to survive as much as we were. That meant they were fighting hard, and taking shots at anything they could while the raiders provided a distraction with their big pushes. The combination of sane tactics and reckless madness was rather terrifying to behold.

Unity and I simply remained where we were, mostly hidden. Neither of us were combat capable, not in something of that scale. A firefight channelled into a cramped lab was brutal and quick, ponies like us would likely be torn apart.

I saw Sooty waving at slavers, sending them running up to the right where none of my friends could see. I tried to wave to them, but they were all too busy fighting for their lives and poking out of cover only haphazardly!

Finally, Grizzly spotted the sneaking group from his position at the top of the stairs, before trying to hold them off with several shots in their direction. The slavers dove into the same side tunnel we'd explored earlier, getting away from him.

"Flanking! *Flanking!* Everypony get over here quickly, we have to get up! The stairwell won't hold!"

Protégé made a break out of cover, fired twice as he went, and cried out as a shot hit the ground before him and bounced up into his side. His momentum carried him into cover during the fall. Before he disappeared, I hadn't seen any spurt of blood. I hoped his armour had saved him like it had in the Mall.

The stairwell was going to be a nightmare. The fire from the slavers now surging around the flank Sooty and Wildcard had opened was just too heavy. We had some good fighters, experienced ones even, but we couldn't force them back. There was just too many and they had even bigger reinforcements coming as soon as Shackles or Brutus caught up to this advance party!

The thought of Shackles approaching was like a wash of ice water over my head. If they fought hard as it was now, how would they push with him in the room...

He was coming. Always pursuing, always there. I could almost *feel* him coming closer.

Off to our right, a huge bang sent my ears ringing. A part of the balcony collapsed entirely. Wood splintered and fell, dragging girders from their sockets on the rough rock wall. Shaking terribly, I cast my eyes around to try and get an idea on what to do. My friends were pinned, struggling to pin down enough slavers till we could get up the stairs! We had no way out! The stairwell would get us all killed with no cover, and the slavers had the only entrance!

Grizzly poked his head up, casting a glance around the slaver positions.

"Ragini, fire on the right! Protégé, pull over a rifle with your magic and get shooting on the other side! Glimmer, spot anypony taking shots at the stairwell! You'll all die if you don't get up here, so *take the chance! GO!*"

They obeyed. I saw my friends coordinate their fire under his direction from up high. He had a better sense of it all. To my astonishment, I saw what a few ponies working together could achieve against a larger but undisciplined force. One well-placed shot could make half a dozen slavers duck, so if they spread *just* enough, and if Brimstone could hold off those raiders who kept getting too close...

We had a chance.

I heard Protégé's voice shout out, sounding tired, "Into the cave! Unity! Murk! Where are you!?"

If Unity and I were going to cross it all to get over there, we'd have to go now!

Unfortunately, the upper level we were on didn't ring all the way around to them. That meant... going down into it.

Oh dear.

My eyes looked around for any other method, before finally coming to rest on that huge lighting rig above us even as Unity waved to Protégé, getting his attention.

Or, we could go *over* it!

"Unity, um, you probably won't like this but we could, um, y'know? R-remember getting

out the FunBarn?"

The look on her face said it all. 'You *have* to be joking.'

I shook my head and started readying up my grappling gun, twitching my hoof to flick out the mouthpiece. "If we go down we'll be in even more danger. This is just a quick, um, whoosh over and they won't have the time to aim at us!"

Unity sighed and shook her head, putting a hoof to her face slowly. "I swear, if you drop us *again*."

"I've been practising!"

"Sure."

All the same, she moved closer and held onto me. Rearing back, I fired up and hooked it onto one of the heavy hanging lights before standing ready at the edge. I could see a big long stretch of a walking space between the machines near my friends. I'd have to aim for that. Aim for that, then sprint to where Protégé was!

Yes! So simple. Yes...

"That bit there." I pointed to it.

"It's not a straight swing, Murky. How will you turn? In the middle of this?"

She was right. The bit I was aiming at was slightly to the side and pointed away from us. If we landed without turning to properly face it in mid-air, there was every chance we'd just hit the metal machines, or crash through those hanging quartz plates. I'd seen how sharp they were.

How to turn?

I remembered back to the train, and Glimmer's words. Ignore what Weathervane said, she'd told me... Flying didn't just mean flapping.

I remembered falling in the crash, how my wings had caught the air when they'd spread.

Taking a breath, I told Unity to hold tighter and flared my wings out behind me. She gasped in surprise, the first time I'd let them fully out since finding her again. I was going to prove I could make something of them, make something of being a pegasus for once in my life!

"Murky... your wings, they're..."

I just smiled to her briefly. "I've come a long way since the FunFarm. Trust me?"

Unity didn't even need to respond. The small smile she gave was all I needed to know she did.

I took a few steps back, before galloping forward. With a leap, we cast out above the lab. A horrible moment of freefall from which I felt my wings being tugged and whipped at behind me before the rope went tight and we *swung*!

We both let out a shout as it sped up, pulling our bodies and soaring over the battle itself! Shots flew by us as we went, phantoms flickered nearby, and I felt Unity nearly choke me with her legs to hold on. My puffy eye made it hard to see in the middle of all this! Slavers looked up, and I saw Ragini looking up with an openbeak as we soared above, my wings open.

I saw the open stretch, and felt us start to move up again at the far side of the swing, off centre! Gritting my teeth, I tried not to scream in pain as I shoved one sore wing out, the weak muscles and fragile bones responding like they had always known how.

Stiff, it spread and I felt the rush over every feather as it caught the air, only to find it set us spinning wildly! I hadn't realised my wing would give that much of a difference!

The grapple rope swung, and sent us spiralling toward the gap! Struggling to see it on

each spin, I tried to control it, my other wing flaring out! Briefly, I saw a glimpse of it in the few seconds it took us to travel the distance, and released the mouthpiece to I drop us, hoping against hope that I'd judged it right!

We fell a lot further than I expected.

I held onto her. I didn't know why I thought it would work, but my wings tried to curve out, to catch the air and slow us. Instead, it just sent me into a flat spin again, hanging in the air for but a millisecond, before falling again. Yet even that little lift...

Glimmerlight's words rang very true from on the train.

The harsh ground threw any thoughts from my mind. We landed *hard*. Rolling over one another, crying out from the impact, we thankfully rolled behind a refrigeration unit, before coming to a stop. We'd made it!

I lay on my back, so sore and breathless. I could feel Unity's hooves still around me as she groaned in pain. No, wait, that was me. Damn my thin voice.

"Murky... that... you've really..."

She tried to stand up, her hooves helping me up as my wings dropped a little, still out to the sides. There was just this little moment, away from the battle.

"I knew they'd be there for you someday."

I felt myself blush. "Thanks. I'm just glad we made it."

"Hah! Thought you'd made it, laddie?"

The third voice cut into me, forcing aside the odd tranquillity of the moment before a hoof struck across my face. Hard. Pain swelled throughout my entire head as I collapsed to the ground, wings splayed out by my sides. My tooth felt loose and shaky in my mouth.

"Murky!" Unity cried out before I heard her yelp too. The sound forced me to turn and open my eyes.

"Two for the price of one, the best deal in the house, me old da' used to say, lad. Hah!"

Before us stood Sooty Morass. The trader wore leather armour and carried a shotgun by his side. For all his mercantile background he had always been a rough and weathered pony. Amongst this madness in the lab, he had us alone! Unity lay by his side, dazed on the ground, near to his hoof.

"U-Unity!"

I tried to rush forward, but Sooty reared up, slamming down and kicking me back again. The impact on the side of my neck jarred my whole head. This time I didn't get up. I just laid there in pain, struggling and whining as I felt his hoof come down and pin my wing to the floor.

"I knew I'd get somethin' if I came in this little excursion of sorts, lad. Didnae think it'd be ye, eh? I had ye cheated from me once, laddie. Not again."

I tried to move, I really did. But with his hoof on my wing, he only needed to *lean*. I cried out again, and held onto my belly. The slavers must have moved up this side of the lab without anypony else seeing! My friends were shouting somewhere nearby, but they were under fire. I heard Ragini cry out as something hit her, and Grizzly shouting to Brimstone to help her. I couldn't see anypony, just Sooty.

"Now get up, lad."

That was his mistake.

He still took me for a broken slave.

The moment his hoof lifted, I spun, trying to whip the mouthpiece up and bit *hard* on it. The grapple line hadn't retracted yet and it began to cycle back in quickly. Quick enough

that before Sooty could do a thing, it crashed into the back of his head. Its hook tore a wicked chunk of flesh from his shoulder, sending droplets of blood over my face. Over all the gunfire going on as my friends engaged in the skirmish with Shackles' forces, Sooty screamed.

I desperately tried to swap the trigger mechanism, to get *Rarity's Grace* up. But my head hurt, my hooves were clumsy. Before I managed it, I was virtually immobilised by Sooty screaming at me, the sound straining my already sore ears from the mass of war sounds in this enclosed place.

"YE THINK YE CAN HURT ME, EH?"

His hoof slapped across my face, before going back to holding his shoulder.

"WE'RE ALL ALONE, LADDIE!"

I screamed as another hoof hit me, and I felt the whipcrack of my neck. I couldn't move! My body was aching too much! I kept seeing Unity stirring, but unable to stand. Sooty leaned in, pinning me on the ground so hard that I cried out, his braids hanging down either side of my face.

"YES!" His bloody face leaned in. "SCREAM ye wee runt! *Learn* to scream! Cos yer comin' with me! I got a line of *customers* waiting for you!"

No...

"They'll want to *hear* that scream! With wings that *work* I can get a fortune from you, laddie! A FORTUNE! You'll be their little *bitch* to squeal when they hold ye down over and OVER! I got a stallion who was *waiting* for you to arrive! *He'll have you now ye little bastard! I'll let him have all of ye for doing that to me shoulder! I—*"

"Hey! Goldilocks!"

Sooty looked to the side, a furious look in his eyes. The anger quickly drained from his face, however, as he saw somepony standing above him on the side of a tall machine. A lever-action rifle pointed directly to his head.

"If anypony is gonna be the one to set him up with a stallion, it's going to be *me*."

Glimmerlight's rifle blew the back of Sooty's skull clean off. The merchant's body fell off me, lifelessly dropping to the ground amongst a spreading pool of blood.

My sister quickly lept down to us, calling behind her as slavers started to move closer. Ragini appeared, as did Protégé. On seeing the scene, he galloped forward, quickly checking Unity, with great concern on his face at her dazed struggling. Without a word, he lifted her across his back. My sister helped me up, helping me onto hers as they struggled back toward the stairwell.

Everypony else was putting fire down, trying to hold off the massively superior slaver force to let us head upwards, using every barrier we could for cover. Everypony took turns covering as the next would take the vulnerable run upwards, working together to spot or shoot and move under Grizzly's commands.

Gradually, we all got upstairs. I saw that Ragini had taken another hit to her armour while pulling us up it. She now fell into cover at the top, winded and sore. Glimmer had a ricochet hit her foreleg as she had carried me up, but my sister had pushed on, carrying my limp body before dumping both of us. That stairwell had been totally exposed. It was a miracle of Grizzly's tactical thinking and direction that we'd managed it.

I tried to shout to them that we had to go up to the top, to find Aurora's cottage, presumably outside again. To tell them what we'd learned. It was Protégé who ended up near me to hear it, pushing me back in behind Grizzly's table and cramping himself into the

same small space to avoid fire.

"Upstairs! Aurora's Cottage! It's upstairs!" I repeated, far too close to his ear.

"Impossible!" Protégé had to shout to be heard, even to me, "They'll follow too quickly!"

"But—"

"Murk, we're completely outgunned! The best we can do is get away with our lives right now! We can't delay that many, we're all running low on ammo here!"

I could only watch as Brimstone effortlessly picked up a fully blown machine gun that Ragini had somehow dragged up here with his *mouth* and blazed away with his rather historic inaccuracy. I saw rounds go wild all over the place and somehow manage to even go into the roof. The sound at the very least kept the slavers down, before he threw it at Grizzly and turned to the stairwell.

"You say we need to delay them?"

Pushing forward, he started moving back *down*. Protégé looked aghast. To be fair, so did I.

"Cover him! Cover him!"

Looking downward, I saw Brimstone halfway to the lab floor again, galloping down the shaky stairwell before he started pulling at the stairwell's supporting structure. The entire thing swayed, held up only by that central column. Shots pinged around him before one slapped home into his back leg. His face contorted in pain, half-falling.

He was trying to rip the stairwell off to stop them following us! Glimmer reloaded and fired with almost psychotic effort, shouting down at him.

"Brim! Hurry it up! You're exposed there! *Come on!*"

I saw Wildcard poke his head up from behind the nexus, grinning. His raiders were clustered around.

"You heard her, my lovelies! Come on, the fun's getting away! Get them!"

A slaver looked up. "B-but—YARGH!"

The machete cut down from behind, Wildcard not even ceasing his grin as the slaver squirmed on it, wailing as he was pinned to a table.

"I don't like repeating myself. It makes me *BORED!*"

Wildcard's mouth drooped open, screeching the word like an impetuous foal! Yet the raiders around him whooped and dragged the hapless slavers with them into a gigantic headlong rush.

Everypony opened fire on them, only for Grizzly's big gun to jam. The others didn't have enough mass fire to deal with it! Below us, Brimstone was forced down. He had to duck behind the supporting column of the spiral staircase below us to hide from the fire coming in from all across the lab. Open on all sides, it wasn't much cover. I wished for all luck to protect him out there! The raiders were going to reach the bottom any second and push up to him! The big raider tried to smash the rusting metal, grunting with pain every time he moved.

Yet then I saw Coral. She moved wearily, but summoned enough power to her horn to set it crackling. She galloped down to Brimstone, hopping her front hooves up on the barrier. With a steely expression, she looked down the last couple of flights at the charging raiders.

"Oh for goodness sakes, such a big nasty pony and you can't even rip apart one little metal thing! You deal with that and leave them to me, you big baby!"

Brimstone's look would have been priceless if it weren't for how dangerous this was. Coral cried out, her horn flaring brightly, its energies uncontained and raw. I saw a few slavers go

into a shocked look, trying to rush away. She terrified them more than *Wildcard*. Clearly Coral was building something of a reputation among slavers.

“As for you all, get BACK!”

Her telekinetic wave surged forward, uprooting tables and blasting the front ranks of the slavers and raiders over one another, hurling them into an immobile heap. I even saw *Wildcard* bowled from his hooves and buried beneath a couple of unfortunate slavers.

Coral Eve slumped over the barrier. Breathless, her horn sparking, she was picked up by Brim and pushed to get back upstairs. Grizzly, the only one of us uninjured and able, helped pull her back up, leaving Brimstone to continue wrestling with the column. It was looking loose. I could see the bottom side of the whole thing beginning to sway.

Yet ahead of us, I heard a bestial roar. At last, as though having come from further back, Big Brutus charged into the laboratory. Without hesitating, he sprinted across, trampling slavers in his rush to get to Brimstone. The big Warlord looked back and snarled.

“Don’t any of you dare shoot him! Hold your wretched fire! Under the altar of times past we shall fight, Warlord! Come over here! Be the alpha you thought you were! FACE ME!”

The minotaur didn’t pause. Glimmer stood watching for her protector, allowing me to see. Behind us, the rest were rushing up into the cave. I felt the fear grow for Brimstone at the sight of Brutus. Two massive claws replaced his hands, his whole body filled with cybernetics, and I could now see his back riddled with injectors of combat chems and healing potions. Those baleful eyes glowed, and his movements were as thunderously organic as they were mercilessly robotic.

“Stay here and we shall end the tale of the Bloodletters, Warlord!”

“Oh, shut up.” Brimstone muttered and *wrenched* at the stairs far harder than was probably necessary.

The flimsy rusted metal came apart, dropping below him with a thunderous crash. The column tipped from half way down all the way to the ground, sending metal and wood tumbling atop the raiders and slavers still trying to get up again. It hit a lighting panel on the way down, ripping the hanging gemstones from their wire before the whole lot slammed into the ground like some sort of metallic tree. Galloping back up the waving remnants of the upper section, supported only by the roof, Brimstone got away before the section he’d been on fell as raiders scattered below the falling superstructure.

Below us, the roar of anger from Brutus made me actually cry out with pain. The massive claws on those cybernetic arms snapped at the rubble or even the walls, trying to pull at it and climb up by digging into the rock itself, but his sheer size could never allow it.

“You run! You old fool! Ancient coward! You are no Warlord! I will find you! I WILL FIND YOU!”

Brimstone stood and watched him, before again turning his back on the beast, sending Big Brutus into a frenzy of screaming. Over and over again, echoing the entire way as we fled.

We left him there, having bought ourselves more time to get ahead of Shackles’ group. We left the furious minotaur and the insane *Wildcard* amongst the phantoms of the past. He bellowed and screamed, slamming the ground as we passed further and further away to send tremors arcing down the cave we found ourselves in. An icy chill passed through it amongst the sleeping areas and offices. Dead, cold, empty...

There, we collapsed as a group. Wounds were treated with the few materials we had.

Ragini had her head bandaged, while Unity helped Protégé take his armour off to check below it. Thankfully, he had at most a bruised rib. Painful, but not crippling. Brimstone held a swathe to his neck and rested, looking very solemn. More than usual, even. He refused to accept a whole healing potion, taking only half for his gunshot wound.

I sat and watched as Protégé thanked Unity quietly for her help, offering her a small smile through the pain. She thanked him in return for being the one to carry her out of there before moving away. His eyes followed her briefly, before moving away to sit down and check what supplies we had left.

Briefly, he saw me looking and raised an eyebrow. I just looked away.

Really, we all had to ration out a bit. We could stop any bleeding, but no one, even after using our last supplies, was entirely healthy. Everypony was aching in some way, while Glimmer's hoof simply had to be bandaged up when we ran out of the potions. I'd felt her hooves tighten around mine while she bit a bit of cloth at the moment when Brimstone tightened her bandage to put pressure on it.

No pony had said it yet.

We'd come out in front, but we'd lost the battle.

They were just overwhelming. We'd been lucky to survive while on the defensive there, and while we had fought well, it was impossible to fight them head on. They'd find another way. They had the numbers. They had the stockpiles. They had the fresh bodies who weren't exhausted.

This wasn't the end. All we'd done was delay them, and next time we'd never be able to hold them off like that again.

If I weren't surrounded by so many who would have seen me, I might have still cried. Instead, I tried to hide the quivers as shaking from the cold. I saw everypony checking. We didn't have much ammo left. Protégé had twelve shots, Glimmer ten, and Grizzly twenty-five. Ragini's bullet-fed rifle was spent while her energy rifle she carried on her back at least seemed to have a significant charge left. Coral looked exhausted, and I knew when she was past the point of casting magic. Brimstone meanwhile...

I was afraid for him. Seeing him fight Wildcard, it wasn't the Brim I knew. He'd looked hazed. Slower. Older.

Compared to the mechanical hurricane that was Big Brutus, who looked like he weighed twice that of Brim and moved with a mechanical precision backed up with murderous rage, I really worried for my big friend. His injuries from the Pit either hadn't healed yet, or had permanently affected him.

On top of all this, it was just beginning to hit me how much of a one way trip this was. There was no way back down now. They would be watching everything.

I felt so helpless, a sensation I'd not felt in so long now. We were so close and yet I was beginning to worry if it would even matter.

Protégé looked despairing as he settled his barding back on.

"Everypony get up."

"Protégé..." I started to say it myself.

"We cannot stay here, we still have a mission." He turned. "The cottage is just ahead. We're under-equipped, but we cannot fail. Master Red Eye himself gave me this task. I will not disappoint him! We can rest there, not here! Aurora's cottage can't be far from here, if what Murk says is true. After that, well, maybe there's a way down the mountain again. A trail or something if we're lucky. Caves to go to ground in. Something! There has to be a

way to get back! If we can push a little further...”

I sat there, wondering if anypony was going to chip in the last part of that sentence in a rousing and dramatic fashion.

Nopony did. I just saw tired faces of friends and unsure allies looking down or at their pitiful remaining supplies. Only slowly, did Ragini get up. Then Grizzly after a long sigh. Brimstone nodded slowly before the rest of us, one by one, joined them.

Before long, I realised that I was the only one still sitting. Even Chirpy had gotten to his hooves, climbing up onto Glimmer’s back to sit and hug her neck for warmth. Gradually, I saw him look back at me.

“Mister Murky?”

His voice made the others turn too as I hastily scrambled up, stumbled as my chest and throat ached and tried to look even partly dignified.

“Always... always when there’s maybe even a chance, right? If it’s g-gotta be done, we’ll do it together, right?”

To one side, I saw Unity smile and wink at me. I was glad she remembered just who had taught me that lesson even as everypony else made to leave, throwing winter clothing over themselves. Maybe, just maybe we could find a way down the sheer cliffs of the mountain to try and get back after this. Maybe we could get away.

No numbers. No supplies. No advantage. No plan. No chance.

But never no hope.

The way out was just ahead. I could feel the icy grip of the outdoors wafting into this place. Chairs and desks to the offices on either side were coated in a thin layer of frost that looked as strangely beautiful with its twinkling glint as it did deathly in its cold stillness. I limped beside Glimmerlight, feeling comforted to be near my sister for now. Sooty’s words had brought back a bad time and thoughts that I knew had once made me do something very stupid.

“You know Murky, if you’re cold you can just give me a good snuggle. I won’t mind.” Through her own limp, Glimmer smirked at me as I realised I’d been leaning against her without meaning to.

Standing more upright, I tried to laugh it off. Instead my voice just sounded thin and fake.

“Thanks, sis’. For saving me again.”

Glimmer ruffled my mane lightly through the wool I had wrapped around my head.

“S’what I told you. We’re a team. Ponies who look out for each other. Isn’t that what siblings do? We’ll get through this.”

This time, I smiled more genuinely. Not out of reassurance, but because I saw how far she’d come. The Glimmer who’d once cast away harsh memories to only retain the happy was now doing it without the orbs. Staying bright even in this mission where we knew that coming out of this not dead or in chains was virtually impossible.

Yet behind her, I spotted something above an office door that made me stop.

“S-Spa... Spaaaaaa...”

“I could use one too, lil’bro but I don’t think—”

I rolled my eyes and pointed at the sign.

"No! No! Look! What does that say? Is that an 'S'? I... I'm not sure."

Those around us stopped and turned. Oh great, just *everypony* look at the dumb born slave who can't read!

"It says 'Sparkler', Mister Murky."

Thanks. Chirpy.

Above the office door was a name plate. Sparkler! Aurora's assistant I'd seen back there. Aurora had said he kept 'too much' on audio diaries in his office. Maybe, just maybe it was worth looking!

"Um, everypony just head on. I'll just check in here, I heard something about it."

I waved lightly, seeing Grizzly grunt and nod. He, Protégé, and Ragini moved onwards, eager to keep moving toward the door that led outside. Coral Eve and her son went with them, Unity tagging along a few feet behind. The young mare stopped and hesitated, taking only short trots before slowly following the others, not quite staying too close to them.

Or *someone*. I cast my eyes to the front and saw Protégé narrowing his eyes back at us at the pausing. Quickly, he glanced to Unity and turned away again.

Glimmerlight stayed outside the office, waiting for me. If she was there, naturally Brimstone was too.

Wandering into the office by myself, I shifted across to the threadbare chair before a simple desk. Sparkler had a very low tech-looking terminal that had long since stopped working. To my surprise, the frost had preserved many papers and quills in startling new condition, but they weren't what I was after.

"Murky, the time for clues is over. We gotta go. Aurora's cottage will have the answers for sure. What are you looking for? We don't have time for this!"

Honestly, she was right. Maybe I just wanted to try and guess before I got there. I'd been on all this too long, finding too many little facts and thinking of too many theories. I wanted to figure it out! Rifling in his drawers, I broke the frost that had formed over the joins to pick up various things.

"Murky!" Those slavers won't be held long if they find another way! Let's go!"

"Come on kid," Brimstone joined her at the door, "Don't be afraid of what's up there."

I saw Glimmerlight look to him with surprise. So did I, looking up from the cabinet.

Was I just... afraid?

It'd been so long, knowing the truth felt so alien. I wanted more clues, more journeying. I was with friends on a big adventure and I'd...

...I'd never felt so important in my entire life.

Looking at Glimmer and Brimstone, I saw that the warlord was right. He'd seen it. I was just delaying.

"I'm coming..."

Slowly, I grabbed just one audio diary of Sparkler's, strapped it to the ruined slab of metal that was my PipBuck, and trotted out toward them. My best friends stood waiting for me, Glimmer smiling as I emerged.

"Don't feel bad about this, lil'bro. Hey, when we all met in a slaver cell did you really think we'd end up here about to find answers to something really special that might even give us a way to escape?"

Brimstone allowed himself a grin. The shape curved weirdly as the scar tissue from his Pit injuries wound across his mouth.

"Still a little ways to go. Aye, we'll make it out of this one."

Encouragement? From Brimstone? Boy...

I hugged both of them, turning to continue after the rest of the group. Together, we slowly caught up as I turned on the audio diary. To my pride, I managed to piece my way through the commands to transfer the file onto my PipBuck itself. Inwardly, I wanted to thank Protégé unendingly for helping me be able to even read a little. I kept the volume low, just enough for just me to hear without disturbing the others. I heard Sparkler's voice, tired and stressed.

"Overtime something, something. I've lost track what day it is without sleeping for a couple nights up here. Too darn cold. We had some progress, but not quite what we intended. We had another nexus test run. Went a little, uh, awry."

I perked up. What did it do? Was this something?

I really, really wanted to figure all this out before we got there! I could see the others up ahead, clustered around a door. If this was to be my final clue, I wanted to hear it.

"We tried a simple one using the new signature concept. Everypony was on standby for emergency shutdown. Aurora's the only one of us good enough with memory magic to do that on her own safely but the Ministry Mares wanted to see her in Fillydelphia today. In hindsight, maybe performing a nexus experiment without her present wasn't a great plan, but these zebras are insistent. They're actually threatening us now. Anyway, we had four volunteers, all ready to see if they could learn the spell. Last test had minimal subconscious ingression so we felt confident about upping the number from three."

Sparkler sighed deeply.

"Not a good move. Up the power to account for more ponies and you make it harder to shut down... of course. It didn't go right. It projected too much of the memory, lots of subconscious ingression. We had to shut it down. Dazzler was on shutdown duty and... well that's the problem. It backfired. Shut down the nexus sure but... it took his memory with it. All of it. Absorbed into the damn orb!"

I trotted slowly, trying to let this pan out. Up ahead they were struggling with the door to the outside and, presumably, the cottage. I had time to listen. Brimstone wandered up, lending his strength to ripping the thick door open.

"They whisked him away to the medical bay. He was awake but unresponsive to anything. So I went up to the orb. I could feel a kind of connection between him and it, the magic was still connected to his body's mind as though he'd become linked with it. I regret to say it, but to help him we had to use his own signature to draw him back and then destroy the orb, one of only six made. Wasn't apparent at first but he's making a slow recovery."

The thought of that sent my whole body shaking. So this was to do with stripping out memories? Was I right? Was that it? But everything had been about teaching ponies things. Wasn't it?

Come on, this would be my last clue.

"So I think we'll wait till Aurora's back before we install the last orb. She won't be happy. She won't be happy at all. I just don't get what we're missing, the zebras keep telling us to continue but we're not getting what we need results-wise! The spell orb style of teaching just isn't sticking! All we get is higher levels of subconscious—oh... I... I need to go. Now. I need to speak to Aurora. I just had a bad thought. Sparkler out."

Click.

I wanted to throw the damn thing down. Aurgh! That wasn't enough clues! I hadn't

understood a lot of what he was meaning. Signatures and subwhatsists and spell orbs and stuff was all for unicorns! If I had time I'd have gotten Glimmer or Unity to listen. They could maybe help.

Until then, I was on my own to guess.

"Three, two, one... pull!"

The door sprung open. Immediately, the mountainside wind slapped me in the face with its chilly bite. Snow collapsed in through the door where it had been piling up. Outside was clouded in thick fog or low cloud to the point of almost no visibility amongst the whirling blizzard, but I could see vague lights dotted in the snow. Gemlights on fence posts to presumably guide ponies.

"Wrap up and stay close everypony." Grizzly pushed himself out into it. "Keep an eye out, it must be nearby."

Into the snow we went again. The gradient of the land went upwards as I realised there was a thickening dark. Night was falling on the mountain and taking visibility with it rapidly. I tried to stick behind others, letting them tramp down the snow for me to try and keep me from sickness, but the cold alone was seeping in. Unity stuck beside me, both of us helping push the other on or picking one another up if we slipped.

Another gemlight up ahead, that way...

Then another to the right. Follow the path, follow the light!

The snow below had been powdery and soft. Like a wet sand dampening me. Up here it was harsh. Like a thin layer of ice that snapped and cracked beneath us. Hard and sharp, it scratched at my hooves as they slipped and staggered. To my horror, I saw this brief path went past a cliffside to our right. In a brief letting up of the cloud, I saw it fall away into eternity.

The wool was blown from my head. I saw Chirpy climb inside his mother's saddlebag to get out of the cold. Brim and Grizzly smacked the snow aside, ploughing through it ahead as we all fought the wind to keep up. Annoyingly, Ragini was running atop the snow with her light flyer's footing to locate each gemlight as we had to push through it.

"Look up there!" Protégé was suddenly pointing the way, "There, about fifty metres!"

Unity and I turned our heads rather in unison to see where he pointed, my heart in my mouth. This was too cold, too radioactive. I didn't want to spend much longer out here. *Please, let it be the cottage!* There was a dull light in the cloudy fog, barely visible.

"Another gemlight?" I muttered. Unity shook her head.

"No, it's... it's a window."

Slowly, it became clear to us all. Through the whirling snow, there was a vague outline. Something the size of, indeed, a cottage.

And upon it, I saw a lit window in a warm orange.

We broke up, moving closer to it. Without really thinking, I moved in beside Brimstone. Bigger pony made for a bigger shelter from the cutting wind.

Hey, I wasn't proud.

Ragini had moved ahead, to which I saw her bounding back down through the snow. Her talons gave her quite an incredible grip in comparison to hooves, the griffon grabbing a rock poking out of the white floor and bringing herself to a halt just above us.

"You were right, Protégé. That's it!"

Shivering, trying not to think about the massive cliff that was just downhill from us, I tried to get a better glance at the dull shape appearing. If I slipped and fell, what if I just slid

all the way down and off the edge behind me? Please, just let me go a bit further! Unity held onto me, us sharing a little warmth as we waited. Although I partially guessed it for mutual comfort at this treacherous icy rock below us. Ragini looked around before pointing us to move on, closer.

“Cloud’s getting thinner up there too. Must be nearer to the top layers.”

She seemed almost happy. I wondered if the height felt good to her after being so grounded since the Mall riot.

Wait, cloud? Top layers?

Were we nearly *above the clouds*!?

I went rather wide-eyed at the thought. Not just myself either. Glimmer, Coral, and Protégé all looked rather astonished to think we were just that high up now.

“Let’s get inside, quickly please!” Unity, surprisingly, made her voice heard to the whole group, “We don’t have anything to treat frostbite and most of us aren’t clothed right! Chirpy, was that his name? He shouldn’t be out in this!”

It almost felt odd hearing Unity speaking to everyone. Up until now she’d only really addressed a few of us at a time and mostly just myself or Glimmer. Yet I could hear the wishing in her voice. It wasn’t just Chirpy that needed to get out of this, Unity had just been the first to speak everyone’s worries out loud.

Protégé looked at her intently as she spoke and nodded, waving Brimstone on ahead.

“Everypony get up there quickly, but don’t rush,” he muttered, trying to stave off shivering himself, “I don’t think Murk will be the only one suffering the radiation soon if we don’t get there, but we don’t need anypony falling.”

Slowly, we waded into the thicker snow surrounding it, feeling the gradient slowly increase until it flattened off sharply, reaching the cottage’s level. There was a wall around it, made of loose rocks about ten metres from the building itself. An old smashed gate lay before us. Not far... not far...

I saw Ragini holding her talon to the bandage around her head. Coral was having to lean against Glimmerlight. Unity seemed to be taking smaller and smaller steps each time, looking very blank on her face out here. I was feeling my knees going numb in all this snow. Even my chest started pounding harder.

I hoped that metallic taste wasn’t what I thought it was. My canteen was empty. Quietly, I whimpered to myself while we passed through the gate.

I saw it. A little hovel with a chimney and a single lit window from some light source within. Rock walls, strong glass, and wood windows with a mass of snow covering whatever the roof was made of. Piles of timber laid outside for use in a fire. Just like any quaint little dwelling I’d seen in the wastes from before the balefire, but clearly made long before the war. It was too rustic.

Ten metres away. So close, probably so warm inside. Out the wind...

Yet my mind kept thinking. Trying to guess on every step I took as I limped forward.

I sought out all the little things I knew and had seen.

In Stable Ninety Three, they’d been making spell orbs that could teach a pony something.

In the Ministry of Arcane Science, they’d talked about a machine to let non-unicorns use memory orbs.

Five metres. It was right there. Protégé was at the door and pushing it aside.

“Think, Murky, think!” I whispered eagerly to myself.

Refugees had been taken in by the zebras via Doctor Heartcare to work on something,

along with skilled Wartime workers and Arcane Scientists, yet Sundial had never seen the refugees ever again after he entered.

The zebras had a portal they used to come in and out of Fillydelphia in secret, building something beneath the city using Aurora's research that included those memory machines. Was it like that nexus thing? To teach more than one pony something?

I slipped and fell. Unity caught me, before she and Glimmerlight helped me up. I was... so cold... couldn't think.

That place, in Ministry Station, had a strange ambience that subconsciously affected ponies to do things against their will.

And Sparkler had just mentioned that the Nexus in the lab behind us had some subconscious effects...

Some sort of thing to teach zebras how to fight better? To give the zebras magic abilities? Maybe to let them strip out information from ponies and project it directly into their generals to have them exploit pony tactics? I could think of a dozen ideas that memory could do, but couldn't orbs do that anyway? Did they just want Aurora's machine to be able to use orbs? To use them faster? Was Aurora just leading them in a giant circle to try and confuse them? But if so... what happened to the refugees? Where did they factor in through all of this?

Then the big question, the one that ached in my mind. Why was Aurora working for them in the first place?

I felt the step of the doorway beneath my hooves, as I realised I was there. I almost fell inside, my friends helping me in. Sighs, gasps, and muttered relief filled my ears as the door slammed shut behind us.

All the clues. I had theories. Ideas. But I just didn't know if they were right. Yet now I'd finally come to Aurora's own hidden place and somehow I just...

I knew that in there lay the answer to everything. No more waiting. No more confusing clues. The answers were all here. They had to be! I couldn't entertain the notion that they weren't.

Gradually, I let my eyes open again to look at where we were.

Below me was polished wood, while the walls were made of chiseled stone. Within the entrance hall we'd come into, I could see my friends leaning on cabinets or sitting against the wall. A rather threadbare rug covered much of the floor, and it was all lit by a swaying lantern hung from the ceiling.

So very peaceful. So at odds with the howling wind outside on the top peaks of the mountain. It was almost possible to forget I was almost past the cloud level in here. I sucked in warm air, audibly forcing it as my lungs tightened and squeezed inside me. I coughed badly, feeling my throat burn. I could hold on. I had to. Maybe there was something in here.

Over the sounds of heavy breathing and chattering teeth around me, I could hear a distant crackling. A cosy, almost homely, sound of fire.

Wait... fire?

I rolled over and tried to get my protesting body up. Why would there be fire if there wasn't anypony—

Ahead of me, I saw Protégé with his revolver stood ready. His head was tracking something.

E.F.S. has spotted something alive in here.

“Everypony, get up. We’re not alone.”

Trotting forward, I realised I could hear no one past my friends. All were still exhausted, sitting and looking more surprised at hearing Protégé saying what he did. Brimstone was first to his hooves as Protégé and I slowly moved further in past the first open door. It was hard to stay steady, my knees wobbled and I was still making so much noise just trying to breathe.

The smell of peat smoke hung in the air like a fruity taste at the back of my mouth as we went in. Ahead, it seemed to be some sort of front room with several thick, plush chairs draped in old woollen blankets. A desk sat near the shaking window bearing a huge tome atop it. Numerous cooking tools hung from the ceiling, alongside some clothes, while ornaments and photos were thickly crammed onto every surface. Walls were covered in bookcases, while past that I could see the fireplace itself. Thick clumps of bog earth burning within with a richer orange than any wood could ever give. Casting a warmth across the whole room, I could feel the loving heat seep into my numb joints.

“P-Protégé?”

“Somepony’s in here. Just through there.”

He nodded toward what looked like an old pantry’s entrance with a grey tiled floor across the back.

“Hostile?”

“No.”

Brimstone thickly trod in behind us, shaking snow from his mane and waiting ready. Protégé advanced, his weapon held before him. I stayed just behind him, creeping up to peek around his body when he finally looked in.

Allegedly, we were not the ones tracking them. I heard something drop as somepony in there was surprised.

“Sundial? Oh my, is that really you out there?”

A mare’s voice. Ragged and rough like a ghoul. Elderly, yet nasal and higher pitched.

I *knew* that voice.

Pushing forward, I shoved my way past Protégé, knocking his gun away as I stepped into the pantry. Ahead of me in the dark, somepony’s shape slowly began to turn away from the assorted shelves I now saw glittering full of memory orbs. That weak looking shape of a pony I saw only by their glow as a vague outline trotting slowly toward me. I felt my mouth stammer, trying to say something.

“I... I’m not... S-S...”

Clad in a thick brown robe, she moved slowly toward me until the fire lit her face at last. I saw her horn and those milky eyes that I’d only once seen for real so long ago.

“You are... not? I felt his signature, there. Ah... you aren’t him, but yet you wear something of his. The PipBuck, it led you here?”

The hood was drawn back and I felt myself merely gasp the words almost in reverence.

“Y-yes...”

Before me, defined only in the flickering glow of memory orbs and a fiery hearth at the very peak of the wasteland’s height, stood the Ministry of Arcane Science’s Fillydelphia leader. The ‘traitor’ who I had sought to learn about and pursue the knowledge of. Here she stood. Alive. A survivor of the balefire, as a ghoul.

Aurora Star.

Explaining this had not been particularly easy to Grizzly.

We'd moved back into the rest of the cottage. Aurora had stoked another fire in an old dining room, a place surrounded by shelves crammed full of plates that never seemed to quite match one another in design. Here, she had bid us to settle in the warmth of her home and brought a small amount of RadAway. Presumably useless after she had become a ghoul, she liberally allowed us to use it.

I was still finishing the sachet I'd been given. The first half I'd poured into my canteen, the second half helped my chest die down for now. Even as I self medicated, I watched her ceaselessly.

The old Ministry leader moved slowly and with great reservation below that heavy cloak she wore. Across its sides I saw the emblazoned emblem of Twilight Sparkle. An old work uniform for being up here, perhaps?

Regardless, it was clear that Aurora was very weak. Her steps were short, and every movement shaky and careful. Coral Eve helped her get the fire going as everypony (and griffon) settled on the wooden chairs around the room.

There we had explained to Grizzly why this mattered. The old slaver had been in the dark for too long, simply believing there was some sort of weapon or magic spell up here to find. While Glimmer spoke for the most part, I kept finding my eyes glancing back to Aurora and a rather frightening amount of the time saw that she had been specifically watching me back with those piercing eyes of hers. The old unicorn sat in an equally old looking chair nearer the back of the room, simply waiting on her sudden guests to finish their internal chattering with a patient demeanour.

Yet as she saw me looking, her mouth moved slowly.

"You found poor Sundial's PipBuck. Where?"

Something felt odd. It took me a second to realise she'd spoken lowly enough that Aurora would have had to have known about my hearing in advance. How had she?

"In Fillydelphia. Behind the FunFarm on his... his..."

I found it hard to say, but Aurora nodded lightly.

"I had feared as much. Such a small pony caught up in a world he didn't understand, nor wanted. Yet when it forced upon him trials to do the right thing, he didn't hesitate to come with me. Brave boy."

Turning in my chair, away from the others, I spoke more directly to her. Coral and Chirpy were beside me, but only the little foal was really paying attention to what the two of us were saying. I could feel him leaning against my side, and I put a hoof around him.

"You knew him? I heard on the PipBuck that you'd met him at the entrance to the mines, but you make it sound like you two did something."

"That we did."

Aurora didn't say any more than that. She simply stared at me as though looking right past me.

"You look a lot like he did. You have the same will. Something that seems impossible is what you want more than anything. When I instructed him on how to encode his PipBuck, I had always hoped somepony more sentimental would be the only one to really follow the pattern and go to the efforts needed to return here. I can see that in the end it was the right thing."

Her mouth creased into a smile, her eyes shifting to the colt beside me that I was protectively holding close. Only now did I realise Chirpy was actually asleep. Everything had just been too much for him.

“But why did—”

“Then it’s settled.”

Grizzly’s voice overpowered my own as he got up. Trotting forward, he moved around me and held out a hoof to Aurora.

“Aurora Star, it pains me to rush upon this to somepony so clearly isolated for this amount of time. Yet whatever secrets your research in Ministry Station held is now under threat. There are ponies on this mountain, coming for you. We must get you to safety.”

The old mare sat in her chair and stared right back at him without even blinking.

“I can assure you, ‘Old’ Grizzly, that I am going nowhere. Not only because this is now my *home* but for that it is quite impossible. This snow, the radiation, it’s the only thing holding this wasted body of mine together with what it does for me as a ghoul. Yet that’s hardly why. Don’t think I can’t read the fear on all your faces.”

She cast her eyes around each of us.

“None of you have a plan. It’s clear as day. The waves of fear and hurt are glowing on every one of you. You don’t know a way out even for yourselves, do you?”

“Miss Aurora, I insist that—”

“You insist nothing, slaver.”

Aurora slowly stood up, her limbs shaking as she did so.

“I may be old and falling apart, but that doesn’t mean everything I studied and learned under the greatest unicorn Equestria has ever known has devolved too. Get good enough with memory magic and you can *feel* it on each of you. To see the signs, the little clues, and the subtle auras of magic surrounding every pony, they’re like a book to those who can sense them. You want to take me into the service of the monster that turned my home in the valley below into what I now look down from on high to see, and weep because of. I see the park where I had played as a foal turned to a pit where corpses are thrown. I see the house I grew up in become the lodgings of a pony who kills others. Kills them in what used to be an ice rink I had my tenth birthday party in. Kills them to decorate my bedroom with his victim’s skulls.”

Aurora shook terribly, and staggered to have to sit down again, scowling.

“I will have no part in your efforts. You will not take me back to that place. If I am to die, I will die in a place of my choosing where I have been comfortable. Not surrounded by the violated ruins of my old life.”

Grizzly looked about ready to speak again, but Protégé held his hoof against the old slaver. Moving past, he sat before Aurora, taking her fierce stare.

“Miss Star, the ponies who are coming up here seek to corrupt what you made in Ministry Station. Chainlink Shackles is a pony you may even have heard the name of in your time watching the valley below. He and those who follow him know of your research. They are inside Ministry Station, and they need only something they are sure is up here.”

“And you think that’s me, do you?” Aurora’s tone was contemptuous.

To my surprise, Protégé shook his head. He was weak, and shook up inside, but he was still the intelligent pony I’d always known it seemed. He actually smiled.

“I have visited Ministry Station. I’ve seen that it’s repairable, and I have seen enough evidence to suggest that you aren’t simply a key. I believe there is something else up here that

are after, something they want. I will not ask you to move but I do ask you to tell us what that may be. You seem perceptive. Well, look me in the eyes and see that this is the truth! I seek to deny Chainlink Shackles the ability to abuse your legacy. Please, at least help us do that. Help us stop him. Don't let him turn your research to the evils the zebras wanted too."

There was a long silence between them. The fire crackled on my left as everypony stared at the two. Gradually, Aurora Star looked away and smirked. The smirk grew to a short nasally laugh as she carefully rubbed a hoof over her head.

"You all have found quite a lot of clues to guess such a thing. It's somewhat admirable. Yet you presume too much about my 'legacy.' I am not some innocent pony who fears her designs being turned to 'evil'. You are two hundred years quite too late for that. My research was 'corrupted' long before even the balefire scourged this land."

Aurora stood up, limping her way slowly to the centre of the room. Her horn slowly began to glow a pale white.

I thought my eyes were beginning to falter with exhaustion, for I felt them haze and blur at the edges. Everypony else I could see was doing the same. The only two I saw relaxed were Glimmerlight and Unity. They both knew memory magic in some way. Was this something they understood?

"I've had two hundred years to perfect my theories. Two of you I can feel have particular affinity with the art. Settle, and relax, if you want to see what you think my legacy 'is.'"

The world began to rush and blur in all directions around me. I tried to get up and was almost surprised to still feel the floor under my hooves. Every sensation that I remembered as being like entering a memory orb flowed through my mind yet I still felt like... like me. Colours sprung up, the kind of vivid nature that could only be Old Equestria. I was standing upon white marble near a lawn of freshly cut and unthinkably bright grass. Above me, flags of all designs flapped in a slow wind while ponies wearing shining gold armour lined the verges of the marble causeway. Dizzily, I looked up to see towering white battlements and spires, each gleamed in the sunlight below a cloudless sky.

I knew this place. I'd seen it in books. This was Canterlot.

An excitement flew through me; the massive artistic marvel that was Equestria's capital was finally here to see! Spinning on the spot, I saw the huge vista of all the land out before us, all ready to behold over a cliff where a waterfall slowly trailed into the long drop. It stemmed from a pool at the centre of this place, with six enormous buildings flanking the edges with their carved stone designs. Each bore a symbol of the Ministries.

I cried out when I heard Aurora's voice in the back of my head.

"The start of my real career."

The entire world seemed to shift, drawing my eyes down. To my astonishment, I could see the floor of Aurora's cottage below my hooves. My friends were around me, all equally astonished. I wasn't really *in* Canterlot, Aurora was just projecting it around us. Yet it was so easy to forget, so immersive in its depth, sights, and smells. I could *feel* the wind from up here on my coat. Only when I looked closer could I see the familiar sparkles of light constructing everything, just like I'd seen on the orbs. Just on a much wider scale all around us.

It was like the ultimate evolution of her memory projection magic, one that would have taken two hundred years to master.

My eyes fell upon a younger Aurora Star, standing in line with numerous other unicorns.

I saw two identical twins with green coats. All looked like well-learned types. Before them stood the familiar form of Twilight Sparkle. She was moving down them, pinning a badge to each of their identical uniforms.

"Twilight Sparkle made us her second tier. The leaders and chief scientists of the Ministry of Arcane Science. I'd been given this position after my work to help bring memory orbs to a more affordable and practical level. Twilight thought I would be able to continue that research with the resources of an entire Ministry Hub in my home city of Fillydelphia. I was so proud, one of the youngest Hub Leaders, and also one of the first. I swore that day to defend Equestria by any means I could, and to end the war as quickly as possible. The same thing Twilight herself had promised in her ascension to command the new Ministry."

The entire projection shifted, zooming across until I could see Aurora Star face to face. A young (and uh, rather cute) mare with the biggest and goofiest grin of pride.

"I had dreams of inventing the things to give us an unrelenting advantage, and I had ideas even that day for new memory orb technology to help us do it."

The world shifted into itself, colours stretching as they relocated and reformed into something else. The twinkling stars making up the projection whirling around me before reforming elsewhere into a new location. I knew this place, the Ministry in Fillydelphia itself. This was the workshop just outside where her office had been! I could see Aurora working with dozens of unicorns as they cast spells onto orbs, or tested various forms of crystal.

"Oh how we worked. The glory days, breakthrough after breakthrough."

In the background, I heard a dull shout, before somepony held up a glowing orb. The others cheered, rushing across to see. Aurora herself took the orb from them to study.

"It all seemed so easy. We only had to think of an idea and we had the resources to make it happen! What scientist doesn't dream of a world where they can think of a concept and be in a position to get everything they need for it? We crafted longer orbs, developed storage that became the standard carry case for orbs all over Equestria, and worked with the Equestrian military to help develop simulated orbs for battlefield acclimatisation and intelligence gathering exercises."

All of the projections changed, placing me in her office. I was once again staring out the window I had once done so before as her beside Twilight. The same sounds filtered through it of the park. The stoney silence of that building felt so calming.

With her hooves up on the railing, I could see Aurora gazing outside.

"Yet I had a dream yet unfulfilled. To go further. To use orb technology for learning. A unicorn who could utilise an orb to perhaps gain a new spell to their knowledge or be able to quickly study a new subject by using the memory of a leading expert as a template! Imagine the possibilities for an Equestria where education could pass on everything a generation had learned to their children for them to build upon! Imagine how quickly the war could end if we could make every pony a combat veteran the likes of Macintosh on their first day of training!"

The entire projection spun, reversing to see who stood behind Aurora. I could now see her with tears staining her face, looking distraught and heartbroken. The figure behind her was Twilight Sparkle, slowly trotting away. To the side, I could see her memory machine project that I unfortunately knew would someday also be cancelled in a similar visit.

Aurora's voice turned weak, cracking.

"Yet, war was at our doorstep and resources grew scarce. The Princess wanted surefire projects; reliable ideas, not the childish dreams of one Hub Leader who thought she knew everything. I saw my projects shut down and felt the weight of demands on what I was to help make. I lost my freedom to innovate. I... I don't blame Twilight. She had to do what she thought was right and I knew th-that she wouldn't seek to harm anypony."

Dizzily, the entire projection spun where I was standing once more, placing me near to the corner of the room. Just beside me, barely visible, I saw a set of eyes looking out from under a nearly invisible cloak as the Ministry Mare left. Devious, dangerous eyes.

"That's when they came to me. They'd been watching me for over a year."

With a flicker of light, the entire projection seemed to cut briefly. I could see her dining room again and witness all of my comrades standing transfixed by it. Slowly, it all reformed on one end of the room before us. A zebra's face below a hood. It was filling the room and staring down at us directly. It looked horrifyingly lifelike, ready to harm me any moment.

"I woke to them in my bedroom. They told me that they had seen my unfair treatment and wanted to 'help.' They desired my research in a way that Equestria didn't, were willing to get me the resources to do it, and could keep it all a secret! I'd been terrified, more than I'd ever been. The dream in my heart had been shattered, and now this?"

It all drew out, filling the room as I saw a still image of Aurora in her bed, surrounded by the zebras, bearing wicked knives and long barrelled rifles.

"They didn't say it but I knew if I said no then I would have been a victim of assassination that night. I wish I could use that as an excuse but I can't. I didn't agree because I feared for my life, I agreed because I wanted my research to be made in my lifetime. I wanted to see a better world, even if I had to work with demons to get there."

Aurora herself walked through the projection, reappearing to us as a ghoul that strode around me. Yet her voice still came into my mind, the magic taken hold.

"So we went to work. They brought me skilled workers from the Wartime Ministry. I told them of something I'd never been able to get funded, a mine on this mountain where I'd known crystal caves existed. I'd seen them on my family's treks to this cabin as a child. They somehow got us it approved. They persuaded me to buy out Ministry Station under a guise of keeping secrets from zebras. I hadn't realised it had been theirs since before I'd ever known them. I helped them open a portal with my sway in the Ministry, which thought I was doing research on weaponising portals for battlefield deployment. That's why Ministry Station went unnoticed. It was like the golden age of the Ministry all over again. I didn't realise they were just buttering me up, getting me working until I couldn't help but do it."

We were inside Ministry Station. Its familiar walls loomed around us as uniformed workers ran here and there with tools and advanced looking components. I saw Sparkler near Aurora, checking off something from a clipboard held in his magic.

"Eventually, we opened the lab in the mountain too. Everything hidden under the massive veils of secrecy in Equestria. Every Hub Leader seemed to have their own secret project or magnum opus waiting to emerge, so this was no different. Few questions were asked, and if they were, I'd just bring out something we were working on to show that seemed innocuous. We developed a machine that I kept in the Ministry as a cover, a machine that lets ponies share memories together, each portraying somepony unique in the memory, with a moderate level of influence in the events. The military was very interested in for team building exercises. That was our external cover and it worked

flawlessly."

Everything darkened, as the projection slid and moved like a tapestry or a mural until I saw Aurora lying in her bed, hooves covering her crying face; her mouth frozen at the moment of screaming out. Around her, almost like other viewpoints, I could see zebras whipping Wartime workers. Aurora being screamed at by one who wore an elaborate cloak. A memory machine with a ragged clothed pony being pulled against her will toward it.

"Yet it all came crashing home eventually; when they started to take control of the things we'd made in our progress to the final goal. They wanted us to be traitors and damn it we'd given them just that. I didn't sleep for weeks as I saw what I'd done. I'd led some of my staff, my friends, into becoming slaves, and allowed the zebras to prey on refugees. They'd even gotten into the Ministry of Peace, bringing Doctor Heartcare into all this after threatening his family. He brought them the refugees upon which they tested what we made."

She was right beside me, the Aurora of today, only from the corner of my eye I could see her pained face. Straining every word.

"I... saw... them... hurt... ponies... with... my... research..."

Like an abstract wash of colour, the images changed to another pony, one strapped into a machine, and whose mouth was distended far further than it should have been, like a painting stretched to impossible levels. I felt a shiver down my spine, hearing a distant and unearthly shrieking in my subconscious.

"Then they started trying to do their own thing; bringing their fetishes and their shamanism to try and take advantage of what we'd made thus far. Those things that let them grow wings and alter their shapes. But... but not everything works first time! It destroyed their test subjects' minds, and turned them to blanks. They corrupted the magical signature that every pony has, forcing upon them memory orbs of death and torture to try and find out how much a pony could take in a single orb of mental conditioning. Using their fetishes to try and change their body's ability to act as a testing victim. Using them as nothing but... but tools! Organic matter was altered! I remember seeing one. It didn't even resemble a pony anymore. Their testing destroyed them or... or turned them to something much worse."

Slowly, it all condensed back into the Aurora I had seen crying in her bed. All the images flowing through the air and around us into her head. One after another. Screams, dread imagery, and worryingly familiar scenes of forced labour. Then suddenly, she moved. Standing up with soaked cheeks, she looked in her bedroom's mirror for some time. I could hear so little, just her gasps and her heartbeat growing steadily faster. Her breath made the mirror steam up before her shaking stopped.

"I'd betrayed my country, and now I couldn't help any of the ponies who'd agreed into this, because they trusted me to get out again. I'd thought the zebras wanted my plans for orb based learning. No, they wanted my orbs because they could use them to mentally condition ponies to turn them into whatever they wanted. After that, they only wanted more. The larger orbs, the projection line we'd been making, they all have a subtle subconscious signature they emit. Unity, you know of the kind of feeling I mean. The zebras learned of this and wanted us to amplify it. Expand it until it could affect somepony's subconscious in the same way as they were using memory orbs to indoctrinate ponies and change them. They wanted us to be able to do this on a wider scale."

Suddenly, it all filtered back to a more recent sight. The mountain lab with the nexus at

the centre.

"The Memory Nexus. This was what they had us build. A device that could project an orb's contents to mentally condition everypony nearby, maybe a few hundred metres. They had plans to make it spread wider, to use technology from the megaspell research Doctor Heartcare brought them. Weathervane would have gone mad had he known they were used like this. Their grand idea was to turn ponies to the zebra cause with it. To implant memories of zebra fanaticism, or to implant memories that no sane being should ever have replace their own. Up here we tested a weak one, while the real one was made in Ministry Station."

The ghoul stood before her old self, staring blankly into her own eyes. Slowly, she turned to us.

"That's what's in Ministry Station. That's the 'secret' that you all were seeking. My dream of a new age of learning turned to a nightmare of enslaved will."

Yes. Yes, I could see it all falling into place. Memory magic of the projection orbs that brought its contents out into the real world. The disappearance of the refugees into that asylum. The reason behind the ambience in Ministry Station. My mind hurt at how far back I suddenly made sense of.

Doctor Heartcare. No, Magister Heartcare. He'd been a zebra worshipper when I'd met him.

They'd used even him as a test subject.

Aurora was looking into my eyes, clearly seeing my mind piecing it all together. They'd wanted to turn Fillydelphia against Equestria! Gradually, Aurora nodded, as though looking right into my mind. Maybe she could. A master of memory magic was quickly beginning to sound like a very scary individual indeed.

"That was when I started trying to sabotage this. I sent all the projection orbs I could to the Ministry Mares in a hope that one of them, Twilight especially, would see it! I sent one to Doctor Weathervane's research team. The zebras thought I was just covering our tracks with older tech now that they had the Nexus being built to project their conditioning field. None of it worked. We'd done too well at hiding ourselves. If I could have told her... but if I did, then everypony involved would have been murdered at a hint of betrayal from me! They were always watching."

The darkness wound and wrapped around the projected form of Aurora, zebra eyes the shifting forms. Enveloping the scared pony, they dragged her away higher and higher, and I saw the entire living tapestry fly to the sky, soaring toward the mountain.

"They carried me here, far away from it, for they feared my sentimentality would lead me to do something rash! In the end, they kept me here while they finished off in Ministry Station with Heartcare, after they'd done such horrible things to that poor stallion's mind. Yet up here, that's when I met what could be my only hope to stop all this."

A young buck slid across the wall in a line of ponies all waiting in a tunnel. I recognised him in a heartbeat.

Sundial.

He stood next to Aurora in that cave, quietly talking. I realised this was the conversation I'd heard!

"I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him that he was a sleeper agent for Pinkie. I could feel the determination in him because it was the same as mine. Trapped in

something he didn't understand but wanting to help for a cause that now mattered to him. I'd always been good at judging other ponies, my magic enhanced it over time. The more we researched memory, signatures, and the pony mind, the more I could tell about somepony at a glance. I saw that he had a connection to Pinkie. Maybe, just maybe, I could get the word out from him."

An eruption of gunfire made me shriek. I wanted to run to the window and check, but my hooves felt locked to the floor. Flares of orange and red surrounded us, and I saw glimpses of scientists and workers bleeding out or burning around horrid wounds. Each flash brought another scene. A group in a corner. Poor Sparkler hanging off Aurora with sadness in his bloodshot eyes. Three on the floor, lifeless as their bodies were slowly torched. Within it, I saw Aurora standing over a terrified Sundial, pulling at him.

"I got him out of there alive! Got him to the trains. We were the only two survivors of the massacre up here. When our escape got back to Fillydelphia it felt like we were being hunted around every corner. Desperately, I tried to find somepony of authority but they were all unreachable! Something was happening, there was a threat in the air. I knew that Sundial and I had to do this quickly. I was the only pony left who knew the spell to shut down the Nexus! They were removing all threats before its activation!"

A frenzied rush through Fillydelphia's streets flowed around us. Hiding. Running. Gunshots. The flare of magic. Then we were underground. I heard a bestial howl and smelt a tinge of mint. Around me, I heard many of us stammer and shift on the spot.

"What they'd done down there, it was beyond thought. I had developed memory that could be projected into our world, but when the memories of those they had forced things no intelligence mind could comprehend into were projected..."

She shrunk into her cloak, shuddering.

"All we knew was we had to reach the Nexus. Sundial helped me. We had others with us, part of the Equestrian military we'd met in the metro who had been investigating, and we fought our way in. Just in time, I cast the spell and backfired the entire conditioning orb they had installed upon it.

I felt proud, wishing Weathervane could see the image before me. Sundial, wounded but determined, ripping an orb from the nexus and shattering it against the stone floor.

"Sundial destroyed it himself. We'd won, prevented them releasing a spell that would have turned so many ponies to the zebra cause. It left a horrid ambience in its wake from that event, forever damning the station to manipulate those in it who were weak and vulnerable, but it was better than the alternative. Only one of the soldiers with us survived as we got out. I thought I could find Twilight and hand myself in. We'd done it, but the cost had been so high."

They were outside. Massive crowds had gathered around a metro that gouted smoke from its entrances. I saw Aurora and Sundial carrying a familiar looking buck between them down the street.

"Only... the world moved on. It ended."

Even as they moved, I heard it. That low drone, the sound you never wanted to hear then. The crowds looked up and around as it began to blare. A deathly wail that grew and grew as the sirens signalled the end coming. Some rushed, others fell. The pictures moved on, the inside of the Ministry. I saw her placing the buck inside the pod where I'd met Mister Peace. Yes! That had been him!

"We did all we could to save the wounded private, resulting in my placing him in my

old memory sharing machine. Its systems would keep him safe and preserved. To reunite him with his team. He'd lost everypony he'd cared about down there. To take his memory and use it for the machine seemed the best I could do to let him be with them again. I implored Sundial to stay with me and come to the protected Ministry building, yet he had other things he had to do. We parted ways for the last time."

Slowly, I saw the image of a long maned pegasus almost ghost over Sundial's form. I knew he would never leave her.

Green fire whirled around us, burning the images she had conjured and slowly fading Sundial away. Wreathing flames rose to the ceiling, flying between us all and carrying with it the death scream of Equestria. Slowly, I realised that my cheeks were rather damp.

It cooled, the green turning to white as I saw a cloaked figure striding in the snow.

"The most I could do as a survivor was return to this peak. To attempt to escape the delerium that overtook Fillydelphia. Things the zebras had done escaped the metro, and other survivors descended upon the city's corpse. A hell brought to life, a place of insanity. I could not bear it. So I came here to find the zebras gone. Thus, I passed into exile from Equestria to my old family cottage here, to watch the world die around me."

Gradually, everything faded around me. Returning us to the cottage that we now stood in. I was more than damp at the cheeks. I could feel my entire face stinging as I cried openly. Looking around I was not the only one. Coral and Unity too. I saw Protégé wipe his eyes. Glimmerlight was stoic.

Aurora Star stood among us.

"Projections have a subconscious feeling. It's what they used to create the conditioning. What you all feel is my guilt. My pain at the part I played in my nation's death. Uninvolved with the balefire or not, my efforts killed dozens, if not over a hundred who had been dragged into this because I was too afraid to see my dream stopped."

Her eyes met with Protégé's. Her voice turned steely.

"Don't think I am unaware of the broadcasts your master makes. I've heard all the same justifications before, and look what they did to those around me."

Nopony spoke. How could anypony hope to say anything after that?

There was simply an uncomfortable silence. Finally, it had all been laid on the table. Aurora Star stood still, before weakly making her way out of the room. Limping the entire way, it took her some time as her shaking and thin legs carried her.

Without a word from us, she went back to her study, leaving us alone with a dying fire.

The wind blew outside as some of us sat down. Chirpy still slept, huddled into his mother. It seemed Aurora had spared him the horrifying images she'd shown us.

His mother looked up, glancing at Grizzly, Ragini, and Protégé. Slowly, Coral spoke.

"I believe that it is beyond a doubt what Shackles wants with this now. You all know it."

She looked around, we all nodded. Coral was right, it was just Glimmerlight was the one to say it.

"He wants slaves. Total slaves. *Indoctrinated* ponies who could not ever hope to think of escape. It's what he's always tried to do. Every time we saw him in that Mall. Always speaking of it, wanting his 'Eternal Chain'."

Coral inclined her head back to Glimmer.

"What Aurora made, it's beautiful, but so easy to abuse. Nopony deserves what they wanted to do with it."

Protégé interrupted anything else she was going to say.

"It wouldn't work."

Everypony looked around at him, even Grizzly. The unicorn stopped and stared, on the spot, before continuing.

"Aurora said it projects someone's subconscious to affect others. Without somepony who *is* a slave like that, he can't hope to ever use it. The same way that he requires Unity to activate it. Without that second pony to craft the orb's programming, if you will, off, it's useless."

Unity sat up at the mention of her name, having been silently looking out the window. I could see her looking more than a little scared at being hunted for this, and somewhat at realising everypony was looking at her.

"Unity? Hun?" Glimmer shifted over slowly, "Could you... do that? I know you said it before but... do you really have enough power in that horn of yours to create a signature that strong?"

Slowly, I saw the mare nod. "It doesn't really matter how big or small it is. I've always kind of hid what it could really do and I just... I just didn't want anypony to be afraid of me being able to sense and-and create things like that..."

My sister put a hoof around the smaller mare's shoulders, holding her close. "Nopony's afraid of you. Murky and I, we'll keep you safe. Promise."

I saw my sister's look at me and took the hint. I nodded a few times. Gradually, I slowed, and thought out loud, raising my voice.

"B-but the other thing? Needing a slave who's so broken they can't even know otherwise? Where would he f-fit—"

I stammered, a sudden shock of cold going through me.

A folder of ponies crossed out in his locker in the Mall.

"Find... find a..."

His bedside in Ministry Station with a picture of a broken looking pegasus.

"Oh... oh no..."

I could hear him. Hear what he'd said when I hid from him in Ministry Station.

"It won't take long to break you back in. The born slave. The servant who knows his place. You were meant to come to me. None of the others... just you. Just you and that lovely broken mind... hehehe."

I fell off the chair, staggering to the side as my stomach turned and my mind filled with panic and fear. I fell against a cabinet and sent plates crashing to the floor. I started to hyperventilate. Hooves went around me, Coral's and Protégé's, pulling me up. Breathing fast, eyes wide and looking around in terror, I now realised how trapped I was atop this mountain.

"The perfect slave in the heart of Fillydelphia."

"Murky Number Seven..."

Quietly, I curled myself up on the softest chair in the room and tried to stop shaking. Outside, I could hear the wind slapping the windows and setting the whole cottage creaking under its assault. Every slam and sound set my heart leaping. What if it were the slavers arriving?

Everypony else sat around me. Most of them were debating or even outright arguing

about what to do, or how to get away from here safely. The only ones who remained quiet were Chirpy and Brimstone. The foal huddled between Glimmer and Coral, while the big raider sat beside the arm of my chair. Truth be told, his presence was a significant calming influence, keeping me from entirely losing it right now. I knew he'd be there, protecting me. That's why he sat beside me, he was playing guardian after hearing the same as everypony else. The days of seeing him as a wary and unnerving force were long gone as far as I was concerned.

Shackles wanted *me*. I'd always known that but now I knew why and it scared me to my absolute core. Put that together with knowing he was coming up that mountain right now...

"Murky has that grapple of his, could we not attempt a climb? It's better than just waiting here and letting them get Aurora!"

"You heard her, she can't go anywhere in her current state. She would not even survive the trip."

Glimmer debated with Grizzly. On the other side, I heard Coral enter into it.

"You don't think we should perhaps simply tell her what will happen? Aurora would not want to work for them."

"She wouldn't need to." Protégé looked back from the window, where he kept watch with Ragini. "Grindstone has the Ministry, he has the means to extract memories in there."

"The same goes the other way, though." Ragini, surprisingly, spoke against Protégé. "If she cannot survive the trip down with us in her state, then she will not survive with them either."

"What makes you think he hasn't brought that equipment with him?"

"You have any proof of that?"

"We have to *try* to stop this! At least get her away from here and—"

"And go where? They'll comb the mountain!"

It had gone in this circle numerous times. I was actually getting a headache from the raised voices and quickly held my ears down with a whimper. I hated arguments. I really did. Especially ones where no one knew the answer. Not after I'd just learned about Shackles' intentions. Every raised voice was like another harsh thump on my head. Each exasperated slap of a hoof on the ground a nail in the skull.

I had to get out of here.

Hopping off the chair, I had to wave a hoof to get Brimstone to not follow me. Trotting quietly past everypony else to the door, I left without really being seen or heard amongst their endless... what was the word? Mind thundering? Brain lighteninging? I'd heard Glimmer say it once.

The dark and cold entrance hall felt strangely isolated from the very room I'd just left, the dark stone and creaking wood were a sudden change in mood from the warm room behind me. Crossing it, sighing in relief as the voices faded a little, I made my way to her front room. There was a fire in there, soft seats and peaceful bookshelves where I could draw in silence.

Yet the door was already open, a flickering orange light spearing out into the chilly hall. With a hoof, I nudged it open and trotted inside to feel the satisfying ambience of the room's large fireplace at the far end. Gently closing it behind me, I advanced inwards, moving to the biggest, fluffiest chair I could see.

"Murky?"

The voice might have startled me, but it was soft and calm. Turning to the side, I saw Unity sat in the corner amongst a small pile of books piled up near the already crammed shelves. She had a particularly large one open before her. Far from the fire, she was lighting it with her magic, casting a relaxing and cosy pale red over herself.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to—" I bit my lip, "I just—"

"Needed to get some peace and quiet?" She answered, inclining her head toward the room I'd come from through the wall. Her voice wasn't much above a whisper, tinged with a little anxiety.

I simply nodded, a short movement while I idly looked around the room.

Unity leaned over her book, making a light sigh. She looked at the dark ceiling, into its thick lumber.

"Me too. I'm really not one for crowds of ponies. Never was. Call it introverted or unsocial if you like, I just—"

"No, I don't. Think it is, I mean," I quickly added, waving a hoof as I trotted over to sit with my back to the chair she was behind. "Do, um, you mind me sharing the room? I was just going to draw in my journal. I can move to the other side if you'd—"

In turn, she interrupted me.

"It's okay. I just needed to be somewhere more peaceful. I'd like to see what you do anyway."

Unity smiled, before settling back with her large book again. Neither of us really spoke as I pulled out my journal, seeing its battered and frayed edges barely held together with string and tape along its uneven pages. It had come through a lot, weathering it all. A bit like all of us, really.

I had something that needed adding to a certain picture though. Somepony long overdue.

Well, there were a few ponies that needed adding to this still, but I could check one off the list now. And I knew how much I enjoyed doing that.

Carefully moving the yellowed pages, I shifted through my earlier drawings till I found the one that mattered. My friends... or some of them, anyways. With me in the bottom left, happy and with spread wings (it had happened for real!); and Glimmer off to the middle, cheeky and charismatic. To her right, Caduceus, as earnest as ever. Behind them both, Brimstone loomed as a heavyset presence, that wry and sardonic smirk I knew meant more contentment than many would think. Gradually, I shifted to Caduceus' right, and began to set charcoal to paper.

Yes, it'd been some time since I'd been able to do this. To relax and just let it all flow forth in creating the two ponies I knew I wanted to right now. The mantra had long become repeated, but it felt good to feel that process move through me. I could hear nothing but the crack of the fire, the distant wind, and the occasional turn of a page from the quiet mare near me. Slowly, as I felt my head fluidly shifting and turning into the ceaseless depths of artistic bliss, this whole cottage became... peaceful. Welcoming. Far from danger.

For now, that was all I needed.

Strong lines for a strong mare. Defined, constant, and yet bearing a caring touch that my charcoal reflected in small, subtle looks in her eyes and mouth. Criss-crossing as I drew the plaids, I felt the beat and rhythm move faster and set me smiling as I moved down to the bottom and began a new pony shape near her legs, in front of Caduceus, between Glimmer and the new additions. A little shape, a happy one, bouncing up on his hind legs and waving with an unthinkably wide grin. No, missing something, I let the edge of my hoof

rub at an edge, before moving the mare's front hoof to settle on his back. The connection, the care and the pride now reflected from her eyes as though I'd always meant that.

Coral Eve had found her foal, Chirpy Sum. Now, I ensured they were found on my collection the way those two always should have been.

Together.

With us.

Sitting back, I smiled enough that my charcoal fell out of my mouth, dropping into the spine of my journal. Coral had been a solid pillar in my life for so long now. Saving us, carrying us all without anypony ever asking her to. Yes, this was *right*.

"Oh, I remember that one! You've added more to it!"

I looked up, finding Unity leaning over under the light of her horn, gazing at my drawing. She wore utter delight on her face, and gently shifted the journal around to get a look at it. I felt myself flush a little; I always liked it when ponies enjoyed what I drew, even if I was scared to admit it out loud for fear of anypony thinking it was ego. But until I'd met Unity for the first time, no pony ever had.

"It's... uh... it's the one I want to put all my friends on." I leaned backwards, against the rear of the chair.

"That's a lovely thought, Murky. This way, we can all hang this up at wherever we get to when we all get out of here. Put it on the wall and see it forever." Unity looked up, her weary face showing a brightness to it. "What can I say? I'm a dreamer..."

Oddly enough, I found myself giggling a little. "We all are. I... I don't think any slave isn't in some way. Fillydelphia's ruined all our lives since it caught us. I was born a slave, but that doesn't mean I'm the only one suffering."

I looked at my picture, seeing within it my friends smiling in a way I never had seen them in reality.

"Glimmer and Coral lost their entire home; this city pulled them in and took their lives away until both were having to cope somehow. Coral lost her son... Glimmer lost the freedom she'd left a safe place to have in the first place. Filly shackled it all down, and told them their life was over now. Chirpy taken from his mother... I... I know how that feels."

I paused, and had to take a steady breath, feeling a gentle hoof on my back.

"Brimstone may have been what he was, but he thinks he deserves this place and I just know that isn't right! Caduceus *lost* his life before we could even try. I don't just want out for myself... I want out for them too. To take back the lives stolen from us all by slavery and Red Eye."

I wiped an eye, feeling her hoof on my shoulder.

"And... and I can't help but feel even Protégé has been hurt too deeply by this place to ever know who he might have turned out to be, had he not been born the same way I was. Then you too, of course..."

Looking up, I saw Unity nod slowly. It made me think. I knew precious little about her life before Fillydelphia. She shifted round, sitting beside me in our quiet little sanctuary behind the chairs, surrounded by books. Her hooves rested before her, and she stared into the floor.

"It all happened so quickly for me. Just on the road and... and their wagons went by and just picked me up. Before I knew it I was in chains and being taken away. I want to go home too, Murky... let my parents in Friendship City know I'm still alive. Did I ever tell you?" She looked at me, but continued anyway, "I grew up in Friendship City's bookstore."

My parents made a decent living off them, enough to stay in that safer settlement. But they did history too, collected old journals and learning annuals that I got really attached to.”

Her magic glowed brighter, lifting the book across to sit between us. I could see what it was now. A collection of maps and photos from all ends of Equestria. The real Equestria, filled with bright fields, lush forests, sparkling rivers, and mountains below a clear sky. The towers of Manehattan looked so sturdy and everlasting. Canterlot shone as a beacon of grace. Small towns were filled with a rural comfort.

“Probably why I turned out like I did... grew up sheltered in my little room, reading books of a time period I’ll never see and learning the ways of ponies that no longer exist. At least, not as much as they used to.”

Her hooves tightened around themselves, fidgeting. Her eyes closed.

“I was only to head to the old hunter’s shack just outside Tenpony to pick up some... some food to take home! It was cheaper than in the statue. I should have only been g-gone an hour... and... I was...”

Her chest convulsed slightly.

“...all they know is that I didn’t come home one day.”

To hell with nerves, I could hear the strain in her voice. Leaning over, I held onto her very tightly, feeling her hooves wrap around me as well.

“We won’t let Fillydelphia win again, Unity.” I tried to keep my own voice straight, forcing myself to not think about that sort of situation, so stupid and simple to ruin somepony’s life on the spot like that forever. “We’ll... we’ll all get out, I... I don’t know how but we’ll... somehow... I...”

“Would do anything?”

The raspy, nasal voice that had spoken slid into my ears sharply. We split from one another quickly, both our cheeks tearful as we glanced around the couch.

Before us, standing lit between the hazy blue light of the window and the fiery orange of the hearth, was Aurora Star. Her eyes, drooped with age, held a sudden vigour and intensity that, frankly, scared the life out of me.

“Y-yes... I would.”

There was no hint of lying to sound brave in my voice. At this point, surrounded by the friends I loved, I would take on any challenge to get us out. To beat Fillydelphia, and finally make true the dream we’d all held since the start of this entire journey.

Aurora was silent, her horn flickering occasionally in a way that made me feel uneasy. Yet to my surprise, it was simply to magically pull her cloak’s hood down, revealing the thin, ghoulisish pony beneath. Her magic floated something out of the pantry. Three small mugs with steam rising. Two were floated to us.

Like shy grandchildren, Unity and I reached out and held onto the satisfyingly warm mugs.

Aurora turned around and began to head to her desk, sitting on the padded cushion before it, facing away from us to briefly sip at hers. After a moment, I did so myself, finding a thick chocolatey warmth spreading through my still frozen body.

“Oh yes...” I heard Unity whisper in sheer satisfaction at the beverage, before looking over at Aurora. “I thought ghouls didn’t need to eat or drink?”

Aurora scoffed. “We don’t. But coffee got me through being a Hub Leader. It continues its service to me today. Reminds me of who I am after so long. You wouldn’t think this fragile body of mine was only thirty-something when the world ended.”

I really wouldn't have thought it. Yet she seemed so aged, even as a ghoul. As though the years had weighed heavy on her still. Some psychological thing?

Aurora sat her mug down, and spoke again once we had settled.

"I listen to you two, and I hear the same things I told myself when I realised what was going wrong. The same things that Sundial helped remind me of, that when there feels like no way to make something succeed... you try do it anyway. For the ponies you love, and without feeling shameful about doing it for yourself too. There is no way off this mountain that's not in their chains, young ones. I cannot lie to you about that. It will happen."

She turned back to her desk and began rummaging for something amidst a disorganised pile of graphs, papers, and schematics.

"I've sat here and tried to work out what I could have done better a thousand times. How I might have fixed things, or find a way to make up for what I did. Two hundred years is a long time to offer hindsight, but it's also enough time to come to terms with it. I don't feel sadness, only a longing to perhaps show Twilight, wherever she is, that the lessons she taught us all in her incredible life made me do the right thing in the end."

Gradually, Unity and I got up, trotting toward the ghoul. We exchanged worried glances, before Unity carefully spoke out.

"I don't follow, Aurora. How can you help us up here?"

Unity shifted toward the desk, before the elderly unicorn turned around again to face us, holding a small parchment. I recognised what was on it instantly. An orb drawn with a pony being projected from it.

"I can do for you what I could not do for my own friends. I can give you an opportunity, a chance to perhaps escape your own nightmare."

Staring at the parchment, I tried to see if there was anything written or meaningful upon it. There was nothing.

"H-how?"

Aurora laid it down, before leaning back.

"I created six projection orbs. Three were received by the Ministry Mares I attempted to spread them to, the other three were not. One ended up back in Ministry Station, where it was used as the host memory for the Nexus and then destroyed by Sundial. Another was lost in Fillydelphia during the Balefire. The last one I recovered and brought here."

Unity gasped quietly. "Those are what give the Nexus its memory to project? If Shackles and his slavers—"

"Exactly." Aurora smoothly slid back into her speech as she settled and groaned, her joints popping. "The Nexus requires an empty orb to be imbued with memories for use. One already used for simple projection, like Twilight's in my office, is useless to it. I hid the one remaining empty one on the peak of the mountain, under an old weather station the Enclave already stripped for parts. With that, one could power up the Nexus, and in turn, fully power Ministry Station..."

She paused, eyeing us carefully.

"...which would, in turn, activate Ministry Station's portal to wherever in Equestria it connects to."

Oh.

Oh.

I struggled to find the words. I didn't want to blurt, not now. Not before somepony who was handing us the key to the escape we'd come up here to search for in the first place! The

secret of Ministry Station, a way to activate the same method the zebras had escaped Fillydelphia with too! I wanted to jump, and run, and shout and scream, but my nerves held me back. Instead I just stood and shivered, with wide eyes, until my brain started to register it all, remaining silent as my friend spoke instead.

“Aurora, if we activate it, then that means Shackles could use it! What if he finds somepony else who can do what I do? What if he finds another born slave that doesn’t escape him! I don’t want to leave behind such a horrible thing, even if I escape!”

Unity was earnest, for sure, but Aurora merely waved an almost skeletal hoof.

“You forget, I know the spell to deactivate it. It has been done before.”

“But you can’t—”

“I won’t. *You* will.”

Unity stopped mid-word, her mouth hanging as far open as mine had been. Aurora leaned closer to us, eyeing us both.

“You two, along with your, hm, better friends. I’ve seen what you’ve been through. During my projection, it wasn’t hard to read the memories of you all. Decipher who was what. I saw your origins in chains, Murky Number Seven. I saw your kidnapping, Unity. I know you two are good ponies in a bad world. You coming here is a blessing to me, an opportunity I’ve wished for in every dream that I regretted having to wake up from. This is something to offer me closure before my life ends, and I face up to those I harmed.”

Her hoof snaked out and lifted mine, bringing the PipBuck up.

“Sundial brought you here, young Murky. Even in his passing, he is giving me one last chance to end this tragedy with something beautiful.”

We gathered once more. The arguments had ceased once Aurora Star led Unity and myself back in. She strode forth to the centre of the room.

“These two have convinced me. I shall help you. All things considered, it is better that this Chainlink Shackles does not possess what I created. I’ve seen his malice in poor Murky’s memories to know for certain that this is right.”

She stood amongst everypony staring at her quietly. The surprise on Grizzly’s face was obvious, while Protégé peered sideways at me. I wasn’t sure if it was suspicion or gratefulness.

There was plenty to be suspicious about.

Aurora was not telling them quite the whole truth, not as Unity and I knew. The reality was that Unity was being taught to permanently shut down the Nexus in Ministry Station with the deactivation spell. We would place the orb in, turn it on to power the station, and then immediately cast the spell. Aurora assured us we would have just enough time to get to the portal and use it before the power drained again.

Exactly where it would lead, even she didn’t know.

Of course, the fact this plan would turn on the portal was the part we were hiding from the slavers. That was the subtle side of Aurora’s plan. To give us the means to escape without informing those who might stop us. She had given me an orb to hand to Glimmer, one that would teach her how to operate the portal, based on what she already knew about it.

Gradually, Aurora explained all that she had told us. About the orb on the peak and that it was the only remaining one that could power the Nexus. About where it was hidden below

an old grate in a weather station, and how to locate it. Grizzly in particular sat in thought, with Protégé nearby. The rest of my friends crowded around to listen, Glimmer keeping an eye on me with a small grin. Was that pride? She'd always been good at spotting when I wasn't involved in the whole truth.

Aurora held her frail body as tall as she could.

"I will teach Unity the spell that is required for a deactivation. I'm sure you'll agree that is necessary." Aurora cast a hard glare at both of the slavers. "She is the one who needs to be able to turn it off, in case this monster does gain access. You will need such an asset, for you know he's coming here and that you cannot escape now."

Coral squeezed her son a little tighter at that being said. It was true though; there was no perfect way out of this. We simply had to do what we always did. The best we could.

"We've waited long enough," Grizzly rumbled from near the window, his eyes looking outside half the time. "If you need to teach her a complex spell, I advise you get started. How long will this take?"

"Some time."

"Hopefully not too long," Grizzly seemed anxious. "We'll defend this cottage until you've completed it and then make for the peak. We'll need everypony we have to hold this place down if we get attacked, and buy you as much time to do this as you need."

"A last stand." Coral didn't beat about the bush. "If this spell is as important as you say, then we'll have to keep the slavers from reaching you. They don't want you to know it, I'll bet. But what about when we reach the peak? What then?"

There was a brief silence. Everypony seemed thoughtful, trying to just think what we even could do. Eventually, it was Protégé who spoke up, turning to look at his bodyguard.

"Ragini, you're far more dexterous than we are on a mountainside. Could you make it down from the peak alone?"

I saw her eyes turn dangerous, the same look I'd once seen in the FunFarm.

"You would be ordering me to leave you to all your fates."

"Could you do it?"

The griffon puffed out her feathers, looking distinctly uncomfortable with it. "Being the one to escape? To carry something important? Sure, whatever. Don't expect me to like being the bird who gets to flee, even if it is a nigh impossible climb."

Protégé nodded slowly, a smile lacking any happiness on his face. "Good, then you'll carry the orb. Get it somewhere safe, then find shelter. Take your time and sneak back to Fillydelphia. They can't follow you over those cliffs with hooves. We'll still need you here in the initial defence though. Listen... I'm not ordering you to—"

Ragini scoffed, leaning back on the wall and fixing her master with a stare only a griffon could manage.

"You think I'm here following you because of what some dumbshit contract says? Maybe other Talons would, but not me. I'm here because you looked out for me, and I looked out for you. We fought together long enough that I wasn't going to let you come here alone. If you think that I'm only doing this because a piece of paper says so, then you can cram every inch of that contract, including all formalities and subsections, right up your pony ass... sir."

That brought a bit of a silence. Protégé looked amazed, his eyes wide, and utterly speechless.

"Glad we understand one another." Ragini smirked and went back to the window again,

leaving him standing a little in disbelief.

"If that is your plan... so be it." Aurora seemed nonplussed by the entire exchange. She looked around each of us in turn, before slowly coming toward Unity.

The young mare looked up at Aurora. She'd been quite quiet since we'd heard Aurora's plan and had sat near the door when we'd come back in.

"Unity, this won't be an easy learning. We don't have time to study and practice but I've spent enough time up here to refine what I know and what I had hoped to do. Even now, I never really perfected it. A young scientist's dream, I suppose." She smiled wistfully, almost nostalgically. "I will directly implant my own memory to yours in order to teach you the spell. This can bring confusion and extreme nausea. It's somewhat rushed and I regret I have not had anyone to practice on."

Unity looked around her, nine faces all looking back waiting for the choice. She'd already agreed before, but I could see the growing pressure of our situation working up her nerves. Slowly, Unity nodded.

"I... I'll do it. With all I've seen even just today I trust you understand what you're doing, Aurora Star. I just wish I'd had more time to properly learn more about my own talent under you..."

"You'll learn more than you know, child." Aurora gently patted Unity's shoulder and nodded to the door. "We should go to the study, the walls are thicker on that side of the cottage. Better protected and with a smaller window for if anything breaks out."

They moved through the door. That was that then. We had a plan. Not the same one as Protégé, Grizzly, and Ragini thought, (or any of my friends, thus far) but it was a plan! Grizzly directed us, positioning each of us near a window somewhere. Ragini moved up into the loft of the cottage to peer through a small upper window that Aurora informed us about. Grizzly and Protégé covered the front from the dining room we were in, while Glimmer and myself covered from the study on the other side of the house. Coral Eve watched the back, keeping her son safely away from the likely direction of attack, while Brimstone was to stand reserve, ready to react to anything. The big Warlord had listened to Grizzly carefully and nodded along. Clearly, his experience agreed with the layout of our defence to the point he said nothing to countermand the slaver.

I settled beside the window, staring out at the deep mists and drifting snow from the fierce mountain winds. Visibility was terrible; we could still only see perhaps fifty metres away from the cottage. I dreadfully wished that we were not about to be under attack; for the room felt cosy and warm. It let me imagine what it was like to have your own place away from slavery, and I enjoyed that atmosphere for everything I could.

Behind me, Unity and Aurora sat before one another on the floor behind every piece of furniture we could find.

"Now, Unity. This is high level memory magic, perhaps the most complex spell you'll ever have known by some distance. You *must* relax and accept it, the learning process is not easy. I won't lie to you, it is untested and will be a great strain on me, so I will need you to be strong for both of us."

Aurora's voice was cautious, this was as big a moment for her as anything. Her own research after so many years? To do it now under pressure? This couldn't be easy. I saw Unity taking slow breaths, some sort of relaxation technique or something? Her chest lifted and fell with calm regularity before opening her eyes and nodding.

"I'm ready."

They began. From the outside it did not seem to be much at first. Aurora's horn glowed, growing until it lit a part of the room, streaming on each wall and overpowering the fireplace. A second layer of magic leapt upon it as I saw her wince a little. Unity's own horn erupted into life seemingly without her intention, if her squeak of surprise was anything to go by. She swayed, catching herself as a small stream of sparkling light leapt between their horns. The same twinkling one would see on memory orbs flowed around them, whizzing to and fro, concentrating on horn tips as a current built up from one unicorn to the other.

"This will be difficult, Unity." Aurora staggered through her words. "Try to relax! Accept the flow of magic and let your mind wander. The same feeling of an orb. You will dream of my memories. You can be startled out of it, so you must remain calm for this to work."

Gradually, I saw Unity look sleepy, shivering as much as anything else. The more she seemed at ease, the more Aurora let the magic grow until she too seemed to zone out. The old unicorn's gaunt face wore more strain than seemed healthy until finally, with a snap of magic, both of them went rather blank, going limp other than just enough to stay sitting up. Watching it with Glimmer, I felt rather ill at ease when the pair dropped into their 'lesson.' My sister seemed only astonished, having to remind herself to keep watch as well.

We sat ready. Aurora and Unity had begun the process. Slaves and Slavers had two plans against one another in the works. All was set for whatever was going to happen on this mountain to take place.

Thus the waiting began.

Aurora Star hadn't been kidding. This was going to take time.

Half an hour had passed. They had stopped twice already after Aurora had almost burned out from the effort of this rapid memory transfer magic, ejecting both of them from the sleepy state the process left them in. Sitting in her own chair, Aurora had managed to recover and go back to working with Unity both times, yet I could see the harm it was doing to her. The elderly unicorn barely had the strength left in her to do this, looking more drawn and thin than even before. I dearly prayed for her health to last through this.

Unity seemed healthier, but of course she was a much younger and stronger pony. At least by my guessing, I assumed it was also due to not having 'all' the memory yet. Even so, she was glancing around during the breaks, looking confused and dizzy. Twice she had asked where she was. Worried, I had tried to tell her until Aurora assured me this was entirely expected. Yet none of it was obvious, all just subtle 'in the mind' stuff when they were zoned out before snapping awake and looking weaker than before.

Memory magic was scary stuff.

Now they were making their third attempt. The light grew and the sparkles flew around their horns again as they fell back into the process. It was a real fight to not keep watching them, praying for them to open their eyes and say it was done. The experience was clearly not pleasant, having somepony's memory implanted directly into yours. Not as smooth as the orbs had been.

To distract myself, I had sat near the window with Glimmer and quietly explained things to her. The leap of joy on her face had set my heart pounding with excitement to be the one who could break the news of Aurora's plan to help us. Quickly, I had slipped her the memory orb about the portal and shared a tight hug. For now, it'd just be us two. Brim and

Coral were too near to the slavers to risk speaking aloud to.

Much as my sis' and I wanted to talk and talk and talk about it, we couldn't for much that same reason. Instead, we sat together and watched the snowfall. I knew how lethal it was, but safe inside, it was surprisingly relaxing in the dying light of the day. Coral brought us some dry blankets she'd found, along with hot drinks from the pantry, a welcome relief from the cold damp I'd been feeling all over. My chest still felt tight, making me wheeze on most breaths, and had to take a swig from my canteen earlier. Now it was nothing but a quarter full, enough for one more brief trip in that snow at most.

At the very least, I comforted myself in knowing I'd thought it was a quarter full. Go back a few days, I'd have said three quarters empty by habit.

Despite the painful swelling in my sternum and the occasional coughs, I dared not take it now. I'd need it sooner or later. Every time I gurgled and retched from it, I felt Glimmerlight pull me in tight, stopping me hurting myself. At least I wasn't alone anymore when sick.

You'll get out, Murky. Trust in what she said.

To distract my mind, I started drawing again while Glimmer watched carefully. Lines, curves, shapes... it all made sense. It was so much easier to relax, rather than sitting worrying about memory magic, irradiated infections, slave indoctrination, and Shackles' plans.

I knew what I wanted to draw, too. Something, somepony, from a time they had felt more hopeful. Somepony here with us who I knew needed to see it again.

Brimstone visited us briefly, sitting just behind the pair of us.

"Brim." Glimmer smirked and nodded to him.

"Glim." He muttered back, not moving his eye from the window, but slightly grinning all the same.

A few seconds of silence after their little 'greeting' dragged on, before he finally spoke.

"I won't let them get to you."

It felt strained, before Glimmerlight turned to him directly.

"Brim, for once... don't think about me for this, big guy. We're all in this up to our necks, you're the only one who can take on that minotaur, and you'll need to concentrate on that when it happens. Please, don't let me be a distraction."

"Mmm..." Brimstone made nothing but a quiet, neutral sound, absent mindedly tapping me very carefully on the head. "Not what I swore to the Goddesses."

"To hell with what you believe, I don't want you to die!"

That made him finally turn to look at her. Glimmer was clearly trying to hold in more emotion.

"He's... he's the first opponent I've ever really feared for you fighting, Brim. You beat him in the past but... but—"

Brimstone's hoof stamped back down on the floor a little too hard. He looked down at his hoof, as though surprised he'd done it.

"Brutus is a mad beast, I don't know what he's like now, but back then I always outsmarted him. If he comes, I will fight him. That's all there is to it. If I have to crush his metal skull off the mountain side for an hour, I will."

"Brim..."

"Don't, Glim. If he comes, I fight. That. Is. It."

Slowly, heavily, he wandered off, stepping round Aurora's fine furniture with his huge

hooves and body with surprising care.

Glimmerlight just looked sadly after him. We didn't dare talk about our fears about Brutus after that.

Protégé occasionally came through, too, checking on progress. On his third trip, I heard him before he even came in and looked up as he came through the door. As he did, Aurora opened her eyes again and sighed bitterly.

Protégé spotted her. "Aurora, how far is it—"

"Not far enough." She seethed through gritted teeth, not looking over at him. "It's difficult. I'm out of practice. Too much theory, not enough experiments. No pony to work with. I can feel it flowing, but finding the right memory is infuriatingly distant. It was so long ago... eugh..."

She slipped and fell to her side. Unity's hoof shot out to catch her, arresting the drop. Lifting the ghoul back up, the younger unicorn held her steady.

"I can feel parts of your memory, Aurora. It *is* working! Tastes... feelings... it's all there."

"We need more than just knowing memories. Your mind has to *be* mine! Knowing how to cast it isn't enough, you have to be able to cast it with my skill and experience. Protégé, I need to concentrate..."

The slaver stood there, nodding silently as once again they faded into that strange unconscious and silent state. I could tell that Protégé was hiding his worries. It was clear in his eyes, all too obvious now I knew what to look for. That empty and trying stare he made. Gradually, he turned to me.

"Are you holding up?"

"K-kinda... I don't feel too well still..."

Protégé's expression softened a little. "I am sorry to drag you through all this... it's—"

He stopped. I saw him suddenly stare in a couple of directions, his eye flicking to the eyepiece he wore.

"Protégé?" Glimmerlight pulled her weapon toward herself, glancing at the window.

He nodded.

"They're here."

Slowly, around the isolated cottage, they came.

Hazy black shadows in the mists, nothing more than dull blurs that grew and moved to just within sight. They surrounded us entirely, holding a perimeter at the edge of our vision. In the twilight hours, amongst the night's growing darkness, seeing anything distinctly was getting harder and harder.

Inside, we all clutched our weapons and hunkered down ready. We'd blocked the doors with furniture and, at Brimstone's instruction, set up a few things to leap behind if anyone threw a grenade in the window. Now, holed up, we waited for it to begin.

Behind me, I could see Aurora slumped to the side while 'out.' The spell was taking so much out of her, with the ghoul looking weaker and weaker by the minute. Unity was tired, lying against a bookshelf as the connection between their horns flowed and sparkled. There was a soft ambience to it, a distant ringing of small bells that I could swear matched up to the times her horn's light grew more intense.

We had to hold the slavers off... give Aurora enough time to finish and then fight our

way to the peak. According to Aurora, we were very near it, just a short gallop away.

This... this could work. Get the orb to Ragini, and then just pray we were taken alive...

The horrifying thing was... I knew I would be.

"I know you are all in there."

The quiet dusk was shattered. *His* voice rung out as I saw a large blur begin to move forward. It solidified through the mists, gathering in shape until it became a huge earth pony. A form and silhouette I knew far better than I could ever sanely want to.

Chainlink Shackles strode out in front of the cottage. Rattling, grinning with those sick teeth, and crushing the deep snow beneath his bulky form, he moved toward our last bastion on this mountain.

"There is nowhere for you to run." His eyes scanned the front. I saw his head slowly turn until he faced my window, "This mountain is entirely secured now. Every route a pony could take to get down is covered. **You. Are. Mine.**"

As he came into clarity, I saw a strange gushing beneath him. The snow was actually parting ways for him as he came for us! A thin crackling shine was in the air, the mists shifting and flowing around him in a sphere-like shape. The very weather itself was giving way to him!

A shot rang out above us, a whipping crack of an energy powered rifle that echoed across the entire mountainside. Ragini had fired!

Shackles didn't even flinch. A magical flare sparked about half a foot in front of him.

Ragini's shot vanished into nothing, dissolving amidst the hard light that had flickered up.

Now I saw it clearly. He was shielded! That was what was making the snow flow around him. Somepony back there must have been casting it from out of sight.

"Heh, amazing things that Aurora Star created, these talismans. But a mere foal's toy to what we know you have in Fillydelphia."

His voice rattled, powerfully speaking until I could hear him shouting directly to me even at this range. That overbearing tone right above me.

"Ministry Station will be a new Fillydelphia's heart, the core for the rightful reclaiming of *my* city. You had me as your mere overseer, upstart! You thought me an old veteran, past his prime. You were wrong..."

Beside me, I saw Protégé lifting his revolver in his magic, looking uncomfortable... even pained.

"Times change, and power changes its bearers... but the chain goes on, upstart! **Eternal. Unbreaking.** That city is mine. Red Eye has only made it a greater prize for my ascension. **How does it feel, my old slave? How does it feel knowing your Master is returning to command you once again?**"

Protégé closed his eyes tightly. I'd never seen him look scared of Shackles, ever. But now, after Ministry Station, there was a chink in his emotional armour, one Shackles was exploiting.

"You will come out, or we shall reclaim you. All of you. **Come out now!**"

Nopony spoke. I huddled tightly near the window, only the top part of my head really looking out. I could see Glimmer tense up as well.

"Steady, everyone." Grizzly growled from the next room. "The more we wait... the less fighting there'll be before we're done..."

Outside, Shackles stood, glaring at the cottage. That shield was like an aura of his will,

the weather obeying him. Yet his face was changed from when I had last seen him. His eyes were more active, flitting to the left and right. His grin wavered from a smile to a scowl. Even his voice was less cohesive and calculated.

He looked eager. Eager, and obsessive. He was close to what he wanted now, and I could see the wanting written all over him.

“No? Heh... so rebellious. So foolishly clinging on to some hope. How many times has it been crushed, now? How many more times need you fail until you realise we will endlessly traverse this cycle? You cannot escape. Not here. Not Fillydelphia. Not me.”

His grin turned into a lethal sneer.

“Let the cycle continue, then. You’ll be begging before the end. I’ll shatter the pride you like to think you have.”

He turned, trotting away, and waved a huge hoof to someone in the mist.

Glimmerlight yanked me down. Protégé ducked. Out in the distance, flares of orange erupted in the fog, and the cottage cracked as rounds clashed into it.

Glass shattered above me. Wood snapped and burst all around. My ears spiked in pain as the rolling volley commenced. From all sides, gunfire burst out, the sound reaching me only now before more shots were fired. We couldn’t do anything but stay low, sheltering while bullets ripped into the room through the window. Two or three even penetrated the stone walls, spraying us sharply with shards of rock. I screamed as it went on and on. I heard whoops outside, elated slavers spraying the cottage with all they had! The sound of a heavier machine gun roared like an army of hydras stomping the ground, its heavy rounds smashing a line through the wall above the window and sending stone dust and shard spiralling among us.

We were pinned down, and I dared not lift my head! We couldn’t do anything! It just kept coming! We had... we had nothing! Only maybe a dozen shots each, other than Grizzly and Ragini! They had enough supplies to launch a full firestorm on us!

“*Everyone! This is it! Hold them!*”

Grizzly’s voice roared from the next room over. What did he mean!? We couldn’t hold this!

Yet, despite that, I saw my sister rise, swing her rifle to the window and *fire!* Beside her, Protégé snapped up, aiming for a second before snapping off a shot of his own. Amazingly, the fire from outside lessened slightly, shouts of return fire going out! They were diving for cover!

A shotgun blast tore the window casing away entirely, making Glimmer cry out as splinters dug into her. She fell back, Protégé firing once more before diving down. From the next room, I heard Grizzly’s combat rifle bark, and up above Ragini’s own energy rifle flared. Return fire sprayed up toward her, giving us an opportunity!

Glimmer, Protégé, and myself all rose! I couldn’t let them do it alone! Dragging myself up, I whipped out my saddle’s mouthpiece and took aim. I wouldn’t hit, but maybe it could scare them!

“Aim for where there’s the most, lil’bro!” Glimmer’s voice held no humour. “Make em nervous! Stop em firing! Come on!”

I bit hard, the small crack of *Rarity’s Grace* bucking my body. I fired again. Then a third time to expend the tiny gun. Out there, I saw blurs moving about, trying to move up! Oh geez they were close! They were at the wall surrounding the cottage!

“They’re going to reach us!”

"No, they *aren't*!"

Glimmerlight racked the lever-action, firing again and again. One dark blur in the blizzard snapped back and screamed. Their shape disappeared almost immediately. So much snow was getting kicked up, and dust from the impacts on the walls drifted down in front of us, obscuring the lethal phantoms of slavers that dodged and ran through the mists.

I heard a howl, a guttural and bestial roar, as something *big* started to charge across the field. I fought the urge to curl up and scream, as I saw the monstrous Big Brutus surge through the snow on a collision course with the cottage.

"I... I... what do we do!?"

Protégé aimed carefully, firing at the charging minotaur. If he hit, Brutus showed no reaction. His warcry was unending, electronically boosted through what looked like small speakers on one shoulder, and given a horrible digital crackling. The ground shook, those massive claws clenched and hissed, forming himself into a battering ram as he went for the door!

"Murk, get *down*!"

Protégé roughly tackled me before the window frame exploded above me, hurling wood and glass into the room to cover the furniture. Shards fell atop us, slicing me across my back. More shots pinged through the devastated window, knocking books off shelves, and pinging off metal tools hanging in the pantry behind us. I heard Unity cry out in fear as one ricocheted past her, breaking the sort of meditative link with a sudden spark of magic.

"Unity, focus! FOCUS!" Aurora shouted at her, holding the younger mare's shoulders tightly.

"It... it almost hit—" The young unicorn looked panicked.

"Nothing except this spell matters, Unity!" Aurora was firm, keeping eye to eye. "This *all* depends on it working!"

Unity paused, staring back.

"I... I can! I can!"

"Good girl."

A stone fell loose from the roof above us, crashing near me as that machine gun gutted the structure again, seemingly searching for Ragini amongst the rafters. The wall around the window began to fall in, stone after stone flying free until a greater hole was formed. Yet, all I could hear now was the animalistic cry of Brutus as he charged! I could see through the new hole. His form grew closer and closer and—

Another bellow set my ears burning. Squealing, my hooves flew up to cover them as Brimstone surged up the hall, crashed through the door, and *slammed* into Brutus mid charge! The impact made an audible bassy thwump, and the colossal minotaur was lifted from his cloven hooves, carried backwards, and tackled into the snow. Brimstone fell over him, his weight crushing down, before he began flailing and struggling to pull upright. The two brutes landed in a heap out the front of the cottage.

"Round the back! They're coming in the back! Charging!"

Coral's voice came through the cottage, right as the whoop of raiders cut into the gunfire. Ragini dropped from the loft, her talon clenched into the wood of the trapdoor, and swung into the far room. She began bounding toward the back. Protégé went with her, galloping past the hole, and ducking as shots chased him the entire way.

"Running low on ammo here!" Grizzly called to us, taking individual shots every few seconds.

"Five left!" Glimmerlight shouted back to him. "Murky?"

How many did I have? Oh, I needed to reload! I cursed myself while fumbling, 'Stupid! Stupid, stupid Murky!'

There was a crack, and the timber supporting column of the wall on our side was struck. The squared wood exploded like a tree struck by lightning, and I saw the entire thing bend over itself and crash onto the sofa behind us. The entire wall rumbled, and came down down before us with a rippling crash, dragging the loft flooring with it. Glimmer and I rolled away from it, crawling madly while coughing and throwing the rubble off of ourselves.

"Reload, quickly!" I was shouting at myself, worried in case I dropped the small rounds amidst this chaos.

With a little dexterous hoofing, I got *Rarity's Grace* off and tried to slip individual bullets into it. Briefly, I peered up to make sure somepony wasn't charging me, too! Sweat poured off me. I grew hot, despite the cold winds blowing through the holes as Aurora's old home was murderously torn to pieces by the firefight. Every time I looked down at my weapon, I began panicking that I was missing somepony aiming at me.

Outside, I could see slavers running from cover to cover, hunkering low as they used the stone wall or mounds in the uneven ground to advance. I could see them so clearly now, see each one as they aimed and—

"*Ohnohe'saiming!*" I squealed and dropped to my back.

The shot went by me and flew into the pantry, hitting a pot somewhere with a curiously humorous sound. With no laughter, only tears in my eyes, I got the third bullet in and started reattaching the small pistol. I only had six more after this.

The sound of crashing metal caught my attention. Outside, there was a ferocious duel going on. Brimstone clashed with Brutus. The pair of them rolled and hurled one another around in the middle of all the gunfire! I finally saw Brutus in combat.

He... it... was horrifying.

Larger than Brimstone, he moved with mechanical strength that whirred and changed direction of strikes faster than any fully organic being ever could! Accelerating his attacks to unreal speeds that looked about enough to decapitate somepony from the impact alone! Lost to the frenzy, he didn't say anything, only screamed and roared as he swung and swung and swung.

It made me want to panic. Brimstone was on the defensive. He dove and dodged, knocking those massive claws away each time they swung and grasped, trying to slice him in two! The true horror was seeing the look on his face. The desperation, the feeling of being *completely* outmatched in both strength and speed.

Big Brutus snapped out, Brimstone's hoof knocking the claw away before the old Warlord ducked in and surged upwards. A hoof careened into Brutus' face, driving the minotaur back with a blow I knew would have killed a normal pony. Yes! The minotaur's head snapped back and the arms ceased their assault for a second. Brimstone drove in, striking again and again, heaving a hoof into Brutus' bare chest, before turning and bucking hard enough to throw Brutus right off his hooves again!

Finally, the minotaur's ceaseless roar ended, winded right out of him as he crashed down amidst the snow.

"They're breaking cover. Hit them!" Grizzly shouted from the next room. I saw the three slavers rushing out from behind the wall, trying to sprint at us.

“Reloading here!” Glimmer shouted back, “Murky! Go for it!”

I felt frozen, that hole had rounds bouncing all over it! I tried to poke out and one zipped right past my cheek. Whimpering, I fell back, shaking uncontrollably. Shackles’ pet or not, they weren’t playing around... I... I...

“He’s pinned down, get the bastards!” A slaver shouted, catching my sensitive ears under the withering hail of bangs and echoes.

They were coming to hurt my friends, and I knew that I had to stand up for them. Aurora had said it clearly, and made me realise it. I would. I would put myself in danger if I had to!

Trying to fight my fears, I pushed myself up and half blindly fired the three shots toward the group, or at least where I could hear they roughly were, my eyes were too clenched to properly see. Ahead of me, two slaves dove away and ran back.

“You said they were fuckin’ pinned!”

“They were!”

The third one slipped, coming down hard. A shot from across the other side hit him in the gut. He squealed, writhing and only gradually passing away. Old Grizzly was back in the game, and I happily sank back down to reload *Rarity’s Grace* once more. Six shots thus far, and I’d hit nothing.

Outside, I heard a grinding of gears and an electronic whirring. Big Brutus surged up from the snow again to face down Brimstone. The earth pony rushed at him as he got up, not giving him a chance to get ready. One of those claws shot out, parrying Brim so hard I was sure I saw a small sliver of Brim’s hoof shear off in the clash.

“Getting old, Warlord!”

The claw slashed forward again, open and ready to clamp shut. Brimstone had no choice but to dive to the side as it snipped where he’d been, the sharp claws narrowly missing his back leg. The other came down, trying to crash down upon his head!

Both Brim’s front hooves blocked it, and immediately had to shift as the enormous claws sprang open. The old warlord held them apart, trying to force it wide open. For a few seconds, they struggled, muscle against machine... until I saw the muscle begin to give.

“Getting weak...” Brutus leaned forward.

The claw lifted, taking Brimstone with it. Only after a second did I realise that I had to duck, as Brutus swung and bodily hurled the massive form of Brimstone into the wall of the cottage.

The impact shook the very foundations; and after a hideous mix of creaking and falling stones, the entire front of Aurora’s cottage came down. Like a folding deck of cards, the front walls and a portion of the roof toppled, their stones rolling across one another, and wooden frames cartwheeled off as they snapped. Within seconds, the blizzard flew in to hit us, even as the crashing of the breaking house filled my ears.

Rocks tumbled around the two monsters, as Brimstone was slammed right through another supporting log. We all dove away, Unity trying to pull the, by now very weak, Aurora into the pantry to restart the spell again.

“Getting SLOW!”

Brutus didn’t give him a second to recover. Even as I struggled to find cover in the tumbled down front of the home, I saw him launch onto the stunned warlord. One of its massive talons slammed across my friend’s face. Brimstone was thrown back out, struggling to get to his hooves again. I could see the determination in his eye, but his body simply

refused to cooperate. Everything I'd feared about his condition after the Pit was coming true.

My big friend wasn't done yet. Experience was a powerful weapon, and without even looking to know, he rolled his body in the right direction to dodge Brutus' clasp claws. The minotaur dropped onto his arms, giving Brimstone the chance he needed. Bellowing loud enough to echo in the mountains, Brim lifted, and crashed a boulder off the cyborg's head hard enough to crush one bionic eye into tinfoil. I saw sparks fly, as the spark energy detonated, sending Brutus reeling back and swinging wildly in defence.

Using the rock to jam the incoming claw, he swept out the beast's legs and sent Brutus sprawling onto his back. It gave my friend, our protector, a chance to get up and reassert himself.

"*Kick his ass, Brim!*" Glimmerlight hollered, raising up to fire directly at Brutus.

The round sparked off Brutus' back as he got up, annoying the hulking monster and shattering some of the vials on the creature's back. The distraction made the beast turn briefly. Glimmer went to fire more, before gunfire tore up the shelves near her, rolling in her direction. I lost sight of her amongst a spray of dust and smoke. To my horror, I heard my sister cry out, and saw a spurt of blood!

"Glimmer!"

Diving from the clouds and away from the gunfire, she fell back against a tumbled-over cabinet, three or four bloody marks splayed across her chest.

"Fuck! *Shit!* Fu—argh... ricochet fragments!" She gasped, holding a hoof to her chest.

I rushed across to her, but she waved me away as two zaps of an energy weapon flew between us and set fire to the bookcases between us.

We couldn't hold this. We couldn't hope to.

"G-Glimmer are—"

"N-not deep... but it'll stop me moving much." She seethed through gritted teeth, firing blind with her lever-action to dissuade two slavers we could spot hear trying to make a break for the side of the cottage. "Three shots left..."

Around the back, there was a sudden and close screeching. Protégé's revolver fired twice, Ragini's energy rifle spat death, and I heard the unmistakable sound of something *evaporating*.

"They're inside! They're—"

An explosion of pressure blew through the entire house, sending books and dust kicking up, lifting all the snow that had fallen since the front of the roof came down. The cacophony of rattling utensils that inexplicably still hung from the shattered ceiling was like a broken wind chime from that eruption of power.

"No they aren't." Coral's voice was strained, pained from near the pantry in the back.

"AURORA! HOW MUCH LONGER!?" Grizzly bellowed from the next room, his rifle chattered and then horrifyingly ran dry. I heard the click. "We're getting overrun!"

There was no reply. Held in silent focus between the two, I saw Aurora's face grimace without making a sound.

The fire was spreading from those energy blasts to the bookcases. The glow was contrasting the white of the mountainside, the blizzard sending embers flying through the air as much as snow did, whirling amongst the besieged cottage. Looking to either side, I felt myself hyperventilating at the sight. I could see Ragini in the other room, slashing a raider's throat with her talons, before hurling the body out the window. Her energy rifle lay

broken at her side, bent at an angle. Protégé hurled a table at one, blew another's head apart with his revolver, and immediately was set upon by a drugged-up raider, rolling with the frothing psychopath on the floor.

I rushed to help him, but was blocked by a barrage of gunfire that ripped up the wooden floor of the entryway. Scrambling back, I yelled again as my head pounded. The heavy gun outside was firing wildly at the doorway, puncturing and shattering the loft ladder in two.

To my horror, I saw the raiders starting to take the far room. They poured in the windows, singing a nightmarish war chant as they came. Ragini ripped the raider off Protégé, slammed her broken rifle into his head, and lashed out at another. Old Grizzly wielded a length of timber in his mouth like a club and snapped a raider's knee. But three others piled on him. I saw his legs grabbed. They were taking him.

"Murky, head down!"

I heard Glimmer's voice and dropped. A shot from inside hurtled above me, passing through the crumbled wall to impact the slaver who'd snuck up on me. Outside, behind where he'd come from, I could see them gaining ground.

"One shot left..." Glimmer muttered, lying in the corner and trying to pull a towel from the corner over to cover her wounds.

Biting my lip, I got up with my own weapon to fire, but I knew I'd never get enough of my body exposed to fire the battle saddle. All I could see when I peeked out was the horrible sight of Brutus slamming Brimstone's head over and over with the edge of a claw. My friend was slowing... bleeding... staggering...

In the next room, I saw Coral Eve trying to blast the raiders out, but her horn spluttered and sparked before fading to nothing. She fell where she was; burned out, physically beyond consciousness.

Grizzly was gone, pulled through the window and taken, the prize of the raiders.

We were going to die. We really were...

I thought it couldn't get any worse.

Behind me, I heard a scuffling sound from behind the wall. The chimney kicked out a ton of soot down past the flames, before finally a filthy white head with multicoloured hair poked out of it, upside down. An insane grin was plastered across its face.

"Hi, kids! What did you want for Hearthswarming?"

Screaming, in a panic, I opened fire with *Rarity's Grace* as Wildcard pulled and slithered himself out of a chimney far too small for his thick muscled body. Even as I fired, the shots went wild, almost hitting Glimmer. Wildcard's magic tore at my saddle, throwing my aim off! Ignoring the burns from the fire he was clambering through, he rose up before me.

"They said I wasn't allowed to kill you again, Murky-Murk! But then I killed you once, and you came back, so I guess it's fine to *try again, huh!?*"

"Try this then, you junkie!" Glimmer pulled the trigger on her last shot at near point blank range.

Wildcard's head snapped back as it impacted right into his face, spinning backward into a chair. For a second I was hopeful, but then he growled and sat back up, grinning as he held the round in his teeth before swallowing it whole.

"High lead diet, little Glimmy... wonders for the complexion!" He stroked his face, smearing the soot over his burns. "Oh, I remember you. Figured out why you hate me, yet?"

Glimmerlight lay there in the corner. I was empty on my pistol and found his magic holding me in place by my own saddle. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Coral being

dragged off. Slavers took Chirpy, too. The foal was squealing for his mother as he went. They were moving into the back, Protégé fighting back to back with Ragini to keep them away from Unity and Aurora!

"I hate you enough as it is..." Glimmer seethed at him.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it, missy. And it's not because you didn't come to my birthday party yesterday, *you trumped-up too-good-for-me whore of a bitch-mother. I'm going to FUCKING GUT YOU!*"

His face twisted as he screamed and rushed forward, his machetes sliding down the chimney to join him. I screamed, too... Glimmer might have... but in a black blur, a huge figure leapt past me and bodily tackled him into the fireplace again.

Ragini scythed at his face, her talons coming in one after the other in a desperate, rabid attack. Wildcard and the griffon rolled out of the fireplace, burning both of them and dragging embers out that caught the carpet, adding to the growing blaze. They tussled on the floor, before Ragini got her rear paws down. Using her far larger size, she wrapped a leg around Wildcard's neck, and rammed him into the bookcase head first. The raider spurted out with laughter, bleeding profusely across his face as his machetes spun wildly, causing me to dive away from his mad magic.

"Flightless! Help Protégé! NOW!" Ragini gasped, trying to keep a grip on the slippery raider, until Wildcard broke free and headbutted her directly, his horn scarring across her face.

I didn't see any more. I rushed through to the dining room. I found Protégé fighting three raiders, a desperate battle for survival. He was throwing chairs and debris around with his magic, scrambling to avoid getting trapped by them.

I didn't stop. I kept running until I came up behind one of his assailants, turned and bucked right up into the nethers as hard as I could! The squeal of agony was enough to let me know I'd struck true, before a hoof slapped me clean against a chest of drawers.

My distraction was enough. Protégé got the other off him, firing into their neck with his revolver, before pulling up the raider's knife and hurling it into the one in front of me. It sunk hilt deep into the stallion's temple, and he fell on the spot without a sound.

Protégé and I stood up, catching one another's eye.

"Murk, we—"

Brimstone crashed through the corner of the cottage.

Like a ton weight wrecking ball, he was drive clean through the structure itself, tearing the corner away. The final part of the roof on this side of the cottage collapsed around us, falling flat into the wrecked corner of Aurora's home. I was only saved by Protégé pulling me into the back, dragging me by hoof and magic.

Brutus tore past us, visible through the splintered side of the cottage. Meeting the fallen Brimstone, their heavyweight duel turning into a one-sided hammering for my friend. He was putting up a heroic fight, but every strike knocked him back. Every test of strength he lost. Every so often, I saw him trick Brutus, feinting, faking, or baiting the larger opponent, but he was never fast or strong enough to capitalise on it.

Big Brutus brought both claws together, swinging them around in a great arc that collided with a jutting bit of mountain rock after Brimstone knocked and redirected the blow. The crash send a judder through the ground, sending more wood splintering from the ruined attic area. I saw them disappear around the back as Brutus lifted Brimstone up and tackled him out of my sight, happily taking mighty blows to the face that sent shivers up my

spine.

“Murk, get up! Come on!”

In front of us, I saw the timber in the roof bend... bend... and snap. With a deafening rumble, the rest of the ruined hovel dropped hard before us. We scrambled away to the very back of the dining room to avoid long wooden beams slamming down before us. The front was gone, buried into a pile of wreckage on both sides now.

All that remained now was the rear of the cottage, the section with the pantry. Slavers were swarming up and over the rock wall now that our attacks had ceased. I could hear the raiders returning after delivering their prizes.

“Murk, check on Aurora, if we’re going they have to be finished now!”

“I... I...”

“Murk!” Protégé screamed, picking up a fallen shotgun and sending two shots across the rubble, the snow falling around us.

“YES! YES!” I hollered and ran back again, finding shots missing me to dig into the snow by my hooves. Something went between my legs. Coming back into the first room, I saw Ragini and Wildcard once again.

I... *no*.

Ragini was held down below a hoof. Wildcard bore his machetes above with a grin. She was trapped, Wildcard’s meathook embedded in her shoulder.

“It all burns... all burns! I could have you tonight, burn you up in it! I do feel like some chicken! You taste like that? I wanna know!”

“F-fuck you!” Ragini winced, trying to rise before the hoof stamped her down.

I stood frozen. Behind him I could see Unity looking through the door. There was no glow. Had they finished!? Had something worse had happened?

I felt shell shocked. Standing in the middle of a ruin that had, not ten minutes ago, been a comforting, warm home. Shots pinged off the rubble near me. Grizzly, Coral and Chirpy were gone. Brimstone wasn’t getting up as the minotaur stamped again and again. Glimmerlight struggled with a slaver, her wound rendering her unable to shake them off her.

And right in front of me, Ragini was held down by that psychopathic raider chief.

“Come to get a chicken wing, Murkie-boy? Haha!” Wildcard laughed, as though he hadn’t even realised he were wrestling with a griffon.

I didn’t know what to do.

Yet Ragini did.

With a loud shrieking call, she pushed through the pain. Hook or not, she got a talon down and hauled her battered body off the floor, bringing Wildcard with her! She struggled, hissed, and strained to hold the heavy unicorn up. Eagle eyes locked on his, I saw a look of grim determination in her eyes. Crying out, she lifted him higher, higher, and showed just how strong a griffon was, summing up all her willpower to hoist and throw the struggling raider to the ground below her.

Surging down, her talons sunk into his chest, even as Wildcard scrambled and lashed out. He clambered up, only to meet her bucking him *hard*... straight into the fireplace. He crashed into the flames, writhing and screeching. I saw her rip the meat hook free, hurl it at the slaver holding Glimmer and then tear the slaver off my sister with it. The slaver howled, his sub-machine gun spiralling into the air.

Ragini grabbed it from the air, and turned to the two others that had clambered over the

wreck of the home, spraying both of them until they collapsed lifelessly out of view.

Tired, breathless, she dropped into cover, and waved at me with the weapon.

“Yo, flightless, they’re done in there! Let’s get movi—URK!”

She had spun, only to find two machetes speared through her sternum. The griffon stopped dead, beak open in shock.

Before her, his skin ablaze in fire, Wildcard stood wearing quite easily the most disturbing facial expression I’d ever seen him make.

A completely calm and serious glare, with a level tone to his voice.

“No.”

The machetes sliced outward. She didn’t even get a chance to cry out as they slid out of her sides and crossed at her neck... taking her head clean off.

Coming through, bearing the shotgun, Protégé stopped dead with a despairing look as he saw her fall. He watched the large griffon body go down, snow immediately beginning to settle across it.

He looked up, disbelief turning to rage. His breathing grew deeper, until all of a sudden he let out a long cry, and brought the weapon up. I saw his magic flare brightly, firing the weapon as fast as it could possibly allow toward Ragini’s killer. Glimmerlight grabbed the fallen sub-machine gun, adding her own weight to the fire, blood running down her face.

Regaining his smirk, the raider bounced and wheeled, diving and rolling like a foal’s bouncy toy, moving aside from the vengeful Protégé with insulting ease

He laughed as he bounded over the wreckage. Not a fun and gleeful tune, but a deathly, mocking laugh that faded as Protégé and Glimmer’s fire drove him off into the mists that closed back in once more, leaving us alone with the first of us to fall.

Protégé fell down, knees going weak. He couldn’t hide the tears in his eyes. I could see that his E.F.S. eyepiece was cracked on its coloured glass.

Behind me, Glimmer ran through magazine after magazine in an effort to keep the slavers from drawing nearer. She was shouting that they’d be here any second.

“—urky!”

“Murky!”

“Murky!”

Unity’s voice hit into my numb head as I realised I was in pain. My side hurt. At some point I’d been hit by some shrapnel and hadn’t even noticed. Only now, in a few seconds of a lull, did the minor pain have a chance to be felt among the million things flying through my mind.

“Murky! We’re done! *We’re done!*”

Unity was crying out from the pantry, yet I could hardly do anything but just stare as I tried to grasp at what had just happened here.

Only, it wasn’t over yet.

Outside, a victorious roar carried over the mountainside. An electronic clipping came with it, and I saw Brimstone barely rising.

He somehow got to his hooves, staggering forward and swinging an attack even I could probably have dodged. The minotaur swept forward, batted it aside, and headbutted the warlord. I felt the savage *crack* like a knock to the skull. Glimmer cried out, as the beast drove Brimstone up above his shoulders, lifting him effortlessly in those claws, before dropping him down again, slamming Brimstone’s side into his knee.

I’d never *ever* heard Brimstone actually cry out in pain before...

Then he went rather still on the ground. Alive, breathing, but done. Exhausted. Battered. Injured.

Beaten.

Brimstone had *lost*.

Big Brutus turned, raised his claws to the obscured sky in salute, and roared. He roared again and again, screaming his victory; his rival defeated. It made sense. He wanted Brimstone to see him winning. From the ground, dumped in kicked up snow, my biggest guardian could only look at his old rival and do nothing.

Gradually, the gunfire began to die down. Soon, there were no more shots at all.

I took the opportunity to rush into the back, finding myself limping suddenly. Something had sprained near my PipBuck. The pantry lay ahead, and I quickly slid in.

"You're done? Did... did it work?"

Unity met me there, pulling me into a tight hug, crying into my shoulder. The poor mare had never experienced anything quite like all that. I realised I wasn't much different.

"Yes, Murky... it did. I... I know now. I know how to stop it. But..."

That word. The moment she said it, I realised there was no Aurora beside her.

Slowly, my eyes fell, finding the now pale and weary ghoul lying against her own fridge door. I felt my heartbreak rising all the more.

"Oh no... not her too..." I felt my voice pitch up in horror.

"I didn't get hit... young Murky." Her voice was so quiet, weak beyond even her age, thin as newly-formed ice. "I... knew this would happen. The spell was so complex... so long... so hard, and I am so very old."

Unity dropped beside her, not caring about ghoulskin as she helped Aurora to sit up. My friend looked tired, too, dizzy on her hooves. Her eyes kept glancing about as though in confusion.

"Just rest... rest, Miss Star. Please, take it easy, and we'll—"

"Hush, child..." Aurora patted Unity's shoulder, "Don't think you can placate me. I know what I did. I calculated before we even started, ngh, how much it would take from me. Tell... tell me... how to do it... prove you know."

Behind me, I heard Glimmer and Protégé shuffling forward and peering over, but my attention was focused on Aurora and Unity. Slowly, the cream unicorn recited things I couldn't understand. Magical terms, methods, and names in languages I had never known Unity could pronounce... ones I knew she had never learned. Yet, as she spoke, I saw the most wonderful thing.

Aurora smiled.

A smile that grew and grew. With every word, those wrinkled cheeks quivered and rose.

"It worked! Oh... it worked... it actually worked. I... it *worked*..."

Tears fell down her face, mouth falling weakly open, struggling to breathe even as she strove to laugh, and failed. Yet, I witnessed such contentment in her eyes.

"I know." Unity spoke carefully. "I don't know how, but... I know it. As if I always have. Like I'm an expert."

Aurora Star wept openly, coughing as she tried laughing.

"It finally worked... I... did it. Two hundred years. A lesson passed on to the next generation to make something better. It... it worked after all this time. I did it..."

Her eyes didn't look at us, they simply and blankly stared upwards.

"I... did it..."

Her body began to slump, each breath growing more faint. Unity and I shared a glance, tears in our eyes as we saw the truth. Aurora Star was dying.

The pony I'd sought to learn so much about. The pony who'd been both the cause, and eventually the hope, of all of this. The pony who now saw her home destroyed, even as she struggled to bring her research to an end, to do the one thing she'd always dreamed of, in order to offer one last good act.

No, this wouldn't be the last thing she saw.

"Aurora Star? I... I need you to see this before... um..."

Slowly, my hooves trembling, I brought it out. The picture I'd drawn. Bringing it before her, lifting her hooves to let her hold it, I let her see it and watched her face transform into nothing but astonishment.

A charcoal drawn image of the Ministry of Arcane Science's Fillydelphian Hub Leader. Her first day being awarded the post. Young, bright, and grinning with the optimism of a lifetime. Bright eyes dreaming of the future, and a better future for everypony.

Her mouth opened again, in one last smile.

"Thank you so much, Murky..." She spoke gently, yet with dire wanting. "Please, make the right choices. Let this horrid odyssey all mean something in the end..."

Slowly, the old pony's eyes closed, holding my drawing against her chest, and her whole body settled.

Her voice was scarcely audible.

"I did it, Twilight. I did it. You told me to make real what I had dreamed. To help ponies. After all that happened... here at the end... I finally did it... oh, Twi..."

Her lips moved, but they were silent.

And then, in our grasp, Aurora Star passed into memory for the last time.

There wasn't any time to really do much for her.

There wasn't much time for anything now.

Unity and I trotted back out front with solemn faces to find Glimmer and Protégé huddled behind the last remnant of our cover. Out on the snowy plains behind the mist, I could see the shape of slavers close by. Waiting... just waiting.

Protégé looked up from binding Glimmer's chest in what clean fabric he could find, his hooves slow and lethargic over his own battered body.

"Is it done? Where is—"

He stopped short as he saw our faces.

Slowly, Unity nodded to him.

"I know what I need to know." Her voice was thin, as though nervous about speaking too loudly after what just happened to break the reprieve.

"Good... good. At least you know this now. At least you made it through that."

Protégé wasn't putting it on. I could see genuine relief on his face, more than I might have expected.

"Yes I'm... weak, but I'll make it I think..." Unity muttered, looking away from the slaver and taking a seat. What she had done was incredible, but it had cost her. She was trotting slowly and breathing hard.

Protégé didn't reply, instead just sinking down against the wall with a hoof on his head. It

was clear why... he'd already lost one close ally today. Whether they were friends or not, I would never know... but it was clear Ragini's loss had shaken him. One of the few slavers in Fillydelphia that had supported him was now dead.

With Aurora gone, that left just the four of us.

"We have to... to..." Protégé began, hesitated, and then continued with a shake of his head, "just let come what comes. We cannot go to the orb. We have no way to get it down now without Ragini, and no way to stop them from getting it other than the hope that they don't find it until we return some day."

He looked away across the demolished house, through the snow now drifting all over us from the shattered and collapsed roof.

"If we can ever return."

Nopony seemed to know what to say to that.

Yet it wasn't true. It wasn't right. We couldn't abandon it now. It was our only chance to activate what lay in Ministry Station! We wouldn't get another opportunity like this... all the other orbs I knew of were already used. Aurora had told us they needed to be empty. This was the only one we knew about.

Maybe we'd just have to look for that lost one in Fillydelphia somewhere, but an entire city was impossible to cover. Not when we were slaves.

Outside, there came the sound of ponies advancing.

"**You are beaten, slaves.**"

His voice echoed across the front of the cottage's grounds.

"I ordered before. You resisted, and lost one of your own with four others reclaimed to me. **You will come out.** Allow yourself to live and come trotting out with heads held low in defeat. The Master of Fillydelphia is waiting... heh..."

I saw him emerge through the clouds. Shimmering shield spell still swirling around him, he carved a path through the freezing ground as he approached. Around his neck was slung a heavy-looking short-barrelled shotgun, while his whip fluttered at his side. His greasy mane coursed in the wind as he scanned the obliterated cottage. Behind him there came Brutus, stomping his way, still bruising and bleeding from Brimstone's attacks. In his claw... he held Old Grizzly.

He hurled the old slaver to the ground beside Shackles where I saw blood begin to stain the snow. He was hurt badly.

Shackles looked down before mockingly patting Grizzly's head.

"I know about the orb, little worms. It's incredible how talkative the supporters of your great 'leader' become when your precious 'next generation' is even moderately threatened. The foal will live, thanks to ponies knowing when they should respond to their master."

I saw him leer down at the proud slaver and felt my skin crawl. They'd threatened Chirpy to know all this. He knew! Oh please, something give me an idea, please!

"It's true!" I heard the pain in Grizzly's voice as he shouted it, admitting it. "He knows, Protégé!"

Beside me, Red Eye's apprentice shivered and clenched his teeth. Somehow I doubted it was the cold sweeping in as the heat of battle began to wear off.

Grizzly struggled to stand before being brutally kicked in the ribs by Shackles. He cried out, falling to his knees again.

"Protégé! Listen... argh... *listen to me, young one!*" Grizzly cried out across the field, trying to muster strength from a battered body.

Protégé turned, looking out toward one of his old mentors with worried eyes.

"We can't fight them, Protégé! I've seen how many they've got coming up. There's... there's no way out now. Listen to me closely. That orb... it *matters*, Protégé! It's what Red Eye instructed you to find for him, not for Shackles!"

"Be silent, wretch!"

The shotgun swung out, striking Grizzly's cheek with its metal stock with a sickening crack. I heard Grizzly cry out, falling sideways. Yet even as he fell, struggling to not lie on his side, he shouted again, even as Shackles bore over him.

"Red Eye trusted you with this, Protégé! Don't let him down!"

Beside me, I could see the hurt on the unicorn's face.

"You're the only one left now to stop all this! You know what you have to—"

The shotgun slammed home again before a hoof stamped down, making Grizzly's shoulder pop, and holding the big slaver on the ground, face side down in the snow. His shout of pain was muffled in it, as Shackles' shotgun levelled on his head.

"You know what I will do, upstart! Here's your incentive to come out and return to your Master! Now trot along and come back to me, heh."

Shackles glared toward us.

"Don't make me ask again. I'd rather you all alive after all..."

His hoof twisted, causing Grizzly to cry out once more. Beside me, Protégé was clearly conflicted. His revolver held low in his magic as he shook, eyes closed.

"Come on now..."

His teeth clenched, tears pooling at the edge of his eyes. Grizzly was the last true ally he had left in Fillydelphia, second only to Red Eye with how much he had helped the young unicorn.

Then Grizzly shouted one last time.

"You know what he'd want you to do!"

The shotgun's booming sound echoed many times around the mountainside as Protégé's eyes snapped open with a gasp. He saw the same sight I did, of what had been done.

Of Shackles coldly executing Grizzly before us all.

I felt myself quivering with sudden terror, yet I couldn't ignore the stark horror of Protégé. His face was aghast, more so than any of us. His whole body stood on edge, upright and seemingly frozen in place.

"Protégé?" I asked, tentatively moving forward. "Protégé what are—"

His hoof shot out, knocking me back away from him, far more harshly than he ever had.

I fell beside Glimmerlight into the rubble, as he stood before all of us, looking halfway between scared and angry. Protégé's eyes looked around. At first I thought with nerves until I saw him looking at his eyepiece. He was scanning every side of the cottage, swinging his head until he stared toward the back.

"Don't... don't follow me."

"Protégé, what—"

His face snapped toward me, stern and hurt. *"Do not follow me! That is an order, slave!"*

The word hit me like a slap in the face. Yet, before I could say a thing, he turned and galloped away toward the back, carrying his revolver with him. Bucking the old wooden door open, he rushed out into the mist. I heard shouts from outside, slavers or raiders spotting him. There were gunshots, and I heard somepony cry out as his revolver fired back.

It became clear to me about the same time as it did Glimmerlight, even as the sound of

his revolver dropping whoever had tried to stop him rung out. She pulled me around, looking me in the eyes, her shaking hooves holding me steady.

“He’s going for the orb.”

I nodded, quivering terribly. Was he just going on a last ditch attempt? Was he trying to save us from dying in the fight? Abandoning us?

Then it struck me. I turned back to the two friends I had with me, shouting even as I heard other slavers beginning to close in.

“He’s going to destroy the orb!”

The look on their faces was clear. They realised it too.

“What Grizzly said, to stop this the only way he can! They don’t care if we don’t get away, they only want to stop Shackles having the power to take over from Red Eye!”

Shackles’ voice boomed out, before the advancing slavers started to run for us.

“Get in there and bring those those runaways back to me! Move! Get moving!”

My heart beat faster while I suddenly felt unsure of what to do. Glimmerlight grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me closely in the eye.

“Murky, we need that orb to get out!”

She glanced to Unity, as the younger unicorn was half slumped against the blackened sofa, and the pair of them nodded to one another. There was only the three of us. Quickly, my sister looked back at me, entirely serious.

“Murky, you’re the only one of us who can catch up to him now. You have to stop Protégé!”

She was right.

“But... I—”

She didn’t give me any chance for anxiety to settle in, cutting me off and leaning her forehead to mine.

“If he destroys it, then we’ve lost everything we came here for! Everything we’ve fought this whole time for! Catch him. Stop him however you can! You have to go!”

She pushed me away toward the back. I simply stumbled and very quickly felt weak. I couldn’t...

“Murky! GO! We’ll give them something to think about. Keep them off your tail for a little while!”

She tossed a captured pistol to Unity who caught it in her mouth and crawled up beside the shattered cottage front. Glimmerlight fired a brief burst from her submachine gun, stalling the slavers who hadn’t expected any resistance. She leaned up on her bag of memory orbs for support.

Her eyes stayed solidly on mine.

“Win this for all of our hopes, Murky. Stop him from destroying our dreams.”

She didn’t need to tell me any more. I turned and ran through the house as incoming fire tore into it once more. I ducked under the beam, that had crashed down, and skittered through the pantry until I fell out the back door, the same way Protégé had gone.

I felt my hooves sink into the snow immediately as I rushed out into the wind. Near me, I saw two corpses lying with big wounds in them, an empty shotgun lying between them both. Crunching snow told me others were nearby.

Behind me, Glimmer’s weapon chattered again, delaying and annoying the slavers. It gave me the reminder I needed to push onward. She couldn’t hold them for long. Into the snow I went, powering through it as fast as I could. Any time a slaver looked near, I’d duck under

the thick surface and sneak forward slowly through the trail Protégé had left. Before long, I knew I was past the cordon of slavers and raiders. In the wake of his breakout, it had been easy.

Raising back up though, I now saw what lay ahead.

A massive pass, steep and sharp on either side that rose upward through the clouds. Jutting rocks surrounded it, making a natural path all the way up that bent and fell off. I could see a trail of broken snow passing into the obscured higher areas. Into this, I galloped, trying to ignore my quickly numbing hooves and the biting wind on my skin. The light was beginning to fail. I now relied solely on the fire from the cottage behind me to light my way in the wilderness.

Glimmer was right, I had to do this. No matter who it was standing before us, I couldn't let him destroy our only hope at escape! We'd worked too hard! We'd endured, and lost, too much to let it end like this!

Even as the steep slope inclined before me, and I felt my hooves slipping and falling atop the treacherous path, I felt the weight of everything striving to hold me back. The wind in my face or catching my wings that were spread for balance. The cold seeping into my very core. The injuries and painful joints. The sickness growing as the snow worked its horrible magic on my chest, that made every breath of the icy air like swallowing glass. I screamed, I cried, I shouted, and encouraged myself as much I could as I put hoof before hoof, and climbed!

"Keep going, Murky!"

I gasped.

"Climb! Climb!"

I fell, my hooves slipping as I collapsed onto the rock and slid on my back further down. Desperately, I spun and fired my grapple hook before I slid all the way back down and broke my leg! With a jarring halt, it caught something above me, before I began to use it in my climb! I was in the clouds themselves, the air thin and my vision going blurry through my goggles! Gritting my teeth before coughing and falling loose on my line, I tried to follow Protégé's path as best I could on the exposed pass.

I wasn't weak. Not this time. I was strong, I had to be. For my friends and *all* our wishes for freedom I had to be! Not after all this! These had been dark days, I had been sunk lower than I ever thought I could be since that moment in the Mall before rising up again.

Grasping a rock, I shouted my frustration at the sky as I pulled myself up another few feet to another ledge. Upward. Ever upward. I'd hit the ground and come back stronger than I'd ever been. If ever I had to be confident, it was now. Now I'd gone higher. Now that I was near to the sky itself.

On the plateau, I galloped forward into the white, sticking to his tracks. I saw places he'd fallen. I fell too, here and there. Yet, always I picked myself back up to continue the hard trek. I galloped... I galloped... I sped up...

The ground rose up. It led me higher, and I saw the clouds begin to thin, turning to drifting vapour around me. My chest was burning, and I quaffed what remained of my canteen to be ready for whatever lay ahead. Using my grapple hook to secure myself, I cut up routes to try and catch him before...

...before I reached the peak.

Around me, the clouds finally broke, their hazy tendrils parting.

A vast blackness overtook my vision. An endless void of beautiful freedom swelled above

me as I ran out of the storm... and into the calm.

The ground levelled out to a smooth peak of the mountain, as I arrived at the top of the world.

Yet, my eyes could only stare upwards. At the night sky...

Stars. So many stars were embedded above me like jewels set in black satin. So overwhelming, and yet so distant and quiet. Different colours, different flares... all dancing in their shapes. Dominant among them, the majestic radiance of Luna's great moon lit the peak of the mountain. I had glimpsed it, but nothing compared to this. It was a welcoming, and reassuring, peace above all the nightmares now below me.

I wished I could have stopped and stared forever.

I never stopped moving, yet my eyes could hardly not wander. Every pain was forgotten now that I saw the place I was supposed to be. The empty space my wings had always been meant to inhabit. There was such a tranquil sight above me, as I ran across a harsh, rocky land in stark contrast to what I had found. Everything below me was illuminated by the moon's glow, casting a silver sheen over the frozen snowtop and the distant peaks jutting up from the miles of cloud to my every side.

I'd said it many times in my life since I had begun to think for myself. Yet this put them all to shame. Never had I ever seen such natural beauty. A strangely silent calm resided over this place, one that threatened to quell the dire need of my chase.

And there... atop it all, I saw the old weather station.

Frozen over, stripped down to its barest structure, it had been left with only rusted metal and rotten wood. A vague shape of something that once had perhaps been a tower stood atop it, an observatory to nothing. A little bigger than the cottage, it had not worn the test of time well. Its two floors were clearly falling apart.

My eyes fell to the doorway closest to me.

His trails in the snow passed into it. The RadAway kept the edge off, but with a tight chest and thin breaths, I approached it and cautiously stepped in. I was out of breath, limbs aching, and many muscles felt pulled or strained. In times gone by, this might have stopped me, yet I couldn't imagine lying back now.

With the deepest breath I could manage, hearing him ahead of me, inside the station, as he hunted and galloped around, I stepped inside and cantered quickly toward the sounds.

The interior was entirely covered in a thin layer of ice and had spread up all the walls and formed thin spikes that hung from the bulbless lamps on the ceiling and across the abandoned bits of worthless furniture. It all cracked beneath my hooves, sending patterns of straight lines out to every side of me. Some walls were entirely gone, broken off for salvage. The perfectly rectangular openings let the wind cast its touch in here, and sharp beams of moonlight glinting off the ice shone through them.

With what traction I could manage, I rushed my way to the room I knew he was in. Skidding into the door, I came face to face with my owner.

Protégé sprung up, his revolver suddenly lifting from beside the floor panel he'd been pulling at. I saw other loose ones upturned around the area, where he had been feverishly searching.

The one he had just opened, though... I could see something in it. A container lay open where something crystal-like was reflecting the moon's light. He saw my eyes flick to it before stepping in front of the hole protectively.

His face scowled, desperation in his eyes clear.

"I told you not to follow me, Murk!"

I was shaking, in fact I didn't think I'd ever stopped since the first shots below, but I refused to back off. I stood in the doorway of the room, or what was left of it. Only a skeleton of a structure remained around us, dripping with icicles.

"I... I won't let you do what you want to! You can't destroy it, Pro—"

One hoof of his stamped forward, shattering the ice. His eyes glared through that half-broken eyepiece. They were hard, yet I saw a fear at their centre.

"It's the only way left! Shackles is coming. He knows about it! Destroying the orb is the only way left to stop *him!*"

I had no choice. If that were all that was at stake then it would be the right idea.

But it wasn't.

Breathing hard, I stepped forward again.

"Protégé, that orb is the only thing that can activate the... the station..."

"Which is why—"

I scrunched up my eyes, before simply shouting it.

"It's the only thing that can turn on the portal to let us out of Fillydelphia!"

My words carried around the empty weather station, disappearing into the great sky outside it. Taking short and sharp breaths, my breath misting in front of my face, I stared at him. Pleading with my eyes. Hoping against all hope that he would finally realise!

Instead, slowly, Protégé backed off, and shook his head.

"Then I'm sorry, Murk..."

I leaned forward. "No..."

"I am truly very sorry." His eyes came up and bore directly into mind. "But there will be other ways. You... you can work two years and—"

That was it. It all finally came up. Impatiently rolling my head, struggling to find the right words, I finally just I screamed at him; frustration and anger in every syllable!

"Listen to yourself! *Listen!* You're saying everything he's wanted you to say! You're... you're no better than you ever were! *Please!* That orb is our only chance! We can't survive two years! Not now! That orb is the only thing that can make this all end for all of us, Protégé! You know it! And I know, you don't want us to die in here! I know you don't!"

Here under the moon and stars, I finally stood up for myself and confronted him. I wasn't going to hide words now.

"You were born a slave, too! But no matter what you say, *you never escaped!* You never earned your freedom, you just became Red Eye's little *pet!*"

His eyes shot open, but I didn't give him a chance.

"He told you to do this, so you're doing it! You know it, Protégé! *You know it!* In Ministry Station you saw that you were still a slave at heart! Still unable to say no! You saw how vulnerable you were!"

I saw his face contort and turn away from me. His shoulders hunched, and his eyes clenched shut.

"I earned my freedom! I earned the... the right to choose and work for—"

The ice cracked below my hood.

"You've chosen nothing! After all this, after all we've been through, you're going to condemn me to slavery *again?* You're going to stop me and say that I just have to go back to working in chains? You're going to say that to every friend I have? You've seen what it's done! You saw the metro. You saw what Shackles did! You know what he'll keep doing! It's time to

end it forever!"

"*I won't abandon my dream, Murk!*" He stormed forward, the words erupting from him with a sudden cry. "A better Equestria! I will see those green fields and those... those wonderful buildings as we all live in peace through Unity a-again! The world rebuilt! Just like it once was! I'll need to see it before I die, and Master Red Eye is the only—"

"Stop lying to yourself!" I interrupted him, trying to get myself to my full height. "Didn't you see what Aurora Star showed us? *What she said directly to you?* She thought the same thing! An impossible dream, and a road through a nightmare paved with hopes and wishes that she couldn't let go of, no matter what it cost anypony else or what monsters she had to work with! You're doing the exact thing she did!"

I stood rock still before stepping forward, lowering my voice.

"Let it go, Protégé. Leave all this, and come with us... please." I felt tears in my eyes as I spoke. "You're somepony better inside. Better than this. Please, *choose* to come with us and we can stop this all from going back to the way it was... we can break this cycle."

He looked shocked as I said that, and stepped backward from me until he was over the orb. I saw him look at it, his magic still holding the revolver ready.

Then, he shook his head slowly and deliberately, his eyes blank. The look of a slave in utter thrall to a master.

"We're so close now, Murk."

"You're not..."

"We are. Master Red Eye has left for the final stage of Unity. It... it will bring us all hope."

I fixed him with a stare, delivering a short and sharp question, my voice low.

"Do you even know what Unity is?"

There was silence.

I could see his breathing become forced and stiff. His eyes tried to look away, they looked to the orb, to his eyepiece, and to me, before he made a sudden and angered scowl.

"I... I trust him..."

"You don't have any reason to."

"*I believe in him!*"

"You've only been told to!"

"He gave me my freedom!" Protégé screamed at me, fanatical, his mane lying loose around his head and his eyes wild. "He took me in! Healed me! Educated me! Gave me a new purpose! He gave me a meaning in a life that had only ever been hopeless!"

"Then come with *us* and do that for so many other ponies!" I yelled back, advancing one hoof in front of the other, slowly inching nearer to the orb and him. "We can all escape forever, live somewhere better! We're both born slaves, Protégé... both our lives were ruined at birth! But we can *change* that now if you just *come with us!*"

I reached out to him, raising a hoof to try and place it on his shoulder to get closer. That eyepiece, it was symbolic to him. I wanted to take it off him, and let him look at me as I spoke without the lens of his master.

"NO!"

His magic stopped me, forcing me back until I tripped and skidded on the ice. He turned, and pulled the orb from the ground. I saw his magic pull the revolver over. He talked rapidly as he worked, his words breathless and haphazard.

"Ragini and Grizzly died for this! Not when we've come so far and sacrificed so much!"

Not now! Not when we're so close!"

He briefly, looking up at me, right in the eye.

"This... this is my duty. Master Red Eye gave me it... I... I must..."

The revolver began pointing toward it.

I couldn't let him destroy it! With a deep breath, I pulled my sore body up and rushed forward, until the barrel of his gun pointed directly at me. Standing just across the room, I skidded to a halt at seeing it wavering in the air, aimed directly at my chest.

There was a pause as I looked at it, as Protégé held the orb close, shivering all over. It cast incandescent rays of reflected moonlight over him.

"Don't move, Murk... please... don't move. Don't make me. We've been here before."

Taking deep breaths, I nodded at him.

"You stood before me once, when freedom was metres short of being mine. You shot me to stop me."

He gulped, and returned the nod.

"And I'll do so again. This is more important than both of us. More than your freedom."

"So you're telling me that to my face? You'd sacrifice *me* for Red Eye?"

He paused.

That was the pause I needed.

My leg kicked out, activating my battle saddle's mouthpiece. It flew up in front of me, the aiming reticule coming to my eye, and I aimed back at him, *Rarity's Grace* levelled.

"Because it's not just me any more, Protégé. My friends deserve this. I'm not the only slave who wants out, and I'm not the little buck you once could talk down and hold back without a fight. Not when you stand in the way, and once again tell me 'no'."

I knew I was shaking, my aim wobbling about just as much as I saw his was. Protégé matched me eye to eye.

And I saw his E.F.S. blink me from green to red. His voice was oddly calm.

"After all we've done. After all the times we've fought together, shared terror, confided secrets, and saved each other's lives... this is what it comes to, Murk?"

My heart was accelerating, a cold uncertainty flowing through my every vein, and making me feel incredibly uncomfortable.

"It is."

"You've changed."

"You haven't."

We both went silent. I saw the blank look in his eyes, he was being driven by order. I was being driven by love. I willed him to see what it was costing him.

Then finally, he spoke.

"Murk..."

His revolver moved back, still pointed at me. I didn't move.

"We are generous souls... sacrifices must be made..."

"Don't."

His revolver started to turn.

"A better Equestria."

"*Don't!*" I screamed at him. "Don't make us do this!"

He just gaped at me for a second, his eyes looking hurt and lost.

"I don't have a choice like you do, Murk..."

The extra glow on his horn was the warning. The orb flew up toward the turning

revolver... and in return I bit down hard on my saddle's mouthpiece.

Rarity's Grace didn't fire. Instead, the whoosh of released air kicked my body back as the grapple gun sent its projectile hurtling out instead. It flew forward, slamming into Protégé's chest, and knocking him backward into the flimsy wall of the station. It came apart, rotten wood splintering as he fell through it. The return shot from his revolver went wild, aimed for me or the orb I didn't know.

I didn't have time to retract the grapple. I simply rushed forward for the orb. It lay on the floor, having dropped from his telekinesis.

Out of the fallen wall, a length of wood slammed into my side and impacted upon the grapple gun. It protected me from harm but the painful impact sent me skidding across the ice, dropping me to my side.

Protégé pulled himself from the wreckage. His magic flung more objects at me. Diving away, the wood and metal slammed down where I'd been, knocking a thin scaffold away to bury itself in the snow outside. Slipping up, I saw him diving for the orb.

I had no choice.

Switching triggers, *Rarity's Grace* snapped its curt retort and blew a section of ice and wall near his head away. The shots made him stop and leap behind the main supporting pillar of the station, his revolver raising to—

I yelled in shock, and bent my legs.

The deep blast of that powerful weapon hurt my ears, as it sent a heavy round slapping into the floor where I'd just leapt away from. A second round chased me further, keeping me running toward one of the remaining walls inside the station. Panting hard, I fired back and hit the column he hid behind, but it drove him away from aiming at me directly. I got behind one of the walls, before a little inkling in my head made me duck.

A revolver round smashed through the rusted metal above me. Of course, E.F.S! A thrill, a fear, a sadness all coursed through me as I tried to come about and get my last shot on target. I was aiming at *Protégé*... he was aiming at *me*.

This was wrong.

I felt a tug, a pull that turned to a powerful yank. Dropping heavily to the chill flooring, I slid backwards, not under my own power. The still-extended wire of my grapple gun glowed red as he used his magic to reel me in. Skittering across the floor, I instead ran with it and dove out, using the momentum to slide on my side across the ice toward the orb between us. I fired my last shot toward him at the same time as I bucked the orb away into another room, clear of his sights.

My shot missed, but I'd never thought it would stand a chance in my desperate rush. It did, however, make him drop the wire, which gave me time to jettison the grapple gun from my saddle. It was too tangled to retract. I started galloping after the orb, before his revolver snapped its fourth shot at me.

I swung behind a thicker metal column, and slipped away into one of the other rooms, out of sight.

"Stop this, Protégé!" I screamed, suddenly feeling so very hurt and emotionally drained. "Look what it's leading to! You'll never be free like this! *Ever!* It's what I've learned since we first met. I know! I can help you!"

"You're only wanting for yourself and your friends, Murk! Master Red Eye is thinking of a wider scale for everypony!"

How many shots did he have left, two? Yes.

I quickly dove into my saddlebag, trying to keep him talking.

"He's forcing you to believe this! You *know* this is wrong! Think how many ponies you've sent to their deaths by his orders! How many did you want to save? How many others like me that you promised you'd look out for and show a better world? I'm not the first, am I? *Well how many of them are still here!?*"

Finding what I wanted, I quickly activated it. The E.F.S. blocker I'd taken from Barb's Shades. I didn't hear any reply, presumably due to my suddenly disappeared from his eyepiece's vision.

Now I could do what I did best. Silently, I moved away, and tried not to squeak in shock at the fifth round that slammed through the metal behind me. No doubt trying to catch me while he still knew vaguely where I was. Protégé knew how well I could move silently.

The orb was in a room between us. He had to know I was out of ammo, but he didn't know if I could reload or not. I had a few seconds grace when I made my move. Creeping around the side, I heard him moving forward cautiously.

"I told you when I first met you that you weren't ready for it, Murk..." I heard him advancing just through the wall from me, through a thin single sheet of insulation. "You've still never tasted freedom, never felt what it is to go free, only within these walls. Even if you went away the victor, you *still* wouldn't know."

Maybe not, Protégé.

I moved backward from the wall I knew he was behind.

But I've got friends who do, and they guide me every single day.

I charged. Mustering my strength, I careened right into the wasted wall, powering through it, and right into Protégé. His revolver went wild, firing its last shot before it skidded across the floor. I tackled him, knocking him over with my momentum amidst a hail of broken plaster and cladding. Both of us collapsed to the floor. I saw the orb just through the door, the bullet hole near it from where he'd just tried to shoot it before I hit him.

He grappled back at me, throwing me over him onto the frozen floor and cracking the full layer of ice. I bucked out with my hind legs and hit him in the chest, sending him back to crash into the same insulation board I'd come through. Scrambling up, I ran at him again. A hoof of mine was pulled away in his magic, tripping me in front of him.

He got up shockingly quickly, a hoof coming stamping down toward me. Throwing my weight over, rolling away, I kicked out at his legs and brought him down, too, before leaping atop him to try and pin him down. I had to talk sense into him!

"Stop this madness, please!"

He choked as my foreleg pressed into his throat. I leaned down with all my weight before a dizzying strike to my head pummeled me off him. Roaring in a more brutal anger than I'd normally known from him, Protégé stood and rushed at me. His charge grabbed me up and carried me until we both slammed through two metal panels into the old control room of the station.

The orb lay nearby, as we both tumbled against a long stripped out terminal desk. My head struck its edge hard, and I cried out from the sharp pain spiking through my skull. I felt him over me, wailing on me desperately, as I covered my head and tried to weather it. I felt cold, and some blood ran from my head. I realised I was lying in snow that had washed into this room.

I tried to hit back, but my hooves were knocked aside. My sore eye went blurry, my ears

stung horribly, and I cried out before throwing the edge of my hoof into his bruised rib from before. With a cry of pain, he fell back and off of me. Slowly, I tried to stagger up in the hard, cracking snow that had frozen into a single solid mass.

“Urgh...” I stumbled, and fell again. Using a chair, I dragged myself up. “Please... we can all go home together, Protégé! All of us! I don’t want to see you held in Red Eye’s chains!”

Protégé struggled up beside me, using the table to get to his hooves and hold his side. For a moment, we panted and recovered our strength, even though we were but five feet apart.

Protégé finally replied, gasping for air.

“You... don’t understand... he is—”

“Still your master! You can break that chain around your neck!”

“This *is* my life, Murk!”

“You can’t bring yourself to lie that you aren’t still his slave!”

I ran at him, but his magic threw the terminal ruins off the desk and into my side. The heavy object thudded into the side of my ribs and my kidney, and a cold pain washed through me, making my legs go limp. Falling hard, breathless, I saw him rush for the orb. His magic reached out, picking it up.

Picking up the shattered casing of the terminal, I flung it at the orb as it floated toward him. Striking it dead on, the sphere flew up and through one of the bare walls, and out into the snow of the mountain’s peak. My yell of exultation was cut short, as he turned and bucked me clean in the chest. The air was knocked clean out of me, and I saw my world twist as I fell sharply, before coughing up blood. My lungs felt like they’d been flattened, and I cried out at the agonising surge of burning pain it sent through my ribs.

“You lie there... Murk...” He gasped, trying to steady himself. “Stay down!”

I gurgled, my lips stained with blood, but I was able to shake my head. “That’s what they’ve always told me...”

“We all have our place.”

He turned, limping away toward the outside, and I spoke after him.

“And this isn’t yours.”

He stopped briefly, looking off to the moon, before continuing. I tried to get up, hacking and spluttering as I closed my right eye. Across each desk, I moved after him, dragging myself on the chairs if I had to.

Protégé stopped and stared back in disbelief.

“Stop getting up, Murk... *stop!*”

I fixed my still open eye on him. “You don’t want to hurt me... you’re being forced to. You could be... better!”

I saw him turn to run, and I surged forward. My ribs ached, but I got close enough to catch his hind legs as I dropped to the ground. We fell together, tired and sore as we rolled and threw each other against the tables and barriers. Yet, every time he kept getting closer to where the orb lay outside. Mustering up what I could, feeling all the pain, I pushed past it. I dove up and over him, pushed him to the ground and lay my full weight on him.

“Protégé, stop! Even if you won’t say it, I know you want better!”

“I... I do...” His eyes looked soft for just a second, before hardening. “But... I have my orders from him. I... I must obey them! Master Red Eye told me, he... he gave me this mission!”

“Listen to your—”

His horn glowed, I looked for what he had lifted, before realising my mistake.

The stun spell caught me unawares. I'd forgotten he'd learned that! My ears cried out in pain, and my eyes seared as my vision was blinded. Everything went white as the snow and my hearing died to a painful throb and hum. I felt myself thrown off as I screamed and screamed, holding my ears. It was agonising, only growing as the full weight of the audio shock landed home. I rolled on the ground, losing track of where he was.

Gradually, amongst a keening whine in my ears, I felt my vision return through tears and blood. Hazily, with the snow and clouds blurring together in my sight, I saw him outside, limping toward the orb slowly; a trail of blood behind him. He held a large rock in his magic.

I'd never catch up to him with enough strength to stop him. My legs were sprained, my head felt twice the size, and my torso bleeding was from shrapnel.

Instead, I spotted stairs to the upper level. One by one, I climbed them until I was stood atop the station itself. I couldn't gallop after him, so I only had one other option. Yelping in pain as I pulled myself near to the ledge, struggling to stay upright... I waited for the wind.

"Glimmerlight... I hope you're right..."

The surging wind changed, its fierce and cutting blow racing up from behind me. That was my signal.

I gritted my teeth and endured the pain as I moved the short distance to the edge as fast as I could... and *leapt*. Flaring my wings open. I felt the wind catch them and tug horribly. It was painful. Less than I'd expected, but more than I wanted as the feathers spread and fluttered. I'd never felt such a thing, of every feather and every bit of my wings catching the thumping air upon them. My leap from the surface carried me out, until I was falling... falling almost straight down. I felt a vertigo, a fear, before the night sky grabbed me in its powerful gales, and hurled me away from the station, my wings stretching and cupping over it. I was a mere plaything to the whims of the weather. I felt terrified, yet excited. Helpless, but more in control than I was while on the ground.

I hurtled out, not truly gliding or flying, but simply using my wings like a sail to throw me farther as I soared out. The feeling was like a dangerous thrill, mixed with my determination as I saw that rock ahead raise up.

"Stop!"

I drew my wings in, now falling. I tumbled down, not from high, but enough to accelerate me into a collision directly at Protégé. I *crashed* into him, both of us crying out as my momentum sent us both spiralling over one another again and again across the frozen ice layer of the peak. I felt something in me pull, and I heard a crack. I was up, then down, then up again. We kept rolling, the impact having dazed us both to we kept falling and sliding... picking up speed as the mountain's peak angled downward. I screamed out as I saw a horridly sharp edge approaching, clawing at the ground with my hooves.

Clasping madly, I found a rock and clung to it, jarring my shoulder joint as my whole body swung around. Protégé slid past, and without thinking I reached out to grab him. His hindlegs swung out over the edge itself, and I felt my shoulder again pulled painfully at stopping his weight.

Our slide stopped and there was a brief moment of silence as we both stared at one another. He knew I'd just saved his life. And I knew I'd just stopped him from doing what he wanted.

Gradually, he began to climb. Using the rocks to hold his hooves, he started to push onward and upward without so much as a word. His teeth were gritted, his face matted with

blood. I tugged him up, but as soon as he was back on level ground, he suddenly stumbled forward, and pulled himself back toward the orb with a tired, limping climb.

Just wanting to scream, wanting to stop having to do this to one another, I yanked up with my hooves as well to follow. Bodies protesting, a race between two exhausted and weak ponies began as we slowly crawled and pulled our way toward the prize.

"Think of how all this can be better, Protégé..." I gasped, trying to reach his hoof, but he pulled it out of reach, staying ahead of me.

"Not... not if Shackles destroys all that Master Red Eye wants..."

"Red Eye will use it himself!"

I gasped and threw myself forward. Edging closer. The orb wasn't far.

"Only... only for the best!" He grimaced, seething through the words. "I will fight to do what he feels we need!"

"But what about *you*?"

He didn't reply as he cried out in pain, his ribs striking a rock, before he rolled sideways, trying to get up and get closer to the orb. He staggered, fell, and rose again. I limped and heaved my way forward behind him. We were only ten feet away.

I saw him slow, his rib giving him problems I used that, pulling ahead, my hooves digging into the burning cold of the ice. I had endured so much, but I could endure more than *him*! My hooves got closer. I had to protect it, take it, and force him to see he'd have to kill me to ever dare destroy it!

His hoof crashed into my head from behind.

I fell back, not even crying out now from pain. Things was too far gone. We had endured too much to even react. I simply hit back, throwing my body weight into the strike that knocked him over onto his back.

Over the orb, we fought. A fight of long, slow, and weak blows between two battered bodies.

But while he strove with all the passion I'd come to know him for. I knew I would outlast him.

Because who I was doing this for wasn't based on a lie.

I rose up, shouting what kind of aggressive roar I could, as I crashed into him and knocked him away. I felt angry. I felt disgusted with him. I felt beyond frustrated, appalled and hurt by him for choosing this!

"*How could you!*?" I shrieked at him, "All that intelligence, all that courage, and you're nothing but a follower! After all we've been through this is what you choose? To ruin your life!"

I struck him again, right across the jaw so hard that I fell too.

"You're such a smart and strong pony! You've put your life at risk for slaves! You *tried* to be better! What could you have been able to do for this world if you'd not been his slave? *What could you have been if you weren't here!*?"

He tried to block, I knocked his hoof aside and struck again. Protégé cried out, falling down on his back below me. I stamped on his chest to keep him there, knocking him onto his stomach.

"You took all that potential, and you *wasted* it on being a slave to a monster! You could have been a *hero* to the wastes! Doing things for the better, trying to change things! I always saw that side of you from when you first fought to help those in danger!"

I cried. I cried out of sheer hurt and rage.

"You could have been so much more with that heroic heart of yours! You could've helped so many! Made a *real* difference! But instead you follow him! You did your two years, you could have escaped! I obsessed for so long over somepony I thought escaped here... you could have actually been the kind of hero I wished existed! Why? Why did you have to follow him? Why *him!*?"

He threw himself over, coming off the ground as his face turned toward me. To my shock, his bloody cheeks were run with tears. A painful voice, lost, lonely, and weak screamed at me in answer.

"BECAUSE HE'S ALL I'VE *GOT!*"

He threw himself forward. I fell back from his assault, falling as he clambered over me, his hooves pressing down on my neck in his struggle! I felt fear crawl over me, and I tried to croak out to him; to get him to stop, to give us this path. My hooves flailed across the ground to either side.

They felt something. Something heavy.

I felt my vision darken with his weight above me on my neck. I choked, coughed, and stared at him with panic-ridden eyes, as my hooves clutched the item and brought it surging up.

Immediately, he fell off me, as the rock I'd grabbed struck his forehead. The dull *thwock* of the impact sounding terrible to my ears, as I choked and threw up in the snow, trying to get air in.

In front of me, Protégé slumped, looking dazed. He dropped onto his side, legs idly shifting in the snow. His eyes still looked at me, his lips mumbling into the drifts.

"I don't... I don't know ho..I'm sor..."

Moving slowly, I lifted his head up to help him from lying with his mouth in the snow. He was dizzy, looking everywhere, likely losing consciousness.

I trembled. I had hated him, I should have felt no pain for him. Yet I knew that look in his eyes. It told me everything. I held him to be chest, and whispered.

"I know..."

Slowly, he looked up at me, before his eyes rolled back and he blacked out, leaving me alone to think on the mountaintop.

I fell back, tired beyond measure, as my hooves felt the orb and held it close.

"I know..."

I wasn't going to leave him. For all that had happened I could not bring myself to just leave Protégé lying on the mountainside. With great effort, I dragged him behind me back to the station for some shelter. The orb was safely in my saddlebag.

It was only a short journey back to the station, but it felt like climbing the mountain all over again. My mind was a whirling ball of emotions and confusion.

I hated him. I cared for him.

I wanted to escape him. I wanted him free.

He was an enemy. He was an ally, or so I had liked to think. I wasn't sure about that now.

All I knew was that I didn't want him dead. I couldn't feel that about someone who was where I'd been. Gently, I left him propped up in the centre of the station and resisted the temptation to pass out myself.

I waited there and took care of him, until I heard the voice.

“Murky!”

Out in the snow. Not too distant.

“Murky!”

Getting my bruised and pained body up, I hobbled to the door, and glanced out into the night air before feeling my spirits lift and fall almost simultaneously.

Out there, I saw Glimmerlight slowly trotting toward me through the snow.

Behind her, I saw the slavers waiting... along with Chainlink Shackles at their head. Big Brutus stood beside the dragged form of Brimstone Blitz, while Wildcard and Grindstone flanked him. I saw my friends chained down. All of them but Glimmerlight.

She saw me, her eyes changing to that of relief as she caught my eye. They'd stripped her of weapons, leaving only her saddlebag to have to cart up to this peak.

“Thank goodness, you're alive.” she spoke somewhat weakly, no doubt the trek up here on her bandaged chest had been hell. “Murky, I'm so sorry... they've sent me forward to... to...”

Glimmer looked pained to say it.

“To get you... to bring you in without a fight. If... if you don't, they'll...”

Behind her, I could see Shackles with that shotgun hanging ready. The same one that had murdered Grizzly before my eyes. I trotted as best I could toward my sister. No, I wouldn't have them threaten her, not now.

I gave myself up.

Reaching her, I fell into my sister's grasp. Both of us hugged as tightly as injuries allowed.

“Did you get it?” She whispered.

“Y-yes... Protégé's hurt in there...” I whispered back, my hooves falling on her saddlebag briefly, holding myself close to it. “I got it... it's safe...”

She sighed and leaned against my head. “Then that's something.”

Behind her, I heard the stomping as *he* approached. Slowly, I pushed myself away from Glimmerlight and meekly moved his way. He stood so tall. The smell was overpowering, reeking of wax, grease, and filth as he grinned and loomed over me on his approach.

“Murky!”

Glimmer snapped at me, drawing my eyes away from him.

“Doctor's orders. Trot like a pegasus.”

She offered what smile she could.

I knew what she meant. Turning, I put my head high, proud, and confident as I trotted toward Shackles to meet him. He didn't strike me. I was in no condition to be hit right now. Instead, he merely cackled as I felt the collar snap hold.

Yet this time, I did not let it weigh me down.

“Welcome back, little slave, heh... we've got a lot of revision to do with you.”

I looked upward, seeing his eyes before his hoof roughly pushed mine away. I expected anger. I only got laughter.

“So proud of yourself... we'll see how long that lasts. Hand over the orb.”

I didn't hesitate. Learn from Sunny, Murky. Play the part.

My hooves drew it from my saddlebag, holding it up to him before Grindstone took it, trotting around us.

“Very good. All intact. Seems my first impression of you being useless when you were first dumped with me wasn't entirely true.”

Shackles smiled at that while Grindstone merely coughed and put the orb away in his own bag.

"I hope you won't mind lending him to me, Shackles. After all, their own memories might be useful..."

Glimmer and I shared a glance as another slaver chained her up again.

"Only for as long as it takes, Grindstone." Shackles turned and roughly patted me with a hoof.

I squinted in pain, whimpering as my injuries were aggravated.

"Do not look upon your *Master!*"

His hoof struck a little harder, knocking my face down. The reminder of his strength after I'd struggled so hard to beat a small, injured unicorn was terrifying. A pony I couldn't ever fight. A monster of slavery I could only run from.

Then I'd run. I'd never see him again at the end... somehow.

Yet, now I felt him grab me, tilting my head up as I was lifted from my hooves. I felt the sweaty, thick coat of his sliding across me, as I was crushed and held tight to his cheek. He forced my head around with a rough twist, making me whimper in pain, as he forced me to look at the beautiful stars, so far away.

"Take a good look at them, Number Seven." His voice was so quiet, dripping with satisfaction. "You got so high, but you're going down now. You're coming down with me, down this mountain. Down the valley. Down into Fillydelphia and back to the ground you crawled up from."

His hoof squeezed me until I whined in pain. It was so big, crushing my face.

"Then down even farther. Below the surface. I'll drag you from this freedom above until you never see it again. Once Grindstone's done and you're back with **me**, you'll never even see the clouds again, little slave."

Turning, sliding across my cheek as his forehead pressed against mine. He gave me a rancid whiff of his breath as he stared into my fearful eyes.

"Down... down... down... deep into the heart. It's all ready and waiting for you now..."

He dropped me. I fell to my side and curled up, wiping my face, trying to fight the fear of that monstrous presence above me.

The presence that, if I looked up, barred my way to Luna's elusive night above.

Yet, no matter how disappointing this was to be taken away as prisoners, we had done it. We'd gotten here. Through violence, the elements, strife, loss, pain, and tragedy we had come here, and I had gotten to the sky. I had seen it. That alone was a prize.

Then my collar was tugged, making me choke as I was pulled forward.

"Number Seven and I have much work to do. The circle continues... heh..."

We were led away. Myself humiliatingly dragged or pulled behind him. I knew what he was doing. He wasn't going to be rough or brutal now. He was letting my mind worry, letting it build up the fear of what he would do when we got 'home.' He thought me ready to be broken and accepting of his ways all over again.

Let him think that.

Aurora, I won't let you down.

I was thrown into the train carriage and the door slammed shut behind me.

I'd been somewhat treated and wrapped in magical bandages after a nearly forced serving of RadAway. He'd been there every time, slapping me back into line. Knocking my head down every time I tried to resist. He seemed happy... happy to have me, happy to see that he could break me all over again.

The thought of my rebellious nature now being broken was as humiliating as anything to imagine.

In the dark, I heard a movement before hooves wrapped around my neck.

"Murky, I'm so sorry..."

Unity! I happily shared the hug back as she led me through the dark into a corner where we sat together. She supported me as my tired body finally collapsed.

"Where... where are..." I mouthed, still trying to get my strength back.

"In the other carriages. I saw them loading Protégé on, too. Is... is he—"

"No..."

She held me a little closer, and I felt no shame in letting my head rest on her chest. We were equals, both the kind of pony that needed a little reassurance in somepony else occasionally. I knew she'd understand.

Below us, the rattle of the train starting up to return us to Fillydelphia sent an uncomfortable vibration through the carriage. There in the dark, we simply sat and rested. As the steep gradients began, I felt her sniff.

"I... I guess we were wrong..." she sighed, "Fillydelphia wins again..."

That hung in the air for a few seconds before I felt a small rush of belief and creaked the edges of my mouth upward.

"No... it didn't."

Her eyes shot open, barely visible in the low light.

"What? But... but they—"

I smiled to her, the best smile I'd given since we left.

"All they have is one of Glimmer's old memory orbs."

Atop the mountain, being stared down by every slaver, they had made the mistake of trying to upset me by having my sister come collect me. He'd been trying to break me by playing his mind games to make it all seem worse and instead had given me the exact tool I'd needed. The projection orb now lay in Glimmer's saddlebag amongst dozens of similar orbs, too similar for the slavers to ever know. They'd never seen it, never known what it looked like to realise the difference.

We'd come up here, and we'd gotten it. Against all the odds, we had actually done it.

"We won, Unity. We won. When we get back, we're going to finally get out of here. Whatever Grindstone has for us, we'll get out of it somehow, and then we'll make it happen. This... this is it. This is what Aurora's legacy will be."

I coughed, but I still smiled afterward.

"The escape starts now."

Footnote: Perk Attained!

Child of the Sky – When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk Equestria with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always long to return. While you have not truly flown, it is a beginning, a feeling to want more. Your wings double their base resistance to crippling.



ACT THREE
DARE TO DREAM

Defying Gravity

“What’s it like to know you’d finally won?”

Relief beyond measure. It wasn’t happiness or delight I felt. No, that was impossible while chained in a train returning to the centre of those great walls. Fillydelphia was taking us home.

Yet this time we finally had an ace up our tattered sleeves. For the first time in so long we had something that would give us an edge. The mountain had tasked us hard. Aurora’s revelations had shaken us, and our losses in that last-ditch defence of her cottage had struck some worse than others. For all our believing that ‘this was it,’ it was impossible to ignore the massive hurdles we still had to overcome.

“Such as going underground again? Getting into Ministry Station?”

Mhm. Perhaps eventually, but we had higher priorities. Like how we were going to get away from Grindstone. How we were going to find Chirpy, Lilac, and Starshine. How to get Sunny back out of the metro. How to keep ourselves hidden and how to get our stashed supplies from the Mall.

Some of it proved to be easy, yet Fillydelphia wasn’t about to let us simply run about without making life difficult.

First, we had to get away from Grindstone and his plans for us. He wanted information, and he was going to use us to get it.

Really, escaping him would happen quickly enough, before they got what they wanted. It’s what came *after* that was the bigger issue. When Fillydelphia was going to show me the depths that ponies might go to escape its pain.

Then of course there was Protégé...

“After all that, you still held some thought toward him? After you’d fought!?”

Look, I... I know it doesn’t make *any* sense! Something in me just didn’t want to forget

about him! Some part of me still felt more sorry than angry... I knew that he and I weren't finished. What he'd done, he'd done because he was ordered to by his master, and I guess I just kept wishing that... that maybe still, underneath, that I could maybe find the real Protégé. The real pony he could be...

My friends helped me to find myself and escape those mental chains. I was the only one who could truly understand what he was going through. If I could help him in any way, I wanted to.

Not that I didn't still have my suspicions about him. As great forces descended upon Fillydelphia and events from afar began to trickle back he still had his own path to walk, one I couldn't hold him back from.

The world was about to change forever. Fillydelphia was about to become one of the centres of the great power shift and we were all going to be caught up in it. He would have to make his choices.

"I think I know what you mean, but there's something you're avoiding, isn't there?"

I... wha?

"Unity's friend, the one she'd been torn from. That stallion, unable to remember?"

Yeah...

Unity was back with us, safer now. However she had just become one of the most important ponies in Fillydelphia, possessing Aurora's memories of the Nexus and how to shut it down. Shackles would want her as much as he wanted me. Unity was stronger than her quiet ways might have suggested... but it'd take all of us to protect each other now.

I just hoped I could do my part. Up there on that mountain I'd felt more like a pegasus than I ever had before. To trot with my head high, to use my wings in a *meaningful* way for the first time in my life! I remember on that train, I just... just wished I could pick Unity up and fly us both away from the cliffs! To soar out and find heroes, to return and rescue all my other friends!

Protégé had told me when we first met that I needed to taste freedom to ever be able to feel the surge of *need* to properly escape... dreaming of flying among those clouds was enough to make me think that if I could ever get off the ground then maybe I'd understand what he meant.

"Murky, you're avoiding the question... Unity's love?"

Oh! S-sorry...

It was something I'd wondered about since I'd first heard her speak of him. Grindstone had lied about him being sent to, uh... the *other* Unity. However, I had my suspicions by now. Unity was not a mare given to 'needing' others to help her but she clearly had had something taken from her. She was lonely.

In all my time in Fillydelphia... I knew at least one other pony that I'd seen the same feelings in. I knew it would struggle to all fit together. Heck, I barely even believed it really could be possible.

"What? So it was—"

The truth behind Unity would only be the first milestone of our final journey together. One that wouldn't always go as we'd imagined it might.

For now though, we had our escape from Grindstone to achieve. With a little bit of outside help, anyway...

I heard the hooves long before the lock shifted on the door of my cell.

In the darkness, I murmured and shifted, trying to get my eyes away from the door before it's opening let the glaring yellow light of the Ministry's corridor inside. It hurt to do that, just to shift a body that had only now gotten a chance to just stop for a while. The chains around my hooves clanked as I moved.

The door opened.

"Come. Master Grindstone is gathering you all."

My reply was only to spasm and cough; a throaty and gurgling noise to match the burning pain in my throat. I needed some medicine. Today. Coming off the mountain had left me needing badly.

"Come!"

The large mare slammed the door's frame with a baton, giving me quite the encouragement to move my shaking frame and stumble past her into the Ministry of Arcane Science's hallways. The baton prodded my rump, pushing me ahead of her. I was being slowly marched to the supply room I'd once found that memory machine in.

We passed Aurora's office, and I saw Coral Eve strongly walking ahead of me. A turn of her head was met with a sharp word to just keep trotting until we entered our destination.

A storeroom for arcane technology in Aurora's old Ministry building, it was covered in parts and wires across multiple shelves. Marble floors led to sharp columns holding up the walls. Old robots were lined against the walls or broken up into massive piles of components, strewn across the floor.

Yet at the back, that massive machine I'd once seen but only now realised the nature of after hearing Aurora speak on the mountain.

A memory machine with numerous chambers for ponies to lie in, possessing a shining orb at the top. Something for many to share the experience as one. Or... or as others? My head hurt too much to think about how that worked. Some sort of military training thing that had kept this stallion alive?

I saw him right at the front in the central pod. Battered, wounded, and yet lying there motionless. His light red mane fell across his face, covered in matted filth from his time in the field.

Numerous slavers stood before us with a smattering of firearms, hovering or on saddles. Why so many? They were lined to one side of the room, next to the shelf I'd fetched that device from last time I was here. There was still a hole where it should be.

On the other side of the room, I saw the rest of my friends. They had been sent to the back corner, near the machine that I still saw dominating the entire room with that apparently sleeping buck in his pod...

Glimmerlight lay on her side, breathing heavily with her eyes looking directly upward. Her chest was still swathed in crude bandages. Brim stood beside her, leaning on a loudly protesting metal shelf upon the wall. Unity was behind them, along with...

...Protégé.

Red Eye's apprentice caught my eyes. There were a very long few seconds as we both looked at each other. He was still here, he'd been kept captive too.

He gave only a cold stare on an unreadable face. While only five feet away, the gulf between us felt incredibly wide.

"I'd imagine you're all wondering why I want you here, right now."

An old voice spoke, weary and deep. I turned my head to see the limping and wheezing figure of Grindstone sitting at the back against the wall. He snapped shut a book I immediately recognised as my journal.

He'd been *looking at my journal*!?

The thought felt insulting, that old crank sitting against the wall flicking through my drawings.

"Quite a fight you all put up. Quite... a... fight..."

He stopped, hacking into his foreleg. I almost felt my lungs contract out of instinctual sympathy.

Almost.

"It's perhaps good you all survived for this purpose. You should be grateful, it was I who convinced Master Shackles to not have all but two of you cast off the cliffside. On that note, I must apologise that the good master is not here in person."

Grindstone scowled at Protégé directly, his fading beard swinging as his head turned quickly.

"He has a prior appointment at the city headquarters, I'm afraid. Being the only one left to be considered for Stern's heir to Fillydelphia's control. After all, *you* turned traitor, boy. You fired at official slaver business. Now he's taking your oh-so-controversial spot. Chainlink Shackles is being promoted to third in line of power very soon. The true Master of Fillydelphia is returning to claim his throne."

Protégé said nothing. He only stared with an intensity that I knew was him not wanting to give them even a hint of reaction.

Coral helped Unity to her hooves, the younger mare looking decidedly shaky. I got a hoof around Glimmerlight to help my sister up. We didn't want to lie on the floor before him.

"The fuck has this to do with anything?" Brimstone cut in, clearly not as patient to learn all this. The big guy was sitting down now, his battered body shaking on the spot. It was very clear they'd at best only stabilised him after Brutus' assault. Brimstone was still hurt badly.

"Information." Grindstone smiled and hobbled closer to us. "We saw her body. Aurora Star survived the balefire and you all met her. You spoke to her. You *learned* things from her. We have all we need to set the Memory Nexus into motion after retrieving the orb from you. Yet there are always more things than what we see... modes of operation, details, or associated projects. Things I am most interested in."

He circled his hoof at that last section, before tapping it lightly.

"To that end we shall use her own creations. This machine, a memory experience simulator for more than one pony, also acts as a standard memory machine. It's where we learned of her in the first place, from the stallion within... he is part of the team who saw what went down on there, in fact from what we believe his team actually came through from the other side. A patrol that found it out there. He's why we know of the portal's other side out on Equestria's frontier."

Grindstone slowly smiled, a rare expression from him that seemed completely out of place.

"Did you think only 'innocents' could come across messages from the past? We've noticed you all know more than usual, but we've always been ahead thanks to what he saw and knew in the fight to stop the Nexus two hundred years ago. Now we are going to *strip* the memories of meeting Aurora from you by using it. Wrench them to our possession to learn

all she said. At least, we will from Murk and Unity... if you would come forward and rejoin us please? After all, you two are the ponies of the hour once more, are you not?"

Brimstone groaned as he forced his body to move, stumbling forward to block me off with a still bleeding leg. I saw Protégé force his own wounded body between them and Unity quickly.

The slavers backed up, weapons raising. I heard the little clicks of safeties and bolts from those who hadn't been ready to just pull the trigger.

"They aren't going with you." Coral Eve grit her teeth as she spoke, one black eye squinted shut. The raiders that took her in the cottage battle hadn't been kind. Despite that, her horn lit, a sight that I noticed made every slaver twitch. "Not them, and not my son, whatever you've done with him..."

Grindstone didn't seem even slightly concerned. Simply standing there with slumped shoulders around his thinning body.

"I'm afraid, dear, that you don't have a choice in the matter. Not for them and not for your little colt. He's been returned to where he ought to be." Grindstone was not intimidated by her snarl. "Now, you two. If you would return yourselves to me for memory processing, please? This way..."

I had to wonder if Coral was going to fly off the handle at that remark about where her son 'should' be.

Brimstone growled, planting his bad leg on the ground and almost seeming to relish the pain of it as he bristled and lowered his head. "If you try to take them, there will be murder in this room, you wee pensioner ass."

"Please, *warlord*... if you still bear that title after it was taken by my associate anyway. You are all unarmed. You can barely swing a hoof, let alone stand against a firing line. Either way, you are not wrong."

Grindstone turned his back and wandered closer to the door, motioning to us.

"Only it won't be 'murder,' it would be execution. That is the punishment for rebelling, and all of you rebelled. I fully intend to carry it out, right here. Call it Shackles' own recommendation... to do it in front of the runt."

His eyes found mine.

"He thought it would be a nice beginning to your new life back with us, a reminder to not get close to anypony again once you see them put down before your eyes."

No... no, I couldn't bear this! I couldn't let this happen!

He raised his hoof. All the guards began grinning, and aiming at my friends. They had all lost comrades to us on the mountain.

Brimstone looked like he was about to charge. Coral's horn flickered. Everyone else seemed to be stood rock still at the numerous barrels pointed our way.

"*Grindstone! Don't!*" Unity cried out to him. "We'll come! Don't kill them! We'll..."

She looked at me. I nodded back painfully.

"We'll come..."

The donkey shrugged. "They're dying anyway. You're *slaves*, what have you got as a bargaining chip? Nothing. Continue."

That line... how many times had I heard that line before something had been taken from me in my life?

"*No!*" I looked from side to side at my friends, and looked to the barrels ahead of us.

"Out of the way! Come on you two, back to your master." Grindstone looked more

exasperated, how could this just be normal life to these slavers?

There was...

There wasn't any way out we could go.

"Think Murky, think..." I muttered to myself quietly, hearing Grindstone and Brimstone talking and shouting over one another.

I had... no... wait.

I leapt forward, as though going with him. Into the line of fire. They looked at me as I stopped before them and stumbled on the spot from my injuries. Trying to get breath, I took a huge gasp of air and...

"HEEEELP!"

I screamed, deliberately trying to make the most deliberately and whiny scream possible. Every joke about me sounding like a filly, I piled onto it.

"SOMEpony HELP ME PLEASE, I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

The slavers actually cringed. My friends too. Unity bit her lip and recoiled a little, Brimstone just looked perplexed. Grindstone turned on the spot with raised eyebrows.

"It's no use crying about it, you runt! You'll—"

"HE'S GOING TO HURT ME! HE'S GOING TO!" I interrupted him, screeching until my throat hurt and I burst into a loud coughing fit that sent me staggering.

"SHUT UP!" Grindstone shouted back at me. "NO ONE is coming to help you! Just... shut..."

The ground shook as something in the Ministry somewhere exploded very violently.

"...up?"

Grindstone let his voice turn quiet as looked around. The guards joined him, seeing the dust falling from the old ceiling.

Out in the distance came the sounds of screams and rapid gunfire. Slavers could be heard shouting for help, causing the ones in here to look at each other and start crowding toward the door to look.

"Guard the door! If *anything* comes down that hall you unload into it! You've got enough firepower!"

The sounds were getting closer. The floor was shaking every few seconds now. Detonations rippled through the building until their shockwaves could be felt even in this room.

"What in the blazing hell is that?"

The sounds came closer.

My friends looked as nervous as the guards, looking at me in confusion.

Another explosion, *very* close.

"Guard that door!" Grindstone screamed as the room rocked. *"Don't let anypony through and—"*

The door wasn't their issue. The *wall* exploded inward. Marble and underlying concrete exploded into the room, blasting into the slavers ahead of me like shrapnel. A colossal hole, torn through the shelves, had been ripped into it. A tall and dark shape surged through at high speed, its metallic shape glinting in the light with a bright electronic display at its centre.

Grindstone was already gone, apparently having fled out the very door he'd said to protect. It swung its arm and a bright cascade of energy tore through the two slavers standing that brought their weapons to bear. They exploded into ash, the weapons

disintegrating before me.

“THE ALARM OF TRIVIAL WEAKNESS WAS SOUNDED! TO ME, MISS FLUTTERSHY! I AM YOUR GLORIOUS SHIELD OF JUSTICE!”

The voice boomed out into the room as the massive robot spun on its single tire and put itself between me and the rest of the wounded slavers getting up.

Behind me, my friends were... somewhat taken aback, to say the least.

Mister Peace didn't even hesitate as the guards got to their feet. His gatling cannon spoke for him, ripping the remaining slavers into bloody chunks through the clouds of rock dust and ash that filled the room. The roar of the weapon led me to hold onto my ears behind him as the war machine went about his business, laughing hysterically as he did. He gestured at the mess, trying to draw our attention to it.

“BEHOLD THE ART OF WAR. I CALL IT ‘PAINTING WITH TRAITORS.’ BECAUSE I PAINTED *WITH* THEM. DO YOU GET IT, MISS FLUTTERSHY? IT IS A JOKE.”

I just stared, slack-jawed as the room crumbled around me and the shouting from outside grew into a panicked scream for ‘everyone’ to get in here. Mister Peace's screen was showing nothing but the most delighted soldier I could imagine, grinning with childish hope.

“A joke? A show of mirth in the face of thine enemy in order to make a resounding demonstration to them that our lips remain stiff?”

Slowly, Glimmerlight raised her hoof.

“...I get it.”

Mister Peace beamed, his screen switching to a delighted foal.

“MOST EXCELLENT! COME, MISS FLUTTERSHY! CLIMB ABOARD! WE ARE GONE FROM THIS PLACE OF NON-APPRECIATION FOR EXQUISITE FLUTTER-FORM! AWAAAAAY!”

I didn't even have time to do more than yelp and quickly scoop up my journal as one of those extendible hands grabbed me, flinging me onto his back. I gripped around what metal I could as he surged outward and hurtled back the way he came. My friends tried to keep up behind as he bore me through Mister Peace-shaped holes all the way through rooms he had overturned in his rush to reach me. I could hear slavers in the corridors outside around the Ministry's indoor balconies that Mister Peace was thankfully avoiding.

We passed a doorway to the old workshop I'd once sneaked through and encountered shots whipping out of it. Mister Peace didn't even hesitate, powering through the doorway and taking the doorframe with him into the room with the small arms fire pinging from his chassis. Cowering on his back, I heard his energy blaster open up on them and toss tables around as they tried to hide from him.

“Stop! Stop!”

A stallion screamed at him, backing into a wall. I felt Mister Peace move as he lifted one of the benches entirely to reveal the slaver.

“I surrender!”

The stallion waved his hooves.

Mister Peace hesitated... then crushed him beneath the workbench with a floor-shaking slam.

“Surrender ACCEPTED.”

Brimstone caught up to us, bearing Glimmer on his back. Her roughly bandaged chest keeping her from running, she now held onto her own protector with a grim face at the

pain. Coral and Unity followed them up. To my surprise, I saw Protégé following at the back. He looked very pale, stumbling slower than the others, but was silent and stayed some distance from us.

“Robot, where are you going!?” Brimstone cast his eyes around during the escape. Slavers were moving nearby, I could hear them again. The sounds of terrified slaves from the main room at the centre of the building were clear.

“Standard operating procedure in the event of assassination attempt, Sir Façade of Great Macintosh! We are to remove Ma’am from the premises immediately!”

The big raider stopped and lowered his eyebrows.

“Sir... what... never-fucking-mind. Head to the sewers, nowhere outside is safe but them!”

“Then so it shall be!”

He spun on his wheel, once fully around and then apparently twice for good measure, before surging out into the main spinal corridor of the Ministry, heading toward the same stairs he had gone down once before. Slavers appeared at junctions, but were quick to flee at the mere sight of Mister Peace hurtling toward them faster than any pony could gallop. He wheeled down the stairs, spinning me so hard I had to bite as well as grip to keep myself on him.

“I cannot thank you enough for returning, Ma’am! I worried you might lose your taste for combat for another two hundred years! Many were the dreams of crushing zebrakind by your side in my slumber until your choral wailing woke me.”

“Um... you’re welcome? Please... watch out for my friends...”

“I like them. The red one has a look of devastation in his eye that appeals to my violence-craving subroutines. Yet the one of pink hair enjoys my sense of humour! She is most agreeable! Do... do you think it could ever work out, Ma’am?”

What.

My heavily armed and warmongering chariot didn’t explain any further, but powered his way into the cargo depot as before. I could see the smashed container he’d been hiding in since last time (why exit through the side when he could have just opened the door?) lying amongst a series of broken bodies that had likely been on guard duty when he emerged. A crater lay at the centre of the room in the concrete flooring.

Digging his hands into the great door, Mister Peace began to heave, forcing them open until the familiar red light of Fillydelphia crept through them. Behind us, I heard galloping hooves and saw the rest of our party rejoin us after catching up. Behind them, a door started to move.

“Mister Peace!”

He threw the door fully open for my friends and spun on the spot, shoulder compartment popping open to send a missile roaring toward the door. The sound of ponies screaming from behind it followed the sharp crack of the warhead’s detonation, still going once my hearing returned. Dizzied, I almost fell off him were it not for him holding me on himself.

“Lead on to the sewers! I shall not abandon you this time, Ma’am!”

He streaked out into the courtyard, spraying fire at the two guard towers overlooking the Ministry and sending one of them crashing entirely to the ground as its wooden supports splintered. Slaves ran for cover as much as slavers did. Those who stood and fired were soon atomised on the spot.

"The path of glory is opened! Miss Fluttershy, hold on tight, we shall remove you from this place! TALLY-HO!"

Yet Mister Peace wasn't slowing down. He was headed right for the wall of the Ministry's slave grounds!

"Um... uh, Peace!" I gritted my teeth, he was only speeding up.

"WALL! YOU OPPOSE ME! HOW DARE YOU!"

Both shoulders opened, firing a barrage of missiles ahead of him into the offending concrete structure. Impact after impact sent shockwaves through my bones and made every injury ache. Mister Peace rushed straight into the smoke and carried past where a section of the wall had once stood. A wagon filled with scrap metal swerved out of our way and overturned on the road outside, two slavers falling off it to the floor. I felt a bump as Mister Peace ran something over.

He turned back to cover my friends, all four primary weapons spraying fire into the Ministry as the guards got their act together and came in force. One arm went to the sky at a passing griffon that veered off and away as fast as her wings could carry. He was our cover, the shock and awe of brutal surprise as our wounded bodies limped and staggered their way through the breach.

Finally, they had all gotten to safety, leaving me clutching onto his back. The slavers were all fleeing. I knew they could overwhelm Mister Peace in numbers, but the war robot had caught them off guard. They wouldn't follow us just yet. We had time to hide and recover as we planned our next move.

Before he sped off into the city ruins with us to hide, Mister Peace turned back to his greatest foe and pointed at the rubble of the wall.

"Let that be a lesson, nemesis of foul stone! Thou does not oppose the passage of a Ministry Mare and her dashing bodyguard! I'll let you off this time."

He went a few feet more and stopped once more, shaking a metallic hand.

"THIS TIME!"

The wet brickwork of the sewers was cold against my back as I sat and tried to concentrate on getting rid of the headache caused by all the gunfire and shockwaves my poor ears had endured during our escape. Unfortunately, it wasn't willing to listen to reason, and, if anything, pounded harder out of spite.

We'd found an old underground pumping station. Enormous curved pipes dominated an opening behind a gate with a gantry over it, but up some stairs to the side and over that gantry we had discovered a couple of mossy and wet rooms out of the way. They were dismal, but had least gotten us out of the tunnels. Those giant pipes we had passed while trotting over the top of the gate were silent. If I'd had to guess, they were part of the main sewage lines that had once been used for diverting flow in floods.

It looked as though it was unused even in old Equestria.

But up here in the rooms beside them, we were at least isolated and safe. Just what we needed to stay out of the way for now and to get us out of trotting through almost solidified waste.

Mister Peace had carried me rather against my will. The looks of envy I'd gotten from the others were enough to make me almost want to jump down to avoid the awkward silence

while we searched. Voices travelled far in those tunnels and we couldn't ignore the idea that slavers had predicted we'd head underground.

To my amazement, we'd actually stumbled across some familiar side passages that had symbols of the inner metro across them. We'd marked one as our emergency exit from here to go to ground in those more expansive tunnels if need be.

Until then, we rested. All of us were still injured from the mountain and exhausted from the trip up the mountain and our imprisonment. We had no supplies, no weapons, no medical supplies, and no food. Lying back and getting some shut eye was the only thing we could really do in the silent darkness, only hearing the occasional whirring of Mister Peace patrolling the tunnels around us. It had taken some explaining to get him to stop shouting at radroaches about being infiltrators and waking us up every ten minutes.

Only I hadn't been able to sleep. The headache didn't help, but I was just filled with too many thoughts right now. Too much adrenaline at what we'd been through these past few days and too much underlying excitement over where we were now.

We'd gotten away. We had stopped them getting the orb.

Hanging by a thread or not, we would be in the best position we'd ever been to enact an escape, once we'd gathered everypony and collected the things we'd left around for just this purpose. We even had Mister Peace to help us. Even...

My eyes found the sleeping form of Protégé well away from us all, out on the station's lip overlooking the pumps themselves.

I didn't even know what to make of him right now. He'd just stayed silent, trailing behind us out of need to survive. Nopony had talked to him. Yet right now I didn't want to think about it. Too heavy, too confusing, and too painful.

Flicking my journal closed, I tried to get away from the two ponies I'd been looking at on the same page, wondering intently. Lacking my PipBuck to try and bring up a message and even any charcoal to sketch, I instead took to spending the time scrawling on the walls with a sharp and soft stone.

That helped. The headache began to filter away as I let my mind drift to what I was doing. Gentle scrapes filling the air as I found myself drawing... well, myself. Escaping with all my friends here, wings spread to soar up high.

In the darkness, I briefly turned back look at my wings, and gently flapped the one on my right. The movement was stiff and restricted, but it was a satisfying pain. The feathers at the end could somewhat spread out, tingling as I remembered them being caught by the wind on the mountain. How I'd... I'd soared on it for a few seconds, held aloft by my own body. I tried to stretch them both out, to remember that feeling. My eyes widened as I managed to get them both to crudely 'flap' in sync.

Behind it, I caught the glint of somepony's open eye staring at me.

Glimmer had been lying awake, too, watching me draw and now flap about like an incompetent.

I pulled the wings back in from embarrassment, shrinking my neck in.

She just smiled at me, before leaning back against Brim's shoulder and closing her eyes again.

"All right everypony! Gather around!"

Glimmerlight took centre stage, waving the rest of us toward the centre of the dank room. According to Mister Peace, it was sunrise.

I'd had to promise the others I'd get him to never play that trumpet sound ever again.

Brimstone shifted over, trotting on three legs. He was clearly the most hurt out of all of us, unsuitable for combat. Looking older than ever, he virtually collapsed into a sitting position, his wounds having clotted over during the night. By Celestia, he was tough to heal like he did and stay alive, but it had still put him beyond use to us right now.

He'd reset his own leg bone last night with a crack that had sent me into quakes, but his injuries went far further. The scar tissue from the bar mine in the arena that wreathed across his shoulder, front leg, and across his face around his missing eye had bruised up in a sickening way, after Brutus had identified the weak flesh. Thick pink lines overlaid his older scars where wounds had been closed by the slavers' healing to keep him alive.

I sat beside him, feeling his good leg tap my head in an gentle motion. In other words, like a frying pan to the skull. All the same, I appreciated that the big guy had some mirth left in him. Unity sat to my right, then Coral, arcing round that we could be in a circle meeting Glimmer at the other side of Brim. Mister Peace stood behind us, watching the tunnel outside.

Everypony looked tired, but determined. Coral still nursed her eye and Glimmer was clearly hurting from her bandaged chest. Unity was the least injured of us, yet her large eyes had a far-away look. After that thing with Aurora, she didn't seem quite the same. I kept seeing her muttering quietly, and looking confused as to what she'd just spoken. She'd assured me that all was fine, but she'd had no time to settle and comprehend all the memories she'd been given since the mountain until now.

Protégé hadn't joined us. Last I'd seen, he had wandered out into the tunnels somewhere.

Glimmerlight looked around us, and spoke.

"Thanks to Murky's quick thinking up there, this hasn't turned into a disaster. They don't have the orb, but until we can steal back our things, then neither do we. So we're all in agreement, this is the time to try?"

We all knew what she meant. Escape.

We were going to plan this, we were really going to plan this.

"We've got a lot of work to do. Aurora Star gave up everything she had to allow us one shot at this. That portal in Ministry Station is our goal. We're going to get everypony together, collect all the supplies we need and then get down there as one. This is where it starts, where we're going to work out how, what, and where."

She produced an old notepad she'd found on the wall of the pumping station and held up a pencil in her magic.

"Let the ideas flow, hunns and hunks. Anything and everything."

I spoke first.

"We've got to get everypony together. Sunny should be waiting in the metro. Chirpy's back at the hotel..."

Coral Eve took a surprisingly logical approach to this, keeping her emotions in check. "We do need to get Lilac and that other filly you mentioned, what was her name?"

"Starshine Melody." The little ghoulish had become friends with Lilac from their shared experiences. We couldn't split them up.

Glimmer noted their names down.

"There's... um..." Unity spoke up, before almost looking embarrassed to have spoken

into the silence as Glimmer wrote.

Thankfully, my sister was quick to leap on the moment.

"Yeah, that's likely the hardest thing right now, I'm sorry. Listen, once I've got my strength up and run an orb to make sure everything's working as it should with my magic, we'll take a look and see if I can't bring anything out your forgotten memories, all right? We'll do it before we go *anywhere*."

That gave Unity a little comfort. She smiled and nodded, before sharing an eager glance with me.

I knew Glimmer wouldn't let her down.

"For now though, you're right. We do need to solve that mystery first. Try to think, Unity. When did you last see him? What were your last thoughts?"

Unity shrunk a little, hooves shuffling together. Very quickly, I was beginning to think she wasn't too comfortable speaking to groups at all, more than just apprehension. I could relate.

"That... that place we just were. The Ministry, Aurora's Ministry building... it's all a blur and... and hard to keep in mind. But I remember being there with him. Then... then the FunFarm at the bumper cars where I was alone. Everything between that is hazy. Grindstone knew about him though, when Murky and I were at the FunBarn. Even if he had been lying, the Ministry is Grindstone's den. He had to know who it is. I know he was sent to the Pit, but I didn't see him anywhere when I was waiting to be sent in..."

I listened, then suddenly felt startled by her last words. Woah woah *woah*. Hang on a second! She'd been *in* the Pit too? Sentenced to it?

Unity hadn't told that to me before.

I could relate, of course, I didn't like talking about that day either. The fear and the stress of knowing what had been coming still gave me shivers. But still, she'd only ever talked of being 'at' the Pit, not '*in*' the Pit!

"Ministry Station?" Coral leaned forward, sniffed and glanced at the floor. "Perhaps even Chainlink Shackles' little den in the metro. I'm sorry, my dear."

I saw the look pass Unity's face about that place. We all knew its effects or could imagine what went on under Shackles' direct rule.

After all, I'd gotten a few days' taste of it once. I felt my hoof lightly brush around my neck, feeling the dry skin. It took some degree of effort to not shake and force those days deep into my mind.

Hang on a minute, didn't I know a stallion who'd once told me he knew the inside of the Ministry? Somepony who'd known enough to know about a salitoony machine he'd sent me for...

It was no secret to me who I was going to have to ask some deep questions to rather soon.

"All well and good talking of who and when," Brimstone grunted and shifted on the spot, "we need food. Tools. Weapons. What's the fucking point of heading into the wastes to get mown down by the first chancy bastards we meet? It's hardly a paradise out there. That stuff's got to have high priority if even one pony gets out. Grindstone said that Equestrian soldier in the pod came through the portal from the other end, so that'll be out on the frontiers of Equestria's borders. Could be fifty miles from anywhere, could be five hundred. We can't count on being near to civilization."

"We've got stuff stashed near the mall. You did that right, Murky?" Glimmer turned to me.

"Um, yeah? There's a couple things like the routes and metro material we got from Protégé's office before the riot. A few supplies, the food's probably gone off, but I think the water might still be fine? Also, I know how to get in through the vents to maybe steal some stuff from the armoury."

The pencil scribbled hastily.

"Hearts and Hooves Hospital." Coral added to the collection of things. "Doctor Weathervane would help us for sure. We should go there first, we can't do anything like we are right now."

Glimmer stopped. "Would he join us?"

There was a brief silence as water dripped. I could hear the faint sounds of Mister Peace's internals whirring and the quiet tap of Protégé's hooves somewhere up the tunnel as he came back.

"I don't think so," I offered with a shrug. "He always says his job is in Fillydelphia, where ponies need him."

Glimmer looked disappointed, scribbling something out. "Well, we can get supplies from him anyway, at the very least some healing for ourselves. If we can get near our old cell's back door, I've got some filtering kit and scratchbuilt batteries."

"I know good places to get things from!" I felt more eager, leaning in to try and read the list, but my sister's writing was almost worse than my own. "Back when I tried to escape on my own, I could get fabric from the mills and... and borrowed things from slavers."

That set it going. Everypony had ideas. For rope, for water, a radio, light, and all manner of tools to help see us through any obstacles in the outer metro. For now, no one wanted to confront the issue of going through that nightmare place again.

I remembered how I'd trembled with enthusiasm while gathering things long ago for my first escape attempt. This felt like that ten times over.

Unity sat in thought, staring away from all of us before suddenly speaking. "We're ignoring the biggest thing."

Everypony stopped and looked at her, making the introverted mare recoil slightly.

"The orb?"

That... was a point. We had to get our own things back. My PipBuck, my Littlepip statuette from Unity, that shining green memory orb of my birthday party, my charcoal...

"The ass doesn't know it's what it is." Brimstone tapped the ground with his hoof. "Far as they know, it's just some slave's random shit in that bag."

"Hey!" Glimmer wrinkled her nose and put hooves on her hips.

The big pony couldn't hide his twisted grin. "Same goes for the rest of our stuff. The wee one's PipBuck for instance. Would he keep that? Pretty useless to him like it is, but we need it for the maps."

"He'd likely send it on the daily sorting wagon to the logistics hub after the third shift to get rid of anything not immediately relevant to his operations in the Ministry worker hub. Grindstone was always pedantic in that fashion."

The voice was quiet and thin, coming from just near the door. All of us turned in surprise to see Protégé sitting against the frame, not really looking at us at all.

"And why would *you* be offering a hint?" Coral's voice was more accusing than I'd expected. After everything she'd seen from him lately, it was hardly surprising.

Protégé turned back and looked at us all. I saw his weary eyes linger in surprise when he saw Unity looking back.

"If you're going to be ambushing that wagon anyway, which you'll have to if you want what's in it before it gets to more heavily guarded areas, then I'd wish my eyepiece back." He sniffed and spoke louder. "That was a gift to me, one I won't suffer them to possess."

With that he got up and left again. He'd said his piece.

More than anything, I watched Unity looking at the doorway after he'd left for a good number of seconds.

"He's very lonely. There's empty air around him..."

She spoke very quietly, before looking surprised at me having heard it.

"It's... it's like I can't feel as much of his presence," she explained softly to me, "I look at ponies, I feel their memory. Like I told you before? Feel all the signatures of their friends, those they've been near. I look at you and I feel Glimmerlight and Brim almost as strongly as yourself. I could never tell all that so specifically, but it's been scarily clear ever since Aurora..."

Unity let the sentence falter and stared back at the doorway.

"Yet with him I don't see anything else..."

I don't quite know why I got up and followed Protégé.

Perhaps it was curiosity. Perhaps it was a feeling that at some point this had to happen.

He was overlooking the motionless sludge of the closed sewage section we were in, standing just beside the railing that surrounded the station's raised balcony to observe the pumping valves below that were long rusted shut. By now, we'd all gotten past the stench.

Protégé didn't look around as I trotted out and stood almost opposite him to look in the same direction, a good ten feet apart. Behind us, my friends continued their frantic planning and chattering over what we'd need to go out and get, working out who would fetch what.

We simply stood like that for a few minutes, both finding interesting cracks in the brickwork ahead of us to occupy the time as neither said the first words. I could feel my body aching, my throat pinched and wheezing from his choking and my skull still thumping from the lump he'd put there when he hit me with a terminal.

Out the corner of my eye, I could see all the same on him. The bruises covering his side where I'd slammed into. His throat scars from Barb looking angry and swollen at my strike there.

"I don't blame you for what you did."

His voice broke the silence. It was quiet, but curt and steady. Clearly, he'd been thinking on exactly how to word it, putting the sudden worry of replying with the right thing on time to my side.

"I... um..." I started, lacking the same preparation he'd had.

"You had every reason. A mission behind you. Friends counting on you. I cannot hold accusation against that."

This all took me off guard. I turned more properly and faced the weary unicorn.

"So... what now?" I asked it quietly.

We'd been at odds up there. Opposing sides clashed together. We'd fought, really properly fought. Injured one another. Tried to choke, to harm... to shoot. I took a short breath, and spoke again.

"Are you going to fight us?" The question had to be asked. "Try and take the orb?"

He didn't reply, before I saw his expression falter. He turned away quickly from me, lifting a hoof to his eyes. It dawned on me there was something he didn't want me to see. Yet then his voice came out, quietly and emotionally. Fractured.

"They *killed* them, Murk..." I saw him quiver on the spot. "Old Grizzly was one of my mentors... an ally, somepony I could seek advice from. I had to watch him be executed."

He sat down, head lowered. His mane was filthy and bedraggled, hanging down by his side and covering his face.

"Ragini stayed there because of me, loyal to *me*. Not to some contract. They believed in me... believed in what I was trying to do, what Master Red Eye asked me to do. And they died in front of me."

"I'm sorry..."

Their deaths had struck us as a shock. As a terrifying sight. Yet only now did I realise how deeply it had hit Protégé emotionally. He'd been left alone in Fillydelphia now. Red Eye was far away, Grizzly and Ragini were dead, and Shackles was only on the rise.

There was another long pause.

"Protégé... you can still—"

"Murk, don't."

His voice seemed almost more pleading than I'd ever expected to hear.

"I feel all the guilt for what happened up there. For them and, as much as you probably don't believe me, for what happened between us. So please, don't try to exploit this. Not now."

"I'm... I'm just trying to say you don't have to be without choice. I've betrayed your trust in the past too, remember?"

There was a pause, his quick reprimand cut short, and he looked away.

"That is true, Murk. Only it wasn't to throw my dreams under a wagon like I just tried to do to yours. I just—"

"I know what it's like being where you are. How you felt. It's no different."

He stopped and waved a hoof, a clear sign of 'no more.'

"I need to work out a lot of things. I'm not ignoring you, Murk. Don't think I've not taken note of everything lately that I've realised about myself."

I looked around and sat down. I had no immediate answer, and we once again fell into an awkward silence. After ten seconds or so, I could bear it no longer.

"So, what are you going to do?"

He finally looked back at me and sighed. I could see how close he was to emotionally letting it go right now. I felt almost uncomfortable to be witness to it.

"This can still be stopped. I have to go to Stern. Tell her all that has happened. Surely, we can both agree that Shackles has to be revealed as a traitor? I must go back."

Brimstone's voice cut in as solidly as a rock slamming through a quiet library.

"No. You won't."

We both quickly looked up to see the raider limping through the door, having to duck as he went. His gaze was fixed on Protégé.

"Shackles and Grindstone will have every slaver in their pay out looking for us right now. They'll have raised the alarm about a group of breakaways. They know we came into the ruins. You leaving could compromise us if they see where you come from. For now, you're not going anywhere, kid."

Towering over both of us, he showed no real expression other than a blunt assurance of what he said.

Protégé scowled slightly, looking up.

“If you want to remove me from the equation then just do it. Don’t beat about the bush if you think I’m a threat after what I did!”

Brimstone stood and listened, not moving as Protégé spoke.

“I betrayed you all up there. Almost cost you what you wanted, and for the love of Equestria I wish I could have avoided it. But that’s who I am... it’s *what* I am. He ordered me, I had no choice.”

He turned and leaned on the railing.

“If I’ve lost all trust you perhaps had in me, then that’s what it is. The things I’ve done aren’t things I’m always proud of. Up there, that was one of them. I know you feel I’ll never be different, whether you think of me as just another monster or not, there is no reason to give me a second chance from where you stand right now.”

I stood aside, almost afraid for what either of them might do. Yet I saw Brimstone only snort and lower his head.

“If I believed there wasn’t any reason, you’d be floating downstream right now. You’re right, I don’t trust you, but I think you’ve forgotten just who you’re talking to about second chances.”

With that, the old warlord turned and trotted his huge tattooed and scarred figure away from the two of us.

In that moment, I felt suddenly proud of him.

“Yo, lil’bro.”

Glimmerlight cantered out of the station to find me. Despite the marked bandages, she somehow held a spring in her step and a mad grin as she saw me. After the awkward talk with Protégé not too long ago, it was quite refreshing to see her delighted face even in this dark and dripping underground hidey-hole.

I’d meant to ask him what I had to, but after that, I just couldn’t bring myself to broach the subject. How was anypony meant to start that? To just... say?

After all, as far as I was concerned, there were threads connecting. Locations too coincidental. Too many little emotive hints.

“Finally happening, huh? How you feeling?”

I smiled back, trying to stand up straighter. “It’s... incredible. I didn’t think we’d get this fa—”

“Oh piss off with that, Murky. Of course you did or you’d never have made it.” She ruffled my mane, laughing as she spoke. “Now you get to have the fun part. Seeing everything we gather pile up and get ourselves all geared out to do this. Brim’s taking the lead on timing, raiding is his thing after all. I think his plan is to get that machine of yours to hold up the supply wagon coming out the Ministry at noon. He’s pretty cool, gotta admit.”

“He likes you.” I giggled and prodded her side.

“Who *doesn’t*?” Glimmer didn’t miss a beat as she tossed out her mane like a magazine model, despite it being sodden wet and coated in dirt from the escape. “If he thinks *you’re* a

more than I must be radiating enough feminine sexiness to him to cross all borders into the technological world.”

That made me laugh. It felt good to just let some mirth go. This should be a happy moment, as things started to come together in our little planning lair.

“Hey, Murky. About last night...”

Glimmer turned and sat beside me, I saw her eyes looking at my sides. At the wings that had flared out without realising when I’d laughed. Those things would take some getting used to. They were making me express things without meaning to.

Her hoof lightly traced the line of my right wing. “I saw you flapping about. Even on the mountain, I saw you use them to steer yourself while swinging. They getting any stronger?”

“A... a bit. I can move them pretty freely now.”

As if to prove my point, I shifted them in a circle, tipping the ends of them before splaying them out.

“It still hurts a bit. I just don’t have the muscles to really flap them.”

Sighing, I sat down and rubbed a hoof over the point they joined my body.

“Up on the peak I... I kinda ‘glided’ on the wind for a bit though. They can support me in the air, I’m just... just really nervous about them for trying that again. They didn’t hold me up. The wind pushed me down, which was kinda what I wanted to stop Protégé, but I’d never have stayed in the air if I’d needed to.”

My sister sat with a hoof on her chin, how I’d often see her look at a troublesome piece of tech before. Deep in thought as her eyes scrutinised my feathers.

“Well... I’m no flight expert, Murky. They didn’t teach us the mechanics of flight, if anything you know more than I do from how it feels on your body. Now, if you want me to tell you how to flare them out to attract attention...”

I waved my hooves. “No! No no... that’s quite all right!”

Her hoof nudged my head as she chuckled, looking away briefly. Her eyes seemed to fall on the long tunnel outside the station, dropping away from our raised platform where we sat. A huge concrete pathway ran alongside the sewage away from the pumps, about fifteen feet down. Then she turned back to me with a curious look.

“Why don’t we try it out?”

“Wha?”

“You’ve got a perch up here, I’ll go down there and be ready to catch you with my magic so you won’t hurt yourself. Dive off, give it a shot! Let’s work out what’s going wrong.”

She didn’t give me a chance to reply, trotting off to the stairs and making her way down into the tunnel.

I looked from side to side, at my wings, at the doorway to where Coral (curiously enough) was working well with Brim to plan things. I saw Unity glance briefly at me before I stared back at the tunnel.

“Come on, Murky! Give it a shot!” Glimmer’s voice travelled down the tunnels as she shouted to me and waved her hooves with her horn lit. “Nothing to it!”

Trotting up to the edge, I felt my knees shaking a little bit. That... that was hard concrete down there and I was pretty banged up already.

“I’m not sure...”

“Course you are! Just gallop up and take a jump! Live a little!”

I really wasn’t sure. I *really* wasn’t. Snow below me or my grapplegun to catch me was one thing, but for all my trust in Glimmer I just felt very nervous about this. She was one to

take the risks, to just say ‘fudge it’ and take a leap without thinking. I wasn’t. I really... really...

“They told you that you couldn’t, Murky! Prove them wrong!”

That did it.

I nodded firmly to her, sniffed hard and cantered back a little from the edge. The roof was high in here. I had room, I had landing space. I’d taken falls before. It’d hurt like *hell* but...

I was overthinking this. Less worry, more dare!

“Come on, lil’bro!”

A couple of heads poked out of the room as I galloped. I passed Unity and Coral. Mister Peace trundled out of a tunnel, attracted by the noise.

My hooves tapped sharply on the ground as I pushed the pain to the back of my mind and made something of an awkward dash forward on aching legs. I felt my wings spread out a little as they caught the rush of the air beside me, the feathers each parting and flickering up. The feeling of being so light that they could lift me came back to mind. My heart pounded hard, trepidation powering the adrenaline.

Then I leapt.

My front hooves stretched out, as though trying to catch a non-existent ledge ahead of me. I felt gravity take over and drop my weight down below the level of the worryingly high ledge I’d left. Everything felt so fast all of a sudden as my stomach lurched and I dropped. Fast.

Yelping, thrashing in the air, my body stretched out and forced those wings as far as they would go! Come on! *Come on!*

A sense of weightlessness flowed across me. Like all the weight pulling me had gone. I thought it was Glimmer’s magic, but suddenly I wasn’t just going down.

I was going *forward*.

The still air brushed against my face as I felt my descent being slowed and directed at a diagonal. Swerving out over the sewage, I got a nosefull of foul stench before leaning away from it. Leaning sent me wavering back toward the concrete.

“That’s it! *That’s it!*”

Coral’s voice rung out behind me and I felt a smile burst onto my face. It was like on the mountain, but I’d *chosen* it! I leaned again and felt myself glide a little further, only about ten feet off the ground. Each time I banked, letting my wings dip, I lost some speed and some height, but if I just went straight then I stayed almost level. Almost.

It was wonderful... the feeling of being aloft, held away from the dull ground for but a few seconds. I kept wavering and wobbling as I went over Glimmer’s head and down the tunnel a bit, rolling back and forth as my wings jittered.

I could actually kinda do this!

Only, there was a problem. As I glided in circles, I was losing height rapidly. I had no real speed left and before I knew it, my momentum ran out. I dropped like a stone.

“Catchmecatchmecatchmee—oh.”

I’d stopped. Her magic had, as promised, halted my plummet before I went into the sewage.

Legs trying to gallop in mid air, I calmed down as she drifted me back across to the stone walkway.

“Woah! That was *awesome!* I told you! You *can* do it!”

Standing upright, I felt very uneasy on my hooves. Almost ready to fall over. I had to fall

back on my rump to stay upright as I looked side to side at my sore and shivering wings.

I... could. I could.

Glimmer hugged me tightly and I laughed as I gripped her back a little too hard. Her yelp of pain was enough warning for me to back off a little and meekly apologise. Coral and Unity galloped down, while Mister Peace trundled through the slurry to us.

“Miss Fluttershy has demonstrated graceful form! I applaud this development of events! Shall I conduct a twenty-one gun salute to mark this auspicious occasion?”

“NO!”

The three mares around me looked at him and shouted hurriedly at once as the screen turned to that of a celebrating pony. Yet they were smiling, as was I. Even Peace seemed to see the humour in it and saluted me instead.

“If I may, Ma’am. You collapsed due to a lack of upward thrust. Pegasus soldiers are trained to maintain thrust to avoid losing speed and falling from the air, upward motion from flapping wings is the key!”

The four of us were almost surprised to hear analysis from the security robot. I guess it made sense, he saw things differently from us. Read things by numbers and forces.

“F-flapping...?” I looked back at my wings, trying to do just that. They just limply flopped about. I could hold them steady and strong, but not in motion.

Coral patted my back. “Don’t worry, my dear. You’ve made an important step to learn some confidence in yourself. Something you could do with a little of.”

That was true... but I couldn’t get my mind off of it.

I couldn’t go upwards without flapping. Was there any other way? Like using a grapple gun to pull myself back up higher? No, it would kill all the momentum by just pulling me in one direction.

If only I knew how to keep myself in the air longer without dropping after running out of lift. For all the support my friends gave, that fact bit hard. I’d never truly fly. With no way to keep or build altitude I was always destined to just come down right away.

Still, it was something.

Flying was hard, but it almost felt like I understood the *feeling* of it in a way I couldn’t *explain* the mechanics of.

I’d been told that before, long ago when I’d first met Brim. Maybe he’d been right. Maybe the answers were all in me like a natural instinct.

Speaking of the big pony himself, Brimstone wandered out of the doorway now above us.

“Schedule’s sorted. Get in and we’ll get this underway.”

It never ceased to surprise me how thick the air was down here in the metro.

I had to breathe hard to keep the air going into my lungs with how stuffy and heavy the ambience was around here as I crept alongside the rusty rails that I knew led to Shackles’ hidden slave pen. The sucking sound I made on each intake provided an unsettling and discomforting feel to these quiet tunnels.

We’d decided that Sunny had to come first. Fetching her was comparatively easy, needing no overground movement and gaining an extra set of hooves to help us put the remainder of the plan together.

The downside, I had to go alone. One pony was all that’d be able to properly sneak

around in these bare tunnels.

My ears twitched as I heard something fall up ahead. A thunk of rock on metal. Slipping to the side, I pressed myself in behind a fuse box and fell still, my eyes peering through the cluster of rubber wires beneath it to try and penetrate the darkness.

Nothing. But that didn't mean there wasn't something about to come. Better to wait, be aware, be sure.

The fact that I kinda wanted a rest, too, had *nothing* to do with pausing. Nope. Not at all.

The others weren't being idle while I was doing this. Coral was headed to Hearts and Hooves Hospital while using the sewers to get close. It had taken some convincing to get Mister Peace to guide her through that unexplored maze instead of accompanying me. Eventually I had to tell him that I was attending a 'mares only' meeting to get him to drop the issue.

I could still hear Glimmerlight's chortling behind me as I'd sighed and said that. She was having too much fun with this whole 'Fluttershy' business.

Really, I just hoped she got some RadAway. I'd already had one coughing fit in the sewers and the sound was loud enough to travel huge distances. Everything felt thick and foul tasting in my mouth down here. If Coral didn't get some on this trip, it'd have to become a very sudden priority for my ongoing health.

Unity had waited with Glimmer as the pair began looking into her mind. My sis' had said they'd need to do a few 'known' memories first to get a feel for it, dragging them out into orbs before revisiting them check what was found. Then they'd begin to work backwards, slowly finding what they needed. When I'd left, they'd been sat in the corner with Glimmer's horn glowing brightly. Set around them I'd seen numerous cream coloured shining orbs, Unity's memories into empty orbs they'd scavenged from the empty houses above us.

In the meantime, I was to check with Sunny about if there were any stallions down here that might fit the bill. Theories or not, I wasn't going to ignore any possible hint to help her.

Up ahead, I heard hooves trotting in the dark, too far away to see. There wasn't much ambient light down here and sounds carried far. Holding my breath, I watched for any shifts or movements. Inwardly, I was relieved that I heard hooves. That meant pony. Something I could understand. Inner metro or not, knowing what lurked in the levels below this one still made my skin crawl with the knowledge of being separated only by a layer of rock.

The moment that thought came to mind, I felt the urge to turn and flee. Dark tunnels were too recent, too close and familiar. They were *down there*. What if they'd escaped in the station? What if they got into the inner metro with all the slavers were doing?

No more sounds came after a few fearful minutes. Trying not to whimper, I started moving again.

Finding the metro camp wouldn't be impossible. The sound of so many ponies would carry, and the inner metro was just a big ring anyway. Eventually, I'd come across it if I just kept moving this way and following the tracks. A brief thought about where I was in comparison to the above ground stations had let me figure out which direction to go in to not encounter the slave lair first before I found the workers.

Who ever said I was stupid? I'd been quite proud of thinking of that.

Another sound. Somepony coughing. I turned and quietly cantered back to the same fuse box. No way to assume there was another one further up to use. Take your time... no

risks...

It didn't take long before a tall mare wandered past me, humming gently on her trip. Some sort of tunnel watch patrol? One way or another, she didn't spot me, passing right by my still form huddled in the darkness. After she left, I took the opportunity to canter on a bit faster than before.

Thankfully, I began to recognise some telltale signs before long. An old train car looked all too familiar from when Protégé and I had come down here. That passageway I'd quickly gone past a couple minutes ago must have been the one with the entrance to the outer metro in it then.

Ignoring the cold wash of fear, I pressed onward. Before long, I could hear the sounds of pickaxes and shovels ringing through the tunnels, growing from a background hubbub into individual strikes and grunts of exertion. For the third time now, I sneaked my way into Shackles' underground mining camp.

The few lanterns hung from the ceiling illuminated the gruesome sight. Wasted ponies still toiled in exactly the same spots that looked as though they'd only gone about two feet since last time. The tunnel looked wider, but for how much effort had gone in, the entire thing just felt utterly pointless. I knew of machines above ground that could have done that in a day.

I found the same hiding spot Protégé and myself had once used, before settling down to watch for Sunny. Covered in old stuffy rags behind a pile of wasted tools, I knew I wouldn't be spotted. My eyes traced across the lines mere feet from me, their stink wafting down the tunnel, a cocktail of blood, sweat, filth, and sickness. The stallion closest to me was hobbling on three legs as he swung his pickaxe. I could see the bandaged stump, left to fester and rot. It was tainted a horrid gangrenous green but his face didn't show any pain. Just a tired blankness.

My empty stomach turned at the thought and I let my eyes drift elsewhere.

It was a struggle to not think too hard about this. I knew it would kill all my hope and strength if I even let my mind begin to imagine how many ponies were having their lives corrupted and withered away down here. Instead I just focused on Sunny, looking for a sandy coloured pony. I saw one on the opposite wall, shovelling away the mined chunks, but it was a stallion. He weakly stumbled between the walls, clearly new to this place. He still looked terrified, lacking the same weary blankness of the others.

As I observed, I noticed that Weathervane's friends weren't around as they normally were. In fact, none of the ghouls were. Had they all been moved? Or...

I threw that thought from my head. Clearly she wasn't here. Great, I'd have to check the other tunnels.

Wrapping myself in the rags (It had worked last time) I trotted in. The slaves wouldn't bother me if I just acted like them, it was just the slavers I had to watch for.

Moving along the right wall, I stuck to the inner side of the metro's slow curve, keeping me out of sight of anypony in the tunnel as much as possible. My eyes traced every new group of slaves I came to. The ones tugging the laden rock wagons attached to the old rails. The ones working the walls or the piles. Even the ones who lay on the ground, resting at their workplaces by the wall. The sound of a whip sent me scurrying toward the mined rock itself, acting like I was one of them.

"Get up! Rest ended ten minutes ago! *Get! Up!*"

The whip snapped again. There was no scream.

"Ah, shit. You two, load them."

Behind me, I heard the shuffling of slaves lifting the corpse onto the wagon. Just another pony who'd gone to sleep and hadn't woken up. About the best anypony could hope for in slavery: to just silently pass away from exhaustion after closing your eyes. It horrified me to think I'd once prayed to the Goddesses to allow me such a death.

My head was beginning to hurt down here. The echoing sounds of over a hundred pickaxes and hammers reverberated in my skull, clanging like an automatic weapon's chatter. Unending. The smell was making me nauseous too, as I noticed the pony beside me was foaming at the mouth and reeking of infection.

Thankfully, with the sound of the wagon moving on, I could fall back out and keep moving. A few slaves turned and looked at me, apparently concerned for the little slave who was moving when he shouldn't be. Maybe some of them recognised I was new? None of them said anything, though. They had bigger things to worry about than risking drawing attention. All the same, their dead eyes were unsettling to see turning and following me as I crept down the tunnels.

"Keep up, you slags! *Come on!*"

A slaver came right towards me. He was already looking this way, trotting out quickly from a second tunnel. Oh no, I couldn't dive in now, he'd see that! I just had to keep trotting, keep my wings hidden and try to look like I belonged.

"*Git mining!*"

A cane cracked, before a stallion squealed at it slapping across his rump.

"Not so back-talky now, hm?"

It hit again and I heard him scream a second time. I kept trotting, shivering as I closed on him. I couldn't divert or change direction, he'd *know*.

The cane descended again and the stallion fell against the wall, screeching as I saw the slaver was targeting an already badly infected cut over his cutie mark. He whimpered, holding his head against the rockface.

The slaver cackled to himself as he moved on from the poor pony. He was the kind Shackles attracted, the type of pony that just loved power over others. To make the proud into the humiliated.

It took all my courage to stay the course. Just keep trotting. I was just going to a shift change, moving slowly but steadily to where I'd been told to. That was all. I was *supposed* to be trotting.

I saw the slaver's eyes fix on me. He'd spotted me coming.

"You!"

Oh no.

"Where you goin'?"

I stopped, looking up briefly before breaking eye contact just as fast. Same way any slave would.

"M-moving t-to where I was tol—"

The cane cracked the ground beside me.

"Well I'm in charge here and I say you're needed on wall three. Go."

This was bad. This was very bad. I didn't know where wall three *was*. If I turned in the wrong direction, he'd *know*.

I lifted a hoof, I just had to pick and hope.

My step hesitated. Wait, couldn't I figure it out? Would... would wall three be closer to

the pen? So the way I was going? Or... or was the way I'd come from the furthest on bits and thus clearly the older ones?

"What the fuck are you waiting for!?"

I squeaked, before gulping and letting my hoof fall, moving to the side around him to buy a few seconds.

It... it had to be closer to the way in I'd once seen. The proper metro station entrance Shackles had made his lair in. If I was wrong...

I began to trot that way.

I got three steps before I heard the swish of air as my only warning before I felt the stinging cane whip across my rump. Shrieking out, I fell forward and curled up, trying to crawl a little to just get away. I'd picked wrong!

"Get moving. Shit, when Shackles gets back on top we won't have uppity runts like you looking at us in the eye again..."

The slaver continued on his way.

I took a few seconds to pant and breathe. The backs of my thighs felt on fire from the strike and I had to clench my teeth to not let out any more sound as I got up and trotted onwards.

I hadn't gone much further before a hoof grabbed me and pulled me toward the wall.

My squeak of surprise was muffled by a sandy coloured hoof over my mouth. I felt myself being pressed into the small space between somepony and the rock before a pickaxe started to strike above my head as the pony kept up the work after pulling me in.

"Lucky guess."

Sunny Days looked blankly down at me.

Relief flooded through me as I stared up at her from lying on my back.

"S-Sunny! I was looking for you."

She hesitated, her eyes carrying to either side of the tunnel. Up ahead I could see the point where it broke into two before approaching the slave pen itself in the station. That entrance to a still unseen operation of Shackle's.

"Is it time?"

I nodded. "Yes. I... I came to get you. We're getting together. We've got a plan!"

Her hoof went to her lips. I could see her face was battered and filthy, but her fitness seemed to have seen her through the few days down here. The shrunken belly was obvious though. They hadn't been fed...

"Can you hear any coming?"

I closed my eyes and listened around, before shaking my head. I couldn't be sure with all this noise, but I didn't hear any hooves trotting closer. Just slavers shouting from further in or out to either side.

"Then let's go."

She swung the pickaxe up, seemingly aiming it down at me. I gasped as it descended, whirling right down over me, past me and slamming into the chain by her hoof that held her to the procession of slaves. With a metallic clank, the length broke to leave just the hoofcuff around her leg.

Sunny didn't hesitate. She flung the pickaxe over her back, hooking it onto a strap before staggering back and away from the mining wall. Her strength faltered and I saw her almost fall. I didn't know how long they'd kept her here, but Sunny hadn't done much other than stand and swing for some time. Her hooves seemed ill-coordinated.

I went to her side, helping to steady the weary mare. Sunny was a strong earth pony for sure, but a time down here would crush anyone. There was no pride or 'tough' resistance to this sort of environment. Even the best were slowly worn down into shells of who they were. Just like any slavery, only heavily accelerated by Shackles' mind numbing work to break slaves in faster.

Laying her hoof around my back, we began to trot back the way I'd come. I only hoped that slaver had gone down the far tunnels and left the curve into the main circle line open. We hobbled past all the others, still thrashing away. Some noticed Sunny breaking the chain and watched us from behind. Many looked pleading but were too scared to raise their voices. A couple of hooves reached out slowly after us.

It took a lot of effort to not think too hard about what they were thinking.

I couldn't take everypony...

We made it to the side room that the ghouls had once been in. I helped Sunny up to the door and pressed it open. It'd give her a moment to get her bearings before we made the longer journey.

I sat beside the door, peering through a crack while she rested. Sunny had to get her muscles moving again after hours (or longer) of the same repetitive motion. She *needed* a time to get her strength before we risked any sort of real escape.

"Gotta admit... glad you came when you did."

She tried to smile, but just rolled her head back onto the wall, taking a few deep breaths.

"We weren't going to leave you... we come back for our friends."

I knew I was trying to sound more comforting, but Sunny just waved a hoof and almost laughed. Despite that, I spotted a small wince before she said anything. Right as I'd mentioned 'friends.'

"Ah don't overdo it... I don't really know your friends yet, do I? Just glad I got *somepony* on the outside to finally get away from that. You can count on me to help your cause, lil'Murky. If you can get me a shot at that big bastard that killed Cayenne I'll be even happier..."

That was a nice thought, but Shackles still felt so immortal to me. Every time he cheated death, got back up after a horrendous beatdown or gained more and more power in this city, it only reinforced my belief that he could not be killed.

There were some things I had to check first though.

"Um, down here... or in the Station or... or the den. Are there any... special slaves? Individuals?"

"What do you mean?"

I shuffled my hooves nervously. "Like... um... a young stallion maybe? Kept specifically in some place?"

"I've been through almost every room, Murky. Seen a few mares or some of the older stallions being kept as 'assistants' to the slavers, but no young ones."

Well that was that. My own theories were elsewhere anyway, but at least that was one potential thing checked off the list.

"Well, uh, Sunny... did you see any ghouls while you were here, then? There was a group in here once. Really old ones... really hurt."

Her eyes opened again. "The old guard?"

"Old what?"

"We called them the old guard, cos they've been slaves since the very start of Shackles'

reign in here. Medical crew and security, right?”

“Yes, yes that’s them! Doctor Weathervane’s last friends...”

“The doc? Heard of him, never met him. They’re his, eh?”

I nodded fiercely, turning away from the door to stand in front of her. “Where are they? I’d... I’d like to get them out too if I can.”

Sunny was quiet for a moment and I felt my heart sink. They’d been falling apart last time I saw them.

“Murky...”

“Please, don’t say they’re—”

She interrupted sharply. “I don’t know. They got ‘promoted.’ In here that means they got taken to the sealed rooms in that there den of his. Ponies get taken there every so often. None come back. Lotsa’ rumours about that place behind those doors. Having seen the metro station downstairs we met in before... I don’t want to imagine the kind of fucked up shit being done. Some say it’s teams to try and fight those *things*. Others say memory experiments or even just being made into a sadistic slaver’s plaything.”

I hung my head a little. Right in the core of it all... we’d never get them back now. I knew the kinds of experiments the zebras had done now, the idea of what would happen if those were being tested again by slavers who didn’t understand what they were messing with...

“Sorry, Murky. Those who get promoted are beyond our reach, no matter how hard their friends try.”

Her face looked solemn all of a sudden. I got a bad feeling.

“Sunny... were...”

She stood up again, taking a sharp breath.

“You know why I stayed last time. You aren’t the only pony who found friends among the slaves. We promised to stick together so none of us had to die alone.”

Sunny opened the door and glanced outside, before taking a step out. She took two spades lying against the wall in addition to her pickaxe.

“Only... somepony’s gotta be the last one alive.”

The pumping station was filling with more activity.

Coral had returned with medical supplies generously gifted by Weathervane once he’d heard we were all still alive. She’d laid out healing potions of hospital grade potency, fresher bandages, RadAway to store for the journey along with syringes of Med-X. (Med-Yes!) Everypony took what they needed; nopony tried to overdo it. Brimstone almost had to be forced to take a significant share, his combat skills were necessary, and even after it we knew he’d be weak for some time. Downing potions like mugs of ale, he sat back and impatiently waited as his flesh bound and repaired the damage Brutus had done. The shock to his system, however, could only heal with time.

Feeling my own aches and pains fade was a relief, along with the foul orange gunk that was RadAway allowing me to breathe deeper again. I spent a few minutes coughing and feeling dizzy as the oxygen went to my brain. The others shared amongst themselves, healing Coral’s eye and Glimmer’s chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Unity take some to Protégé outside and spend a little while trying to talk to him.

Watching the two of them felt awkward... he kept looking unsure around her. Every so often he'd dodge a question she asked about his past or veer away from talking about anyone he ever knew before us.

Yet they got on fairly well. Probably about books.

I felt my mind slowly piecing more ideas together. I'd seen his looks, the fact he was always looking like he missed someone... the fact that he'd once been a slave too and—

It just... it felt so crazy. It felt *impossible*.

All I could think was... why? It occurred that I didn't know how long she'd been in here, and likely neither did she with her memory affected like it was. That was what got me thinking most.

Why the memory removal?

Had she—

Sunny rapped my back with a hoof, shaking me out of my thoughts. She was just finishing off her second potion, after insisting she'd be fine with food more than anything.

"Seems you lot have a pretty darn neat operation set up here. We've got the mining tools, a big blasty robot, about six healing potions left alongside three rolls of bandages and a bunch of Med-X... why I'm downright feeling the urge to hoard all over again, just like scavenging outside."

"That's the plan!" Glimmerlight was organising our stuff with Coral, laying the pickaxe and two shovels against the wall after wrapping the potions. "We've got places to hit, all at the same time after splitting up. Feeling up to helping?"

"Try and stop me. I want to take anything from these slaving bastards."

Glimmerlight turned and grinned with delight at Sunny. "Sounding like a gal after my own heart. Say, question... your name? Sunny Days, right? In a wasteland with no real sun, how'd that come about?"

The weathered earth pony smirked and waved a hoof. "Ah, it's nuthin'. 'Days' is just a popular name out where I come from. So what's on the list needing done?"

Brimstone glanced down at Glimmer's lists alongside his own scrawling. (I really wished I'd gotten to see him try writing)

"First up is the things we can do easily before anypony starts to realise we're doing anything and tightens security. Murk and Glim will collect our stashes, with Murk getting inside the Mall to the armoury. Hopefully Blunderbuck might even help you if possible. Robot?"

"Yessir!"

"Watch them as they go, wait for them in case they need to come galloping back."

"Allow them to lead the enemy unto devastation at my hands! I approve of this methodology! I shall set a tea party for pursuers. By tea party I mean surprise. By surprise I mean *death*."

Brimstone looked almost blank with complete befuddlement, staring out the corner of his eye at the giant machine thumping one metallic hand into the other.

"Some days I honestly feel raiding made more sense..." He shook his head. "Much as I hate the fucking idea, I'm too big and well known to go any real distance, so I'll take a stroll in the ruins with Sunny and see if we can knock over anyone trying to find us and take their stuff. Maybe see if we can poke our heads in and see if the way to the hotel and Ministry's exit road is clear. Coral and Unity? You know the Mill?"

Unity nodded, before pushing herself to speak up after Brimstone failed to see her. She

was on his blindside.

“Mhm... I had a work a couple shifts there. Being, y’know... undersized.”

Coral stroked her back. “Nothing ‘undersized’ about you, my dear. You’re just fine with who you are.”

Glimmerlight grinned. “Exactly! See? Murky’s nodding, he agrees that you look *good*.”

I... wait what!? Had I been? I looked side to side rapidly, before just blushing. Oh dear.

There was a deep sigh from, beside us.

“If we can concentrate on us getting the fuck *out*?” Brimstone was clearly trying not to snarl. “Murk, Glim? Get going with the bot to the Mall. Coral and Unity, see if you can get materials to sew some bedrolls from the mill. Hit anything of opportunity you can, all of you. All good?”

Everypony nodded.

“Right. Sunny, let’s go. Everypony else make it happen then meet back and we’ll head out to new places after that. Let’s fleece ’em dry.”

One of the most *satisfying* days of my life began.

I’d always had to steal to make my way in life, it was partly why I was still here. Theft and sneaking around had become something of a little trick of mine to evade all the harm I could, and it had served us well. You could say it was my reason for being in the group, their little thief below the real leaders and fighters like Glimmer and Brimstone.

Now I was being told I had to steal *everything I could*.

Glimmer and I got out of the sewers a short gallop from the Mall and made our way toward it. Sticking to the blasted shopfronts that lined most of the streets surrounding the huge building, we leapt from ditch to wall to window, using any hideaway we could.

We found the first stash just behind the building, where I’d once left a set of boltcutters after my race to get RadPurge to Glimmerlight.

Unfortunately, they were on the other side of the Mall’s perimeter fence... the fence that I’d once got over by tying linen around those same cutters to use like a grappling hook and rope. Now, I was stuck on this side with no solution.

“Hmm... this is a problem.” I muttered and plopped down on my rump to think, hoof on my chin while Glimmer watched behind us and moved up.

The linen was still there. If I stood on Glimmer’s back and jumped, maybe I could make it? Or... or I could glide over from that powerbox on top of the sheds nearby? Or—

Glimmer trotted past me, lifted the boltcutters over with her magic then used them to cut through the fence in about twenty seconds, before grinning at me.

“Was there a problem?”

I gaped. Why hadn’t I thought of... back then when I’d been in danger I could have just...

They were *bolt cutters* and I’d used them like a... instead...

I groaned and held a hoof on my face.

“Not a word, sis.” I muttered and trotted past her as she presented the hole like a magician over their impossible trick.

“I didn’t say anything.” She singsonged with a smug grin.

“Just *don’t*.”

"I didn't say *anything*... Mister 'Shortcut.'" She lowered her voice, teasing with the name.

I groaned and rolled my eyes, ducking through the hole and cantering up to the back of the Mall. Seeing it again was pretty strange, this place had been the centre of my life for some time in Fillydelphia now and yet even a few days away felt like I'd left it behind. Its imposing height and width still stood out, crafted from those thickset stones carved into shapes of supporting columns topped by sheet metal.

There was a different air to it though. This was Shackles' domain now. The slaves inside likely had it worse than ever.

Yet apparently, the rear was still unguarded. We quickly made our way toward our old cell's doorway to find the second stash. Glimmer had left some of her old trinkets from that pile she had inside somewhere around here.

It didn't take her long to find it and we started loading up.

Spark batteries, crudely realigned to peek out what power they still had sat glowing beneath a tarp while the filter she'd once used during the repairs to collect and purify rainwater was dumped in a sack. I flung it over my back while Glimmerlight used her magic to nab every scrap of wiring and arcane technology she'd left into a bag tied out of the tarp itself.

Behind us, we heard a clatter of rock.

Her magic brought up a thick stone from the rubble on the ground, holding it ready to hurl at whatever we saw.

Instead we just saw a radroach crawling out of a half covered drainage outlet. Covered in yellow filth, it skittered around in the waste before finding something to chew on. I turned away in disgust.

"Jumpy, lil'bro?"

"Y-yeah... we're exposed out here."

Glimmer let the rock down and grabbed the last couple of charge talismans.

"Well, we both know no one patrols here. You get into the vents for the armoury, I'll head for the third stash with the metro maps we stole. Coral and I stored a lot more of our stuff there before we got sent to the mines too."

I gulped. The vents were no longer threatened by the ghoul; I knew he'd fallen into one of the gaps, but the thought of having to pass over him still made me uneasy. Quite frankly, I needed a few more minutes to gather my courage.

"Um... s-sis?"

"Bro?"

I tapped my hooves together.

"About... um, Unity? You're finding out who she once knew, right?"

Glimmerlight looked a bit confused, before we sat back behind a pillar of the Mall's outer building. "Of course, hun. I did promise her, use this magic of mine for some good. It felt familiar though... not fragmented like a traumatic memory loss. It felt clean, magically, I mean. Definitely taken out into an orb somewhere, but unicorns who can do that aren't common, Murky. I don't know any other ponies in Filly other than me who can."

Following that only made my head hurt. So unless there was some pony neither of us knew, it had to be...

I really didn't know how to approach this. Should I just say what I was thinking or... or hint it? I felt my eyes fixating too much on the eerie light of the crater behind the Mall.

"It's just... I really want her to be happy and... and she said that she wouldn't leave

without him. They'd promised. But what if he doesn't want to leave?"

Glimmerlight opened her mouth, before closing it again and looking down at me. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't he? Murky, this is *Fillydelphia*, we all want out of here. It's ruined all of our lives. Did you find some sort of hint about him while you were away from us?"

"No... no... I was just, y'know, wondering." I tried to shrug it off and stood up. "She kinda means a lot to me, is all. I just don't want it to hurt her if it's... not what she thinks it is. Cos it's been so long with no answers and... I just worry I guess."

She gave me a very strange look, as though studying my every facial expression. Eventually her face softened and she shook her head.

"Don't worry about it, Murky. What happens happens, either way it's better to know. Trust me on that one. Forgetting things isn't the way to do it. I learned the hard way, I won't let her go the same direction. Just wait and see, it'll all be fine, I'm sure of it."

I hesitantly nodded, smiling. Glimmer telling me something would be okay was always enough to make me put something to the back of my mind.

"Now go on, shoo! You've got to get me some bang-bangs!"

Snorting with laughter, I turned and galloped off to the vents. Yes... there was thievery to be done.

"Blunderbuck, you *blyadischa!* Rifle is not to be corrupted by your fairy dreams!"

"But it looked so nice and—"

"*Otebis!*"

The sound of something hitting somepony hard echoed through the halls. I saw Blunderbuck staggering away after crying out in pain. He held the back of his head, before a wooden hoof struck him again.

"Come with me, assistant! Move! Is long past time I got to Wall to oversee war preparations, and all I see is this messing about like child!"

"Sorry! Sorry!"

I really felt bad for the poor buck. Mosin was not a well-mannered boss to work for. Watching them both go, I really wished I had gotten the chance to speak to the slaver assistant who'd joined us for good times on my birthday. I was sure I could have convinced him to come...

Perhaps later. For now, I had the armoury all to myself after sneaking by the guards further out. Wouldn't they *ever* learn?

It was almost enough to make me want to hum a tune of happiness as I wandered past the thick metal doors and stood surrounded by the cages of weaponry.

I was alone in here.

It was all mine to take...

Anything I could get.

Anything.

Any.

Thing.

I could almost feel myself salivating before I dove in amongst it.

The huge bag I'd nabbed from Shackles' office came with me, one I'd remembered he had

that was big enough to store everything but a long rifle in. Dumping it in the centre of the floor, I ran off to the cages and yanked each of them open in turn. Ammo crates had their tops torn off.

I tossed five pistols of varying sizes into the bag, along with three magazines for each. A heavysset shotgun went in next as I dragged it in my teeth from its wall mount, both of its barrels glinting from recent polishing. After a bit of hunting around Blunderbuck's workdesk, I found red boxes of shells lying stacked in a deep drawer and started tossing them across the room in beside the shotgun.

You could toss ammo right? (I figured so, if it went off from tossing why would anypony need guns? Flawless logic!)

Glimmer would want something accurate, so I galloped around the back and found the lines of rifles lined vertically. Some were bolt action, others seemed to be automatic. (Why did they call it that anyway? You still had to pull the trigger...) I pulled a long bolt action from the stands, feeling its recently polished wood in my front legs as I scooted it across to the back and tucked it in. A lever action followed it from the same rack, I'd once seen Sunny carry something similar.

I ran around the armoury quickly, unsure of when anypony might come in. I was gleeful, shovelling an entire box of cleaning kits into the sack before following it up with two small cans of oil. Some tools followed, before I started looking for the rifle rounds. A locked cabinet denied me access to a set of mines, but I found three loose grenades on Mosin's desk to tuck into the bag's side pocket.

Behind me, I heard ponies talking. I couldn't wait too long, *somepony* would come back eventually. Slavers left their weapons in here a lot of the time, and I knew they were regular about it.

A metal filing cabinet opened to reveal a tangled mess of harnesses and straps. I didn't have time to sort this, so I just drew out what I could and tied up the loose long-arms with them to hold them all steady in the bag.

Then my eyes fell upon *it*.

That massive set of armour at the back of the room still loomed and watched over everything I was taking. Yet again, I found myself unable to avoid spending a few moments staring at it. This monolithic knight of steel, an early Ranger design. Less advanced but still tall and carrying the pride and iconography of Equestria upon its chest and shoulder plates.

I'd once been chased by Rangers, yet looking upon this one now with the time to wander around it I began to get a sense of what they perhaps once were to ponies. A symbol of strength and hope.

An icon of the future, not the past.

"Hey, mate! Did Mosin go out yet? Shackles sent a runner asking where the bloody hell he is."

"Yeah, yeah... he just left. Taking half our fucking staff too, Stern's got anypony not needed here on the walls right now or helping organise the army camps outside the city."

"Fuck... this really happening?"

The voices rang out from the corridor outside. Shaken from my thoughts, I poked my head around to see vague shadows moving from around the bend outside the room.

Okay, okay... maybe I *didn't* have time now.

"There's chatter on the radios though. Shackles getting a lot of bigger jobs for the preparations. Lots of ponies saying he's already won that vote shit they do. They say he's

coming back to power...”

“Fuck me man, I dunno if I even wanna work here if that happens. Bring Red back quick, I say. Least we got Stern.”

Every few days, I’d had nightmares of such a reality. Of him in power. I couldn’t believe I was thinking it but... please bring Red Eye back, Goddesses. Anything but *him*.

I threw my all my efforts into taking what I could. A tube shaped quietener that was lying spare by the edge of the desk, the much sought rifle rounds that were in a small cage below where I’d found the guns themselves, two long range telescope thingys to attach to the tops of weapons and a shortened carbine lying under a pile of magazines. I threw a bunch of them in too, hoping one of them at least matched the weapon.

Zippering up the bag, I went to start slinging it around me and quickly realised this wasn’t going to work.

“Urk... *heavy!*”

I gasped the word as I was forced to stop trying to lift it and instead wore the bag’s looped handles like a harness. Dropping into the straining routine of wagon pulling all over again, I slowly pulled the heavy bag out of the armoury along the floor.

“I heard the scouts said they’re definitely coming this way, mate. Rumour is that old Red’s got it bad over in Everfree too. We lost contact a while ago.”

“Shit...”

My ears pricked at hearing this.

Something had happened over at Everfree with Red Eye’s operations? Something was coming this way? Some force to break everyone out of this place? Oh, my wishes were taking off...

Unfortunately. This bag wasn’t.

There was a vent in the next room over I could use to get away from them, drag it all the way back to Glimmerlight where she would help me. I just had to get there... ten feet down the corridor of hoping they wouldn’t turn into it toward the armoury.

Five feet...

Three...

“Go tell that runner to carry back word, though. Mosin left just now. Want a tip mate, tell him to arrive before Mosin does to say he’s on his way.”

“Pfft, fuck no. It’s Thistle Tip.”

The first guard burst into laughter.

“In that case, tell him to take his time, that guy’s a complete wanker. Anyhow, see you later. Gonna go nick a slot of Mosin’s drink while he’s gone.”

I heard one leave, but the other one was coming this way. Struggling and skittering my hooves on the floor as loudly as I dared, I heaved it into the room and started trying to lift the bag into the vent.

I heard the guard approaching. Just don’t look in... just don’t look in...

The bag slipped mostly in. Standing on my hind hooves, I started to shove it inside. There was a small slope in the vent behind the wall, so I could get it moving quickly once I got inside myself. Just had to... to lift my legs up and—

“What the fu—HEY!”

I actually screamed in shock as I heard the voice behind me. The guard had looked right in at me. They weren’t allowed to do that!

A wiry brown slaver with a whip looped around his neck stood in the doorway.

"It's you! The fucking runt! Shackles' told us to look for you! C'mere!"

I shoved and the bag slid fully into the vent, but I had no time to get in myself. If I moved quickly, he'd grab me! I turned and pressed my back against it... I just needed five seconds more...

"I... I'm just..."

"You're just coming with me, you little shit. You any idea how much we need to put up with the boss rambling about you? Fucking obsessed!"

Sweat dripped down my brow. I didn't have time to turn and go... I...

I looked behind him.

"Oh! Thank goodness, Brim! Help!"

The slaver's eyes went wide.

"Brim? Brimstone? The... *oh shit!*"

He spun to face the empty doorway behind him as I took the few seconds that gave me to turn and hop up inside the vent, pushing the bag ahead of me.

"Wait... you little sneaky *fucker!* COME HERE!"

Hooves grasped in after me, making me very glad he wasn't a unicorn as I bucked out at them in return until I was far enough in. Wiry or not, he couldn't follow me in here. He ran off, shouting to all the others.

The journey was exhausting in the darkness, navigating from memory and by the foul screams of the ghoul trapped in these vents near to the exit. Pushing the bag and stopping to rest. Pushing. Resting. Pushing. I had to stop sometimes as ponies were heard below me. I could hear them watching vent exits, but I knew they didn't know about the one to the old janitor's room where the ghoul once had been.

It was there I finally let it drop out and found Glimmer waiting for me in the cobwebbed old office.

"Murky!" She galloped over and helped me out with the heavy bag. "Geez, by Equestria are you kitting us out or building a damn army!?"

She already had a thick set of straps made from the janitor's old bedding to carry the third stash worth of items, between us both we got down the back stairs of the Mall and back through the fence toward the sewers and the safety of Mister Peace.

Stashes and weapons?

Check.

Our first real haul was a complete success.

After unzipping the bag, we drew the weapons out and placed them along the wall. Pistols lay on an old table somepony had acquired, ammo was counted and organised into proper magazines. The long rifles were stripped and checked by Glimmer and Sunny. Mister Peace seemed very interested in them, providing an almost incessant commentary on their histories and development times.

Along with that, everything else was laid out. The metro plans were taped to the stone walls and studied, Red Eye's patrols outside the wall were mapped beside them and overlaid with the tunnel systems, just in case we had to make a run for it there. While the portal was our goal, the idea that we might have to make a break for it in some other way through the outer metro on our original plan wasn't forgotten.

The remaining medical supplies were carefully wrapped and kept safe. Coral got her gemlight lantern lit to provide us with a pale blue haze to work in. Unity and I sorted the mining tools against the wall. Spades, a pickaxe, boltcutters, and a couple slabs of long wood to prop anything up were cleaned and kept from rust. Afterwards, Coral and I set to sewing new saddlebags with the stolen linen and wool in a quiet corner while the others worked with Glimmer to make spark battery flares or improvised disruptor grenades of the like I'd seen her create before.

The old forge gloves converted into waterflasks were set near the sewer exit to catch any rain, hooked up to Glimmer's filter. Any on the ground was too contaminated for the filter to handle, it seemed. Sunny laid out the slaver's clothing she'd stolen. She and Brim had managed to 'deal' with two slavers wandering in the ruins. I hadn't asked in what way, but they brought back a two way radio they'd possessed and had also taken their clothes.

The idea was to have Sunny disguise herself and camp out near the Ministry with the radio, ready to warn us the moment the wagons appeared. Glimmer carried the other hoofset latched to her barely recognisable Initiate robes.

We had a few hours yet till the third shift ending and the time of our ambush on the wagon exiting the Ministry. In that time, we had just one more big thing to do.

Raid a logistics warehouse.

The warehouses were the most stocked places in Fillydelphia. From there, the food was stored, the tools were kept in racks, survival equipment was held on shelf after shelf and anything with no real purpose just lay in wait. Even better, some of them were lightly guarded. Most of the focus was on protecting medical supplies, weapons, and high technology. Just enough guards to scare off desperate and hungry slaves, but I'd broken in there before while on the run. I knew the ways past.

It was near the FunFarm, just a couple hundred metres from a sewer exit and across the street from Wicked Slit's factory. You could almost call it my old stomping ground from before... well, *all* of this started on that day of the Pit. I knew every little street around there, every ditch and hiding spot. As such, the decision was made to take a small team to raid that place and leave the rest on standby for attacking the wagons, just in case things got set off early.

Glimmer, Mister Peace, and myself would go for the warehouse. The robot would be handier with us there, as the back alleys could get him to the warehouse without an issue, and we'd desperately need his support if anything went awry. Coral, Sunny, Brim, and Unity would remain near the Ministry. Now that we had weapons, there wouldn't be as much need for Peace to handle things there, and the last thing we needed was him attracting attention with his firepower if the ambush needed a couple warning shots.

Much as I trusted Peace to protect me, I *didn't* trust him to 'hold fire' when others were getting to shoot instead.

If all went right, we'd be back to join the ambush a good half hour before it was due. In the event of anything going ahead of schedule, Glimmer had the radio to let Sunny contact us and warn those of us not around to make haste back.

All in all, it felt pretty well planned.

Leading up to leaving, I spent the time making a mental count of everything we had. I was just killing time, really. My skill was in acquiring things, not in doing anything *with* them once the sewing was done. It was, however, very satisfying to mentally tally it all up and grin happily at all the things we'd gotten together. I wanted to add to the pile, make it

larger. The thief side of me was being spoiled rotten today. It was enough to make me trot on the spot with glee.

At least, until somepony saw me. Then I just sort of shuffled away blushing.

Glimmer and Unity continued their own work. Almost all the orbs had been used up by now, lying in a neat line nearby to them, all glinting with a soothing cream colour. Both of them looked quite worn out, Unity in particular. I could imagine why; a slave's memories are not the happiest ones, reliving them to try and look back was something we *all* tried to avoid. Concentrate on the present, don't let your mind be taken up by the routine when you realise how automated your life has become.

Yet as I watched them, something changed.

Glimmer's horn glowed brighter while Unity jumped on the spot. A loud gasp and twitch of motion shot through her like she'd been thrown into cold water.

"Oh... I... I..."

"Shh, it's okay!" Glimmer stroked the back of her mane, holding Unity close in a gentle embrace. "We're out, we're out. It's okay..."

"*What was that?*" Unity's voice was thin, struggling between deep breaths. "It... it was like falling through ice, like something j-just snapped..."

"We've found where your memory ends, hun..." Glimmer spoke gently. "It's normal to react that way, it's unknown territory for you. It's a shock to the system, I'm sorry... do you want to—"

Unity's head shook. For a moment, I could have sworn I saw the same determined look from Aurora on her face. "No! If that's it... I want to get it done, to see!"

She sat up straight, taking a slow breath as I saw the gentle mare I better knew returning to her calm and quiet demeanour.

"We're so close."

Glimmer seemed to take a second to decide, before slowly shifting in to sit beside Unity and cradling a hoof around her shoulders. "Then you have to relax, don't get agitated. You won't immediately see what it is until I drag it out into an orb. Then we can see. Hopefully we'll get you an image of him, so we'll know who we're looking for, all right? Now, this could be... unusual, unsettling even. Having your memory pulled can feel like you're dreaming of it, but without knowing it yourself this could be weird."

"I'm willing, if this is what I have to do. I trust you."

A soft smile came over my sister's face as her horn started to glow. Gradually, she leaned closer and softly nuzzled the smaller mare. Affectionate as ever, she squeezed Unity with her shouldered hoof and whispered.

"Let your breath out... like you're trying to sleep. It makes it easier."

"O... okay..."

I watched as they proceeded, trying not to feel weird as I just stared at the two mares. Unity was almost snuggled up to my sister for comfort during what was clearly a discomforting process. If anything, I felt proud of Glimmerlight. Seeing her using her talent in a truly helpful way and offer her very loving personality to relax someone during it felt... right. I'd have to sketch the two of them like this someday; it was such a nice sight.

At least, until I saw Unity's expression change as though having a nightmare.

She shifted, her hind legs twitching and her whole face clenching. I heard a couple of suppressed whimpers while seeing her whole body squirm a little, as though trying to wake up from not even being asleep.

Glimmer's horn glowed brighter, clearly digging deeper as I began to see an orb lighting up. It flickered lightly, like a flame struggling to catch before growing slowly into a bright hue like the others beside it. The process went on for a few minutes, Glimmer's azure blue magic lighting the pumping station and attracting the attention of the others.

Before finally, with a snap of ceasing magic, it finished. The orb gleamed brighter like a little star, before settling into a steady glow.

Glimmer and Unity both opened their eyes at the same time, looking up. My sister seemed fine, if a little... wiggled out. Something had surprised her. Strangely, I saw her quickly lift the orb away behind her back.

Why?

Unity looked confused, searching the room with her eyes for a few seconds before settling on me.

"Did... did it work?"

All I could do was shrug a little and look to my sister for an explanation.

"Sort of..." Glimmer muttered and got up onto her hooves, "I... phew... I didn't really see it too clearly, but I got *something* for sure."

Unity's face lit up, driving her dizzy self to her hooves in excitement.

"We did? You did it!? Can we look? I have to know!"

"Patience, hun." Glimmer was acting calm, Unity might not have seen it. *I* did. "A removed memory is never truly gone. We just broke through it into your real memory. Give... give me a few hours to recover, this isn't easy. Then we'll draw it into an orb properly. It didn't really carry properly this time, wasted orb..."

"Oh..." Unity couldn't have looked more disappointed.

"Come on, you've got a chance to rest while we go to this warehouse, get your head down. That wasn't easy."

Unity let her eyes look around the place, clearly impatient and downtrodden at having to wait longer. "Okay... thanks, Glimmerlight."

She passed me on her way to where Coral had organised the blankets into a makeshift sleeping roll. We met each other's eyes on the way.

"You okay?" I had to ask, it only felt right.

To my surprise, Unity smiled. "Yeah, I am. Just eager, I'm sure you understand. Good luck out there."

"Thanks."

We shared a little hug, just to let her know I was worried for her. Or just to comfort her? Or was it for her to comfort me that she was fine?

Oh, to be socially experienced...

As she left, I heard Glimmerlight approaching behind me.

"Ready to go, lil'bro? We should have left by now."

"Y-yeah... hey, um, sis?"

Glimmer arrived beside me and looked down, raising an eyebrow. She still looked in deep thought.

"Hmm?"

I stared at her for a few seconds in the quiet dark, the only sounds being the mutters of Sunny fitting herself into the slaver's clothing and Mister Peace rolling by outside. Glimmer's newly sewn saddlebag was weighted a little with that orb in it. I could *see* it.

"Murky?" she asked, prompting me again.

"N-nothing..." I looked away, not knowing how to ask so close to Unity anyway.

If I had to guess, Glimmer had seen what I expected she would and didn't want to drop the bombshell right now. Perhaps that was the right thing. Waiting for a moment to quietly explain everything? Maybe I'd get a chance to ask when we left?

For now though, I just felt her hoof ruffle my mane.

"Nuthin's apparently what's going on in that cranium of yours right now, forgetting your own question. C'mon, let's get out of here and go rob shit."

She trotted forward, grabbing a few extra bags and jokingly making a big deal out of the weight, before making a pouty look to Mister Peace.

"Oh! Right away, Ma'am! A true gentleman soldier of Equestria does not suffer a pony to struggle without his assistance! Especially not one of such grace and class."

Coral mockingly blew a raspberry with a roll of her eyes on hearing that, not even turning her head to look.

I grabbed my own bags, slinging the weapon sack over my back as well. After a moment, I picked up my journal as well for safekeeping, before finding it lifted away from me by Glimmer's magic.

"Here... uh, I'll take it for you, keep it safe out of any deep sewage. Longer legs and all, y'know?"

Feeling a little put out for a second, if not confused, I slowly nodded and cantered to the exit into the sewers. "Uh... s-sure?"

"Just for safekeeping."

"Okay..."

As I left, not getting a chance to ask any further, I found myself confronted by Protégé. He stood with weary eyes at the exit, a couple of Coral's stitched bags around the barrel of his torso.

"I'm coming with you."

Behind me, I heard Brimstone stand up. The sound was *quite* obvious. Yet I kept my eyes on the slaver before me.

"Something is... odd, about Fillydelphia. The things Unity told me from going up there, the things I saw while outside since coming out of the Ministry. I must get a proper look, figure out what's happening. Why the hospital was stocking up so much, why you've all encountered light security."

I'd heard guards saying that. Something about a force coming? About Red Eye?

I hadn't dared tell Protégé what I'd heard though.

"You're going to be fine helping us steal from Red Eye then?"

Protégé met my question with sharp eyes. You don't pull the trigger on somepony and look at them easily the next day without some sort of awkward feelings.

"I won't be stealing anything, just accompanying you. You won't let me go alone, and I don't want to stay here. If you want rid of me, I'll simply leave for the FunBarn the moment you're done. I'll be out of your mane."

For some reason, the others stayed silent. Was this my decision?

Really, turning him down made no sense; he *was* correct.

"Well, um... okay?"

"Thank you, Murk. Now, shall we proceed?"

With that, we did. He remained behind us the whole way, trotting without a word.

I knew Protégé by now. His lack of speech wasn't because he was unwilling to talk to us.

It was because he didn't know what to say to us in any casual manner anymore, after all that had happened.

The trudge through the sewers was quiet. Each of us all seemed to have our thoughts in mind.

Glimmer was clearly trying to process what she'd seen and put into that orb. I had my suspicions that I knew what, but on account of who was with us, I dared not bring up the subject.

At the very least, I knew she had the proof with us. It was going to come to light. *Today*. Unity deserved it.

Protégé meanwhile was almost unnoticeable behind us, had it not been for my hearing tracking his movements. He was so very quiet, deep in thought.

Mister Peace occasionally hummed to himself, taking the lead to scout in his own inimitable way. By that, I meant that it involved leaping around most corners with the cry of 'AHA!' Aside from a few startled radroaches, there was nothing to sate his wishes, and he would glumly reset his missile launchers again, before moving on.

Eventually, judging by the huge grates we passed, I could tell we were in the FunFarm's area of Fillydelphia. I recognised the way out I'd once used to escape those pursuing me from the same warehouse. I smelled the burning in the air spike up from the heavy industry that polluted Fillydelphia. The drifting smog collecting down here made me gag and my throat burn enough that I pulled a bag around my mouth to try and breathe through.

Oh such a familiar stench...

Mister Peace took a hold of the chosen grate and set his hydraulic arms moving. The rusted metal was like putty in his hands, snapping and bending so easily that I wondered how weak the bars really were. A quick test of my own strength gave me nothing but sore muscles and a gentle pat on the head.

"Do not concern yourself, Miss Fluttershy. Allow me to conduct matters of physical strength against the enemies of your trotting direction."

His arm ripped the last bar off, before his screen turned to the face of a dress uniformed soldier on ceremony. He gestured me through.

I was getting a little tired of that happening today, actually.

My hooves sunk into the soft mud and sewage outside as I made my way to the embankment and dryer soil. Glimmerlight followed me through, scooting up on her belly to the edge of the ditch to look alongside me.

"Nice navigating, Ma'am." She teased me with a grin.

"Oh, not you, too..."

Behind us, Mister Peace let Protégé through, before promptly tearing the entire grate off in one fell swoop for his own bulk to fit past. Why hadn't he just... oh forget it.

The area out here was in the back roads of the housing I'd once used to hide in near the FunFarm. I could see the connecting road that would lead into the factories or deeper into the FunFarm itself. That meant the warehouse was down this rarely used street. Most slavers and wagons would use the larger repaired road that ran concurrent to the FunFarm's borders. Briefly, I remembered spending time hiding from the gang in a sewer outlet in that road long ago...

In other words, we were free to move even with Mister Peace, who would remain outside and wait for us.

However, as we moved up, I looked to the side at a nearby factory surrounded by a broken wall. The glow of molten metal came from within while wagons filled with scrap metal were being tugged into it by weary slaves. I could feel the heat from here, an angry warmth of prickly pain on the body.

Wicked Slit's factory.

"Um, hang on a second, everypony..."

Glimmer and Protégé looked to me in surprise.

"What is it?"

"I need to get something, I'll only be a minute!"

Glimmerlight saw me looking at the factory and shrugged. "You sure?"

"Yeah! Yeah!" I tried to smile it off. "It'll, um, help with my gliding practice!"

That seemed to give her reason to let me go and I cantered off, dropping into a sneaky crawl before I got near to the factory.

It didn't take long before I saw the others spot me coming galloping at full speed back out of the factory across the ground back to our hiding spot.

Glimmer got up, seeing me just whizz past her.

"Murky!?"

"RUN!"

They followed me without asking more. I could feel the item I'd lifted dangling between my teeth.

From behind us, a figure stormed out of the factory. Frazzled mane over a body so tense it looked about ready to have a neurotic breakdown any second. A curved knife waved in the air as she glanced around with twitching eyes.

"WHERE'D THAT LITTLE BASTARD RUNT GO? WHO SAW HIM!? I KNOW IT WAS HIM! I FUCKING KNOW IT! THIEVING MY FUCKING GOGGLES *AGAIN!* ARGH!"

Yup. *Satisfying* day.

Getting in without my grapple gun was a little tougher than before. In the past, I'd climbed up the fire escape and used my saddle to zip up to a higher open window above me. This time, we had to use something of a 'pony staircase' to get there. With me hopping off of Glimmer's back to grab the ledge, then reaching down to help Protégé do the same. Glimmer, being taller, was able to hop up far enough for both of us to grab her hooves and pull her in.

Mister Peace waited below near a door. If needed, he could tear that thing off and rush in at a moment's notice to provide us both a way out and some cover. Elsewise, he was hidden on this unguarded side.

We were getting pretty good at this whole 'working together' business.

Of course, there were more secrets I was keen to see very soon. Ones that could define the next few events in our escape from the filthy sewer into the last part of our plan. Right now, we had things to do.

The inside of the warehouse was simple. One gigantic open floor filled with tall shelves in

lines. They were vaguely organised into groups, with all sorts of goodies just lying out for any slaver's needs. Or in this case, ours. Where we stood now was a raised platform overlooking the warehouse floor with an office beside us. Its windows gazed across Fillydelphia's skyline to the great fortifications surrounding it. Red Eye clearly didn't trust slavers around the food alone. The guards only ever remained on guard at the entrance, with occasional patrols inside. It had been one of them that caught me last time.

"Murky, head over the far side, you're quietest! I'll plunder this line here." Glimmerlight kept a hushed voice as she handed me some of the bags. "You know what to grab, right? Survival things, food... anything to keep us going in or out. Let's not push our luck. Fifteen minutes at most. Agreed?"

"You'll have at least thirty, we're on a shift time," Protégé spoke quietly, looking toward the office, "The random patrols only take place in the logistics hubs when slaves might be out and about."

With that he trotted into the office, staring out of the window. I thought it was to look forlorn, but then I saw he was actually glaring around and trying to read the activity in the sky and streets. As he'd said, he wanted a look at Fillydelphia.

"Let's get going!" Glimmerlight hurried down the stairs, shuffling her hooves quickly to hop the last banister and drop onto the concrete floor.

I tried to do one better and leapt from the second flight, wings spread. The momentum carried me through the air for all of a few feet, and I felt my wings catch the air to help soften the fall!

Yet before ten feet had gone by I simply *fell*. Landing sharply on the concrete, I felt my knees ache in protest at the steep drop.

No lift. I had no way to get lift under my wings. Curse these broken things...

Shaking the thought from my head, I sprinted across the warehouse, ducking my short height below the shelves and through gaps to reach the other side faster. Already I could see Glimmerlight grabbing things in her magic to toss into her saddlebags on the opposite side.

Reaching my target, I started to canter alongside the shelves, eyes peeled. It really was like a supermarket where everything was free.

My hooves grabbed a few things as I hopped up to whisk them off their labelled piles. A bag of cotton tinder, a flint and steel set, a compass in case my PipBuck shorted out...

All of them were dropped into my saddlebags quickly. As I snatched up a large rolled map of Equestria, I spotted my sister again through the shelves. She was trotting carefully down the lines, whisking small bottles of tepid looking water with her magic, taking my journal out to make room for them. I saw her casually flicking through it as she went, smiling occasionally. I could imagine what ones.

"Urgh, she *would* look at those drawings." I rubbed my forehead. It never felt any less embarrassing. Was now *really* the time to look in it?

Shaking my head, I hurried along the shelves. A can opener disappeared from its pile. Two metal cooking tins went in with it, placed either side of the map to not clatter when I moved. I followed it up with some heating blocks that could burn even in the rain. I'd once enviously watched a slaver use them during a storm from my leaky pig sty.

Everything I grabbed would be ours. Everything would help a bit more. I felt eager and confident. It drove me to want every little thing. My hooves landed on a plastic rainshield for the map, a set of hoof warmers for Chirpy and then found themselves grasping for the food section as I galloped down toward its piled boxes.

Behind me, I could still see Protégé up in that office.

Alone.

If I could finish up and fill my bags here right now, I might get five minutes free to go and speak to him.

See if I could get anything out of him about this. About her.

To that end, I might have rushed a little. I reached around an entire shelf of mixed tinned goods and just swept a dozen of them at once into my bag, feeling the weight drop on that side of my body. Oh, that scoop felt *good*. I followed it up with dried and vacuum packed strips of processed hay. How they made that last two centuries, I'd never know, but apparently they were still edible. Even better, they were thin and light. I upturned a whole box to fill in the gaps between the tins. Glimmerlight had briefly set my journal aside, pulling a trolley over to load a full box of oat cereal containers onto it. Of course, we had Mister Peace to carry more for us!

I could just imagine trying all these. *Real* food! Food that could be warm! Sugary! I'd always wanted to try sugar. The thought made me quiver as I cheekily tossed a few foil wrapped chocolate bars in after spending a few seconds trying to decide if blue ones would taste better than red ones. Eventually I settled on blue. (In my mind, red was a bad colour, blue was like the sky!)

"Just a few for me to enjoy!" I giggled like a foal, running amok in here.

Soon though, the hoarding was filling my bags. I'd taken some dried mash powder to slip into the remaining gaps and pressed some dry pasta under my saddle's straps, but this was as much as I could feasibly carry myself, knowing I'd have to help with other things too. As such, trying to quench my disappointment at all the yummy things I hadn't room for or couldn't reach, I made my way back down the warehouse toward the office.

All joking aside, this was a serious thing. I had big questions for him.

I was going to confront him on the subject of Unity. No way out.

She *deserved* this. I'd heard it enough times from a voice I'd come to trust. The truth had to be known.

No matter how bad it might hurt.

Each step of that staircase made me rethink what to say. I was rehearsing lines in my head over and over. How to word it? How to say it? What tone? I tried to think what he might say back, how I'd counter any dismissals.

Yet I kept trotting and eventually, I saw that bare office bathed in the red light of Fillydelphia, glowing over my now ex-master as he stood watching the city.

"Protégé."

Simple. Basic. Just greet him first.

"Murk." He nodded without looking. "You're done?"

"I have everything, yeah. I just came to, uh..."

My voice stumbled, leaving a gap after speaking. Thankfully, Protégé picked up where I left off.

"I understand. Things are awkward after what we tried to do to each other. I still don't know how to quite think on it. Perhaps that's why I'm distracting myself from coming to terms with fighting a pony I never wanted to hurt, just because of life throwing us on

opposing sides..."

I could have sniped at that with comments about the living conditions, but this wasn't the time.

"Well, um... what have you seen?"

Stepping up beside him to look out, I saw a hive of activity from this vantage point. Protégé was right, something *was* different. Around the base of the wall, I could see campfires. *Thousands* of campfires. An army was set in here, far more than just the small camp I'd once crawled through. The skies were filled with Pinkie Balloons and veering formations of griffons.

"Preparations. It's as I thought..."

Below on the street, a column of ponies with newly created arms and armour cantered past.

"Fillydelphia is preparing for war. The Enclave must have started to move against us; Red Eye always knew this might happen. It goes against all expected timeframes, however."

"E-Enclave?" I was just coming to grips with what I knew, but weren't they just a small, almost mythical outpost of pegasi up there? "They're really as strong as... as they say?"

"More than you know, Murk. And more than I've seen. You won't be the only pegasus in Fillydelphia soon enough, only you're the one who won't be trying to burn us to glass. I can only hope we have the power to resist them. Once Master Red Eye completes his task, we shall stand a better chance with the Cathedral's reinforcements."

Finally, he turned to me, pushing his mane behind his ears as best he could. He'd found a bit of string to retie his ponytail, but it wasn't keeping it all in.

"This will be a time of woe and hardship, Murk. Whatever you are trying with your friends, I can only hope that if you succeed, it will be before this comes to pass. We have seen many battles together by now, but true war is unlike any of those small skirmishes. Death, loss, and undoing of what progress so many have died for will assuredly happen. It will be when all ponies in here must cast aside their prejudice and band together against the storm. To hold close those they consider dear to them..."

That last line, I'd been given a way in. Awkward or not, I leapt on it.

I didn't turn my head. I simply spoke. A clear sentence, spoken level and simply with no accusation or worry.

"So why don't you?"

He went silent.

I was afraid he was simply going to leave, or suddenly shout. He just looked at me with those thoughtful eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

I couldn't back away now. I couldn't let it slip.

"You know who I mean."

Protégé looked uncomfortable, his hooves shifted in the same way mine often did. His face steeled as he gathered his words carefully.

"Murk... I appreciate you and your friends for what you've done for me, but I... I am not what you all think I am. Yes, having you by my side has kept me alive. Yes, I am grateful, even perhaps happy, that I had somepony to share the journey thus far with who understood me as deeply as you do. But—"

My hooves raised as I almost wished I had a griffon's talons to tear at my mane in frustration. Stomping them down, I interrupted him.

"Not *us*! We're happy for you too and all you did to try and... and make this easier, even if some of us haven't forgiven you, that isn't *the point*!"

I had to stop myself from seething. But the summoned up the will to just say it directly.

"Why don't you tell her?"

"Murk, what are you—"

"*Why don't you tell her!?*"

I shouted it at him, far too loud than I should have. Any worry of others hearing all the way across the warehouse was cast off. I advanced, shifting closer.

"From the moment we saved her from Grindstone and Shackles, you've been glancing her way! I've seen how she looks at you too, like somepony who recognises how lost and *lonely* you are in this city! You've been like that ever since I met you! Always looking for company, the company you wanted from me because you had nopony else! We were always together, because of how much you craved somepony else who understood who you are and *yes*, we had that... that bond! But there's another isn't there? *Her! You know who I mean!*"

He backed away from me. "Murk, I—"

"Just look at both of you! Interests in books, wanting quieter moments to discuss with one pony. Both of you feeling lost in this place. You were once a slave here. In Grindstone's Ministry before Shackles was promoted out of being his overseer, yes? You knew the inside of there as well as I did, you knew about the sanisiso—"

"Sanitiser" Protégé curtly added.

"WHATEVER IT'S CALLED!" I was in no mood for corrections. "You knew that Ministry like the back of your hoof to guide me in! That's where *Unity* also was, getting it now? You were *both* there. Tell me, were you at the Pit where Littlepip escaped?"

Protégé almost looked worried, but I couldn't tell in what way.

"Yes, I was. Murk, stop—"

"Unity told me that her closest friend, more than just a friend to her, was sent to the Pit, but she couldn't see him and couldn't ever remember! She never saw him down there... *because he wasn't a competing pony!*"

He went silent, stepping back as I shifted forward again, pushing my head up as high as it could go.

"You're keeping that poor, worried, and *wonderful* mare in fear! You're doing it knowing full well who she is to you. Every time she got hurt or threatened, you were *always* the first to leap to defend her. So I want to know, *now*. Why are you hurting her by hiding who you are to her? She doesn't deserve this and if you're treating her like this then you don't deserve *her*!"

"MURK! What are you talking about!?" He let down his intelligent look, shouting it back and shoving me away from him to stand properly again.

"*Stop hurting Unity and just tell her who you are!*"

My voice felt frail as my vocal chords clung and tightened. I coughed harshly, stumbling. Protégé moved to catch me before I pushed him away, circling around one another.

"Both of you! Stop! Stop this!"

Glimmerlight's voice carried above us both as she raced into the office. Putting herself between us. Standing with her legs wide and firm, she sent us back with her magic, keeping me from wanting to hit him all over again! Why wasn't he telling her? Why was he denying it?

"Sis! It's him! He's who we're looking for!"

"Murk, I assure you, I—"

"Liar!"

Azure blue magic threw both of us apart.

"Murky, stop!"

Glimmer's voice took me by surprise, as she suddenly turned and faced me, leaving Protégé behind her. I made to protest, raising my little hoof to speak up, but she got the word in first.

"You're wrong, lil'bro! You're so utterly, *totally* wrong..."

Then I saw it in her eyes. She was scared. Shivering and unsure of what was happening.

"I... I didn't believe what I saw. I had to make sure, but I think... I think I know who it is..."

The next three seconds as she gulped and got her breath back felt like my slow lifetime all over again. What was I meant to think? What was she saying? Why would she be worried to know?

Her lip quivering, struggling for words, Glimmer spoke again.

"I didn't think it possible. Look..."

My heart skipped more than one beat as I felt everything go still, her magic floating something forward and opening it.

My journal.

Pages flickered, going back from what I'd done on the mountain in Aurora's cabin. Back... back past my birthday... back past the lowest ebb of my life and back further to my time in the Mall, and then further. Back to my first drawings before the Pit, and the pages kept turning. Pages I'd never wanted to look back to. From before the Pit. From the time of my life I'd sworn never to look back on! I wanted to turn away!

Lines, curves, shapes...

Sketchier, rougher, lacking in the life I knew I could do now. Like they were done by someone with no idea of the creative freedom I'd attained, or who was still working at it. The turning stopped on one of them. An environment, the Ministry of Arcane Science's main interior. I'd recognise it anywhere.

Huddled in the middle were two ponies I knew, together.

Unity... and myself.

Drawn before I had ever met her.

I staggered back, nearly falling over the office's desk. I felt my breathing heighten.

"Sis'... sis' what's going on?" I pleaded, feeling my whole body shake.

Parts of my mind were trying to tell me things. I shut them out, terrified.

"Murky, calm down, we can figure this out. Calm. Down."

Glimmer started advancing, a hoof gently settling with each word. Behind her, Protégé looked very concerned. Yet I fell away from both of them again, knocking over a paper basket in my haste.

"What's *happening*!? That isn't... it can't..."

"Murky, breathe! What do you remember?"

Limping away, I fell to my rump, hooves either side of my head. Things... things were lighting up inside, things I didn't want to know. It was too sudden, too unsettling. It was

impossible, but there was proof of it right in front of my eyes.

"I don't... know, I... no, no it can't..."

My journal's image kept flickering again and again in my mind. That sight. She and I, huddled together in fear, seeking comfort. I couldn't remember anything of the sort! That couldn't be true!

The feeling of how we'd huddled together in Aurora's cottage felt fresh.

Familiar.

No! I refused to think this was true! Why was Glimmer tricking me? But I knew she wouldn't. I didn't understand. My head *hurt*.

Running alongside her to escape felt so familiar, didn't it? Working together?

Dreams were faded, hadn't I often dreamed of that sort of thing? Of running beside another? But that was just dreams! It was just imagination! I'd wanted somepony to be there with! Companionship! It wasn't—

"Together..."

Four other words, I'd heard four other words after it, muffled, distant.

I wanted to cry, I wanted to rock and whine and ignore everything. I wanted to run and hide.

A mare reaching out to you.

I felt a hoof land on my shoulder.

"Murky, it's okay..." Glimmer's voice was soft, but distant. "We'll figure it—"

Out.

I shot to my hooves. I knew how to check if this was all true. Pushing past her, I galloped for the window out onto the fire escape. Leaping high, I grabbed the ledge and flung myself over it before running down the stairs onto the streets of Fillydelphia.

As I left, I only vaguely heard Glimmerlight shouting for me in a blind panic, before crying to Protégé and Peace to take the supplies as she tried moving her sore body in pursuit.

I didn't even think about what slavers could see me. I simply galloped onto the main road, the route I knew by instinct, and headed in the direction of the FunFarm. My hooves sharply impacted with the tarmac at high speed, driving me forward. Tears were in my eyes, and my head thudded and whirled painfully. Like something had sparked that shouldn't have. It was like ice was shattering, and plunging my realisations into freezing waters to wake up.

Like breaking through a forgotten memory's barrier, Glimmer had told Unity that's what it felt like.

No...

I didn't remember anything of Fillydelphia from before I'd been sentenced to the Pit, because something bad had happened that I wanted to forget. I'd told myself that from the very start.

Slaves turned and watched the little pegasus whisk past them. Their handlers seemed more surprised than anything that they just stared. Griffons above watched with interest at this fast moving pony through all the shift change crowds.

We'd both looked back at each other after we first met outside Slit's factory, like we'd recognised each other.

Thoughts shot through my mind, connecting with chilling realisations. My hooves were sore, my knees were tired, yet I kept galloping. I rounded a corner at an angle, and leapt a small wall to miss a checkpoint.

She'd known I was a slave all my life before I'd ever actually told her.

The mud and dirt made me skid sideways while turning before I stumbled onto the next pathway and kept running, hearing Glimmerlight shouting behind me. Yet I could not stop. My eyes were wide, seeing things I could now remember like daydreams.

My first master in here had been Grindstone. He had mentioned Unity by name the first time he saw us together.

It was like my coma from Wildcard's attack all over again. Remembering memories from times gone by.

On my first shift under Grindstone, a kind mare had picked me up when I fell.

I could see the FunFarm's helter-skelter a block away.

Whiplash had said he didn't know who dropped me off with him. I'd just woken up there.

A slaver shouted, wondering where I was going. I completely ignored him. My lungs were burning from running through the thick fogs of chemical smoke, yet I powered out of it and made a break for the FunFarm's entrance. I could see that Pinkie standee waving toward the west still as I tore past it.

When I'd visited the Ministry for Protégé, I'd run around without needing the map, I'd known where I was going like I'd been there before.

I gasped as a sharp pain darted through my skull. Worry, stress, emotion and confusion turning a headache into something worse. I staggered in the FunFarm's entrance, trying to clear my eyes.

In Aurora's office, the memory machine had been surrounded by green and cream memory orbs on the floor. When I'd left, I'd thought to myself that I wanted to come back and 'remember more...'

I passed by the hall of mirrors.

I'd seen myself behind her. In that magic mirror It had shown us the truth, just like it had shown me with my wings.

I followed the route we'd taken, aiming for the rollercoaster.

Mister Peace had said the last time that he had seen me was while escorting 'you and your friend away from the Ministry after visiting Miss Star's office...'

I could see the mesh fence ahead. See the locks covering it, all clasped to the wire with names carved upon them. Hundreds of them, scattered around, the love-locks of Old and New Equestria all together.

She'd asked me if 'Murky' was the only part of my name... she didn't know about the rest of it...

I fell, exhausted. Clambering, struggling as I approached the one I knew the location of too well for my sanity's liking. Reaching out, my hooves clutched it. My simple mind trying to use my newfound literacy to read it. To figure out every letter with a growing well of indecipherable emotion.

Just his initials, like she'd said.

Two names inside the symbol of Celestia's sun, separated by a small heart.

Unity

M.N.S.

Pinkie's letter was in my mind. Fresh, every word clear.

To,

Murky and Unity.

So super super sorry that this letter took sooooo long to arrive, but when I knew I had to send it, I was just like 'Aaaaaaaaah!' for at least a minute! I mean, can you imagine?

I'm really really sorry that it missed your last few birthdays, Unity. That's why I want to make my gift to you really special! I just want to tell you that you don't need to panic. It's all going to be fine! I hate to say it, but there's a hard road to go first, before you see the buck you once knew. I wish I could just tell you, but I don't really know all the itty-bitty details. This isn't like one of Twilight's crazy organised experiments, y'know! I'm sure you'll work it out together. You're a smart pony. Smart ponies always figure things out! Except me. But then, I can't figure me out either! How crazy is that!?

Just trust me, Unity, it'll be alright. Together, or not at all, right?

Hey, Murky-Murk? You're what set off my Pinkie Sense so bad that I spilled somepony's sarsaparilla! I mean, a pony who never had a birthday party in his life? I will not, as Ministry Mare of Morale, let this happen! But it's a few days till your birthday yet, Murky. Be patient, okay?

Oh, and Murky? Listen very carefully to your Auntie Pinkie. Don't. Worry. When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not, you'll know what to do.

I'll be watching out for you two, from wherever I am.

With hugs, (Give each other one for me! Hehe!)

Pinkie Pie!

She had said it right then, right to the both of us together.

You have to discover it for *yourselves*.

My sister found me, hunched against the fence and staring at the love-lock.

I couldn't even think. I just couldn't. It was too much.

All I could do was just stare at it. Reading it over and over.

I couldn't remember anything of it; only piece together the evidence that was flying toward me the more I thought about it. All surrounding this image before me, and the image in my journal.

"Murky..."

Glimmer's brash voice was tuned back to a weak whisper. She trotted carefully through the waste and discoloured mud of Fillydelphia toward me, and sat down. Just the two of us in this foul place beneath a sky of smog, alone with this.

I didn't know what to do. All I could do was lean into her body as she leaned forward and embraced me very tightly.

"We'll solve this, Murky. I promise you. Memory is what I do..."

"I'm so confused... I-I-I don't..."

"Murky, ssh..."

Glimmer leaned back, taking me by the shoulders.

"Whatever has happened, this isn't the end of anything. Murky, this is *good*. I've always wondered what happened in that journal, always wanted to take a look, but never did because I *respect* you, Murky. For all of who I am, I won't ever pry, but I had to know. I'm so sorry for lying, but I had to make sure this was what I thought it was."

She wiped a tear from my eye with a cleaner part of her hoof.

"I saw it in her memory. I have the orb to show her. To show *both* of you."

I shuddered, looking upward at the sky.

"A-Aurora's machine, we used it to..."

"I know, I saw..."

Glimmer looked at the love-lock, the small smile on her face almost surprised me. I didn't understand, why? Just... just why would we do that?

My sister helped to put it in words. She'd seen the memories. She knew it all.

"You both tried to escape together, and you were both sentenced for the Pit for it, Murky. It was a punishment that put you both on opposite teams."

I remembered the Pit. They did that. I remembered seeing two friends forced to fight to the death. Glimmer was right.

"Two ponies who'd become friends in that Ministry, amongst a living hell; a beautiful, *beautiful* friendship. You wiped your memories of one another. You used Aurora's machine in her office."

She was crying. The thought of it terribly upsetting my sister.

"Actually erasing the love you shared to avoid knowing who you both were. To prevent the pain if it came down to you two being told to kill one another in that horrible place..."

Mister Peace coughed.

"Which is where I stepped in."

We both sat up sharply. The robotic voice spoke louder than anything we'd said as Mister Peace slowly trundled through the quagmire to us, with Protégé mounted on his back and towing a trolley of supplies.

Blinking, I looked up at the huge machine.

"M-Mister Peace? What happened?"

His voice quietened, almost to normal levels.

"Miss Fluttershy, I told you when we last met that I had escorted you and your friend from Aurora's office. Upon hearing of your mission for me, I could not deny its importance. A tragic tale for the operas of great Canterlot, it is so..."

His screen flickered to a soldier with dress uniform on, captured in a still expression of mourning, probably meant for use at soldier's funerals.

"It was not my place to know what you two did, only that I was to carry your unconscious selves to separate areas of this city, before returning to my vigilant post."

"Why didn't you *say anything*?" I almost begged him, holding out a hoof that he (as best a war machine could) graciously took in both his metal hands.

"You both ordered me. The most hurtful order I have ever carried out. To never tell either of you of the identity of the other, unless you somehow knew it yourself, like now. Such a thing could have undone everything. I will never pretend to know why you both did this. It wasn't my place to question. I simply saw you both so hurt and afraid..."

For a second, Mister Peace almost looked... *upset*.

"...I wanted to help."

Something about the way he said that. He *wanted* to help. Not just following orders.

Protégé had moved around everything, before he took a look at the love-lock for himself. I heard him mutter in disbelief.

"Murk, I am so *very* sorry."

His hoof rested on my shoulder, firmly giving a little shake.

Then things were quiet.

Nopony knew what to say any more.

After but a few seconds, however, it was broken. Glimmer's radio crackled into life, fizzing as a signal fought its way through. Just as she got it dug out, Sunny's voice came through, garbled, but intelligible.

"They're already moving! Way early! If we don't move now, we're gonna miss it, big Brim's already on the move with Coral to block them off, get your hineys over here as fast as you can, folks! We're having to start without you! Hang on... wait, I—shit!"

A gunshot sounded loud and clear through the radio, before everything went to static.

Mister Peace lurched back on his single axis and seemed to shake out every weapon he had.

"The call of allies in need of munitions based assistance has rung out! Shall we bring to them the glory of reinforcements and become heroes, Miss Fluttershy?"

The others had turned to listen, I hadn't. I couldn't get it out my head.

Unity... how many times we'd been around one another. My first friend in Filly, even if I hadn't known it.

How could I say anything? That I was...

Was I supposed to feel different? It was just so... so sudden...

Then I heard a resolved, and firm voice ring out.

"We need to get over there, *now*."

It was my voice.

I had realised what mattered. I could see my friends over there, fighting for their lives if things had gone badly as it sounded!

"You heard him! Mount up!" Glimmerlight jumped to her hooves as she shouted.

Mister Peace grabbed each of us in turn, pulling us on to his back. Glimmerlight pulled a pistol from her bag, passing a second to Protégé.

"Hold on, little ponies! Interception protocols activating, speed limiter... disabled."

He leaned forward and I felt the vibrations as his wheel started spinning at a high rate in the mud, digging himself deep before it found the hard earth below. My stomach lurched as he tore off through the FunFarm, streaking past a *very* surprised Whiplash as he skidded out of the gate and surged off down the main roads.

"TALLY HOOOO!"

Behind him as he left, I saw the love-lock swing in place from the rumbling, before coming to a halt amongst the others, its proud declaration facing forward once more.

Fillydelphia flew by faster than I'd ever imagined it could. The wind tore at me, sending my wings flaring out behind me from the air catching them. My lips wobbled if I opened my mouth, as I tried to cling on as best I could while Peace veered, leaned and rocketed down the primary lanes too fast for anypony to really get a gauge on what they'd just seen. We were causing some commotion. I could see slavers running to tell their superiors what had just rolled by at high speed. We had to help them and get out of here quickly before Fillydelphia organised a response.

Soon, I heard gunshots nearby.

"Wondrous battle detected to the south, Miss Fluttershy! Shall we greet them?"

“YES!”

I recognised this street! Feeling my entire body flung to the side as he turned a ninety degree angle, my eyes spotted the ambush up ahead. Slavers were running toward or away around us, depending on their armament. No pony without a gun wanted to be near a firefight.

Up ahead, several wagons were laid out, some of them pulled by griffons. Hang on, why? Without an answer, my heart sank. A griffon in danger would bring the rest *quickly*. They cared for their own and—

“Watch out, Ma’am!”

Peace changed direction rapidly as a shot rebounded off his thick shoulder plate. Slavers were clustered around the wagons, firing at us or into the ruins by the side, near the Ministry. I could see others from the opposite side of the street joining them. Not much fire was coming back from where we’d intended to be, where our friends were stationed just below a huge crane that had somehow survived the balefire.

Our ambush had been *ambushed*!

They’d predicted we’d try for our old kit!

Mister Peace drove straight into thick of it. He curved his path, sending a missile with a surging gout of flame toward the ruins on our right. Streaking like a firework, it detonated inside a top floor window, blowing the whole floor out in an explosion of rubble that shattered out onto the tarmac.

Making a short hop off the ground over a hump in the road to avoid the falling debris, Mister Peace leaned tightly to one side, carrying us past the wagons themselves. Two griffons lay with broken necks. Brimstone’s work?

Bullets chewed into the ground behind them. The cracks of gunfire banging into my ears only after each vicious ping lit up the ground behind or around Mister Peace. Another shot spanked off his middle torso.

“Attain cover! I shall engage them!”

He reversed into the ruins that our friends were in, allowing us a chance to dismount and scurry the supplies into cover before hunkering down ourselves. The incoming fire was met with a deafening *boom* of an anti-machine rifle. From the skies above.

Mister Peace rocked, a portion of his top plating shearing off entirely, exposing the robotics beneath. His right weapon arm rose to the sky, before his gatling cannon shot and lit up the sky with red hot firepower that chased and cut down the heavily armed griffons.

Glimmer and I fled for cover. Pistols were useless here, the slavers had *much* more power to go on. We had to find our friends, see what they had to use with them! We couldn’t just leave Peace to do it alone!

Soon, we stumbled across Sunny crouching down in the top floor of a half collapsed home overlooking the firefight in the street. She had a clear view of the houses at the far side and was sending out shots with her lever action, hoof working it after every shot like a natural before ducking down.

“Glad ta see ya!” she shouted down to us, before huddling more into cover as something firing a rapid burst chewed into the window ledge where she had just seconds ago rested her rifle. “The bastards were waiting! The buildings over there were full of em, maybe a dozen or so plus the half dozen we shot out on the carts! Had griffons pulling, shoulda fucking known when I saw them! Griffons *never* pull.”

“Where’re the others?” I screamed up to her, before having to repeat myself after being

drowned out by Mister Peace's energy weapon unleashing its devastation across the opposite houses.

"Further up! Alleyway between us and them though! Don't even try to cross it. Coral did and almost lost her head to that big automatic they—"

Another whooping bang signalled a second of Peace's missiles firing and impacting with a second noise soon after.

Sunny took a quick glance as the crumbling home across the street lost an entire room.

"Hot damn. Well, they *used* to have one."

"Do we have the stuff?" Glimmerlight took up position opposite Sunny, doing what she could to keep the ponies behind the wagons trapped in the road pinned down with her small pistol.

"Nope. Sorry, couldn't get out, too much fire! Not enough time to hunt before they hit us. Might have to try again, there'll be more coming."

She was right. I could see on the skyline the images of Pinkie Balloons beginning to waft toward us alongside wings of griffons. Those balloon riders carried *heavy* weaponry, even Peace wouldn't stand up to them all if he didn't hit them first. Even then, the griffons...

Even as I spoke, the slavers seemed to realise this. Some of them rushed out of the buildings into the street, unloading a mass of firepower on Peace. The big robot was actually forced into cover, cursing their (presumably made up) names loudly as much as cackling about the unfair odds. The slavers got near to the wagons, seeking to protect them.

"Any idea which one?" Glimmer leaned out and snap shot twice at a slaver, making him squeal and run back to the buildings. Return fire made both of us duck. A round whipped in, hit the decaying roof, rebounded right down past me, and buried itself into the soft wooden floor.

"Front one! Front one!" Sunny swung her lever action out, racking it as she went before putting one through the side of the middle wagon. A scream of pain came from behind it as the powerful round penetrated completely.

A follow up from Mister Peace tore the wagon asunder, sending the rest scurrying around. Up above, three anti-machine rifles unloaded toward him, forcing the machine to go into an evasive circling in the street, before turning back and opening up on the agile griffons. They dove gracefully in the air, separating to make smaller targets than one group.

"Just like Shackles said! Split up, take them!"

The griffon's voice was shocked, they hadn't expected Mister Peace. Yet it betrayed a horrible reality.

Shackles was still there, pre-empting everything I did. He had control of griffon squadrons now... Grindstone had been right, Shackles was on the rise of the ranks again.

That brought a horribly worrying thought. The higher he got, the more resources he had to stop us. Already I could see more slavers at the end of the road, rearmed and approaching again.

This was getting out of hand. We had to retreat.

"Peace! Cover us getting into the sewer!" I shouted, knowing he'd hear *my* voice.

He obeyed, surging through fire, using his body to cover our side as we moved toward the alley and—

Oh no...

I saw the street. With Peace busy protecting us, the last griffon had gotten back in the saddle of the front wagon. The one with our things.

It was *taking off*.

I'd forgotten that's why griffons sometimes went on wagons. They could *fly* materials around Filly if they were needed. A single slaver had gotten in the back wagon, providing the griffon cover to get off the ground.

I'd already given up on getting it for now, but that wasn't what made my heart sink. As the wagon lifted off the ground, passing by the buildings on this side, I saw a pony rush and leap through a window.

Unity.

Diving from an upper floor, she landed on the wagon, tackling the slaver in an effort to try and force the entire thing down. Was she crazy!?

As I watched, the wagon kept going, lifting higher... higher... out of all of our reaches. I could see my friends rushing to the sewers behind me. Sunny leapt down as an energy weapon sparked and set the dry timber into an instant flame that started to spread around the house.

We could escape.

Yet... Unity...

I tried to shout to everypony, but Brim, Coral and Sunny were out of reach. Only Glimmer and Protégé were still close enough, behind a desperately firing Mister Peace, trying to hold half a growing mass of guards by himself. He was making them reluctant to push in here.

No... *no*.

Beyond the flames burning in the house, I could see the wagon lifting up, like the hot fire sending scraps of paper floating on its heat off into the sky. I was watching her carried away in her brave attempt to rescue our only chance amongst this madness.

After all this I just... I just...

There was a moment, right then and there... that I felt something *click*.

My eyes refocused, watching the flames. Watching the paper. Anything light above it would rise...

It would *lift*...

A trembling came through me.

Looking upwards, I saw the construct right above this area... the crane.

With that, I made my decision... and galloped in the opposite direction.

Behind me, I heard Protégé and Glimmer shout to me. I simply took off, barging through the flimsy rotten wood surrounding the crane base. The shallow stairs ran in a spiral to raise up and toward the top, where operators would climb to work. Tall and thin, it led out to a huge crossbeam that loomed above me.

"Murky!? What are you doing? We have to get away and try to find where that wagon comes down!"

I stopped, glanced at them and just shook my head...

"We won't..."

I galloped off up the stairs. With a cry, Protégé leapt forward, chasing me up.

Round and round I climbed. The vertigo hitting me was intense as I saw the rooftops fall away, as I felt the wind make the crane sway and creak below me. Yet I didn't let myself stop. No, *now was different*.

The wind began to pick up as I went higher. The heat of the city ebbing away.

After all that had happened, had been revealed, I wasn't going to let Fillydelphia beat me

again. Not this time. Not for her. She had saved me in so many ways and was *still* trying to save us by getting that orb.

I couldn't abandon her, not knowing what I knew now.

I came to the top, near the cab. A rusted platform that led past a set of controls to the huge beam. The moment I came to a stop, I felt Protégé leap on me from behind. Not an attack, but making sure I didn't move any further.

"Murk, stop! What are you thinking of *doing*!?"

Turning, I got my distance, casting him possibly the most mature expression I think I'd... well... ever made.

"I'm not letting this happen."

The look on his face turned from worry to... to a more personal concern. He shifted closer, speaking very precisely and quickly.

"Listen, Murk... you're right!" He spoke quickly, a hoof on my shoulder, another on his chest. "I *have* been lost... so let me do this for you. Come *with* me! Act as my assistant again, we can get in and find her *my* way! Don't think I don't realise what you're planning... please, don't test this..."

I stared at him, before letting my head turn slowly. The wagon was moving slowly, swaying as something disturbed it... I could see it banking around. Below us came the sounds of fighting dying down... they hadn't seen us come up here. The others had escaped. Mister Peace was escorting them back into the sewers.

My gaze turned back to Protégé.

"You would do that?" I spoke while shaking my head. "You would fall right back into the same routine... just to try and make things right..."

"Murk, it's the safe way! The *right* way..."

"You want to go back to the way everything was. What are you even going to *do*!?"

I tried to move away from him, but his hoof held me back, I fought it, a brief struggle. Eventually, he let me go.

"You're going to *kill yourself*, Murk! YES! I'm going to go back to it! I have to! I have to try and stop all this! To help M—"

"Your master?" I interrupted. "And that makes you happy?"

"Murk, listen to me..."

"No..." I didn't shout it. There was a brief pause, up so high. The wind howled between us. "I know... you mean well. I know you have your things, but I can't do that anymore. Not after knowing what I know. After going through what I have and all it's cost me. I'm not going to play by the rules of Fillydelphia any longer."

That shiver had returned. Again.

I realised what it was.

Anticipation.

"Murk..."

"Come with us, Protégé. Stick with Glimmer, she'll get you away. We can get out of here."

I laid a hoof on either of his shoulders.

"Together."

I couldn't delay longer, but I had to ask him. Yet as I looked in his eyes I only saw fear, before he shook his head and slowly pushed my hooves away.

"I'm sorry..." I felt unbearably sad for him. All I'd wanted to hear was him say he'd drop

all this madness. Yet I couldn't force him. "If that's what you choose then, I hope it's what you want in the end. This place will only bring evil. It's all it's ever done, just breaking down good intentions."

Behind him, the sound of hooves on metal gave way to an exhausted Glimmer joining us. She saw me standing there, near where the beam of the crane would go out. Saw the wind catching me and making my wings flutter.

She knew what was going through my mind.

As Protégé slowly stepped back, I turned and strode up onto the beam itself, snapping my goggles down.

My sister looked up at me, seeing me standing above them both.

"You're standing tall at last, lil'bro..."

She smiled sweetly. Her face hardened a little, around a grin.

Glimmerlight trusted me. She *believed* in me.

"Go get her."

I took a deep breath, before sweeping around on my hooves, facing away from them toward the beam.

There, I felt a rush of clarity.

Limits... walls... chains...

They'd always been there.

Now before me I saw something else.

Open sky.

I could choose. I could go and do this.

Trembling, I closed my eyes briefly, I could remember her letter. Only now did I know what it meant. The true meaning this time.

"When the time comes to make a choice, whether to leap or not... you'll know what to do."

I *did*.

Galloping forward, I ran down the beam of the crane. Passing out above Fillydelphia at such a height that it all felt so small. Ponies were like specks below between the numerous smoke stacks. I could almost see above the Wall itself. The whole city sprawled in every direction.

So I *ran*. I ran and ran, speeding up as I surged forward. I felt the wind pick up. My wings flared to either side as I saw the end of the beam approaching. Spreading their feathers and feeling every prick and twist of the air. A natural feeling, a *pegasus* feeling. For the first time in my life I felt *like* what I *was*!

I could do this.

I could do this!

I leapt.

My heart in my mouth, I left the edge of the beam into the open sky.

My wings caught the air, as I felt every bastion of safety disappear and leave me to the mercy of the winds. My eyes were locked on the wagon, a few hundred metres away. I swept forward, letting the air rush by me as my momentum carried me forward, gliding in a downward arc. The world began to move beneath me, the ground shifting faster and faster as the air tore at every part of me and swept past my wings in a shockingly firm way. I realised my legs were tucked in neatly, in a way I'd never thought about. *Instinct* had driven it!

I was *so high up*. Every inch of me was shaking with the clenched horror of how far from

the safe ground I was. Shivering as much in fear as elation and wonder. The winds were so strong up here. The temperature so much colder. The feeling of isolation so great. Just me and the sky.

Elation and terror hurtled through my heart as I *sped* downward, angling toward the ground as I picked up speed more and more! Piercing through a pillar of smoke, I felt my wings aching with the strain being put on them. My height was lowering, my speed increasing tremendously, but I was still so *high!* The ground was so far away, making me breathe rapidly every time I thought about the distance I was flying over the city that had defined my *life*. Surging on my wings as they carried me forward until I was going faster than even Peace had been through Fillydelphia with street after street I'd have trudged through disappearing one after the other.

Yet always losing height.

But this time, before me, I saw my goal. My inspired plan.

Between me and the wagon that was arcing in the air across this part of the city there lay a massive funnel above the smelting pits. I could see the air shimmering, thick with heat.

I was the paper. it was the fire.

The moment my flightpath broke the edge of the funnel, I felt my wings *yank* me upwards in the rising warm air! Under my body as well, the burning heat prickled and stung my skin, but the adrenaline set me to cry in excitement as I felt myself *lift!*

LIFT!

With a growing roar of passing air in my ear, I *soared* upwards! My whole body angling toward the skies as I gained altitude and hurtled back upwards again! The rush it gave me was beyond anything. Beyond any drawing, any theft. I felt a sheer pleasure as the rising heat sent me flying out toward the wagon. I swept past a Pinkie balloon and its grinning face to see the full vista of the city below.

From up here, I could see it all. The rows and rows of ruined buildings punctuated by industry pulling out before me. The red and grey streaks of concrete and metal rising and falling with the glint of flames through it like staring into the coals of a campfire. A moment of cold clarity shot through me at where I was, away from the furnace below. How terrible and yet beautiful it felt to a pony who'd never flown before...

Within this mighty vista, flying below me, was the wagon.

I could see Unity in the back of it! She was grappling with the slaver, trying to hit him with something! The griffon in front was banking to either side. Squinting my eyes as I fought to concentrate and stay level, I tried to read where they'd go and let myself bank to the side. The motion tipped me over, throwing my balance off as the *whole world* inverted and I spiralled twice to the side before catching myself. I was at least going in the same direction as the wagon now, I just had to get closer!

My wings were so very sore, not used to this sort of use out of nowhere, but I felt elated enough to ignore it as I pursued the mare who'd helped me get through this city from the very start. Pulling my wings in; I dove and sent myself hurtling toward them. I saw the wagon turn, bringing it toward me! In it, I saw Unity's eyes go wide for a moment.

She'd seen me.

Seen me *flying*.

A sudden rush of air hit me from below. I'd stumbled over another chimney where the hot air blasted me off course. Crying out, breathing hard, I tried to correct myself, feeling very out of control for all the wonder of this first flight. Everything felt imbalanced, every

hard surface felt like a potential death and the worry over getting *down* was plaguing my every thought. Only getting to the *wagon* was keeping me from freaking out in worry by now.

The wagon was slowly turning to the left, toward the abandoned quarter of the city. I could see Unity and the slaver's fight in the back were throwing off the griffon's flightpath with the rocking and sudden shifts in weight. I tried to turn that way, more softly letting myself spin to the side, before I felt a more controlled turn go with me.

Yes... yes, this I how to do it!

Suddenly, I was above the wagon again. The second jet of heat had pushed me way above it. I was headed in the same direction, but the griffon could change direction more fluidly ahead of me. I was approaching it too fast! The wagon was coming up too rapidly! I was too wide! I was going to miss it!

The griffon suddenly changed course. I saw the slaver suddenly snap back as Unity cracked him in the head with something. The weight of an unconscious pony falling onto the side sent the whole wagon twisting beyond what the griffon could correct. It sharply banked to the right again as I saw Unity grasping for a hold to avoid being thrown out.

I didn't have a choice. I hurled myself in that direction, spinning right around once in a stomach upsetting aerial tumble, almost feeling my wings lose their posture.

Then I saw the truth: I was going to miss. I had turned too sharply, I was going to fly past it and I'd *never* be able to turn well enough to get it again. I was so close! A moment of clarity as I saw Unity in the back, shouting something I couldn't hear over the rush of the wind to me. She had the saddlebags in her hooves.

She jumped.

The brief moment of realising that Unity was secretly *insane* was quickly overridden by the will to toss out my hooves and try to grab her.

There was a moment, a picture still moment, as she was diving from the out of control wagon, one hoof outstretched toward me and the other clutching the precious bag as I stretched to reach her from my flightpath. A moment where we both saw the fear on each other's faces.

Then I felt the warmth of another grasp hold of my hoof.

The weight tore me from the sky.

Unity was a small unicorn, but her extra body weight swung down and made me drop vertically. I spun, pulling her in toward my belly as I used my spin to wrap ourselves around one another. I heard us both screaming.

I couldn't see anything as we tumbled over and over, falling toward the ground from the air, from red to black over and over. My wings kept getting thrown out of position! I didn't know how to place them to recover from a falling spin!

I decided to just let go of my thoughts. Let instinct carry me. It had carried me this far.

Clutching Unity in tight, I tried to settle my panicked movements, and spread my wings with a cry of pain. The wind roared into them, and I held them as steady as I could. My body was being spun diagonally downward. I still had *some* forward momentum... I had to use it!

Throwing myself in the opposite direction of my spin, I felt *something* rebalance as the wind snatched us. We were still falling, but the glide was arcing out, becoming shallower and faster the further we went on.

"Can you *land!*?" Unity shouted into my ear, unnecessarily loud.

"I... I... you jumped! *You jumped!*"

"NOT THE ISSUE!" Unity broke all her quiet personality to scream it as we hurtled across Fillydelphia's skyline. The tops of the hard buildings were getting worryingly close. We passed between two smoke stacks.

I tried to spot any sort of rising heat! Anything to get some height again! There were some, but I couldn't resist the speed we were moving at to turn into them, not with a passenger. If I tried too hard the winds and air around me felt like they'd throw me out of control into the ground.

"Move left! MOVE LEFT!" Unity shouted again and I did as she asked, trying to curve us left as we almost collided with a scaffold structure. Slavers looked up in abject shock at what just soared past them.

Unity was doing something below me, trying to pull something out. I felt something poke my belly, something metal and hooked. I couldn't turn my head that far down to look, only hold on to her as she prepared whatever it was. I—WOAH!

I felt a sudden surge as we hit a wall of hot air. Burning pits below us cast a stench through my nostrils even as the heated air angled me upwards. I tried to spread out, with my wings wide, aiming to use it like a thicker bit of air to slow down. Briefly, the worry occurred that if I went too slow, we'd simply fall out the sky! Fast or slow? Where was the right amount? I didn't know!

"Get near to something, Murky! Now!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the tall square chimney of the refinery. I used the brief reprieve of height to arc toward it. I must have travelled halfway across Fillydelphia.

The building got closer... the ground got nearer...

"Unity...?"

There was no more heat around to get back up.

"*Unity!*"

Below me, I felt a sudden whoosh of air as something flew away. I saw my grapple's hook fire out and embed into the chimney.

After a few moments, the rope was pulled taut. I felt my momentum simply *end*. It took all the strength I had to hold on to Unity as she did the same around me. We both screamed like foals as we wound around the chimney again and again. The rough surface came closer, and I felt the metal of my saddle strike off it. A bright orange spark flew over it. We skidded off the wall a few times, knocking us around and around, but slowing us until I felt my back hit the wall and slide down it, slowly letting out the rope.

Close enough to the ground, it slipped from her grasp... and we fell.

The old wooden roof of an abandoned hut shattered below us, before I felt myself almost knocked entirely out by the final landing.

Then, under falling shards of wood and the heavy thumping of two hearts squeezed together, all was still.

Flying...

I'd... been flying...

I could feel somepony beside me, groaning and turning under one of my hooves.

My dizzied thoughts slowly collected, finding us lying in a dark hut, staring up at the clouds.

Wood fell around us slowly. Dust rose. The pain settled into my whole body.

The roar of the air was gone. The exhilaration replaced by a quickly dying high of fear,

satisfaction and panic. My chest was thumping.

Yet all I could do was laugh.

I laughed loud. I laughed long. Of happiness. Of success. Even as I felt Unity quickly pull her bruised body over to me in worry, I simply laughed. I thrust my sore hooves to the air.

“You told me what I needed! You *told* me! To taste freedom!”

The very first thing Protégé had ever told me to get. Up there, able to go anywhere, do my own thing, make the choice to leap! I’d done it! Felt what it was like! To be truly at my own mercy, soaring free on the winds of the world! I... I knew! *I knew!*

I punched the air again and again, before simply grabbing Unity and squeezing her tight. I felt her return the favour.

“Murky... I... wow...”

“I tasted it! Freedom!”

I screamed it to the sky, an elation, a *revelation* like no other!

“I know what it feels like!”

The Apprentice's Downfall

“What was it like to fly for the first time?”

Sometimes, I really wish I was a pony that knew lots of fancy words to say it in a better way.

“Don’t worry, just try. I’m sure it’ll come to you.”

It... it was just a completely new feeling. Like my mind didn’t even accept that what I saw was reality. Lots of ponies say something really incredible feels like a dream but... well, that actually did. Maybe it was all the air rushing into my mouth making me dizzy, but everything just felt so fantastical and full of happiness to even be up there.

It felt like freedom.

Like, um, like I could go in any direction I willed! No pony could tell me otherwise because no pony else was there! Nothing but me, the crisp winds, and the choice to go wherever I wanted. You see, on the ground there’s streets and walls blocking you, but up there it’s all empty. Just a boundless expanse. Flying is like the ultimate freedom, and at last, I had finally known how much of a massive rush that feeling could be.

Sure, we all wanted out, but my friends had all once lived free. They knew what that was like from memory. Now I joined them in knowing. I understood what drove them to seek an escape without needing the same helpful shove that I did.

“Fantastical? Boundless expanse? Hah, you’re more poetic than you think you are, Murky. Must be the artist in you. You tell it almost fairytale-like, really.”

It is?

“Your first taste of freedom, to save your first friend. Both these things discovered in the same day. How could that not be something magical?”

Oh... yeah. Unity.

As much as flying was a delight to my mind, I really was still reeling from that one. I felt

so stupid, so ignorant, not to have known how important she was to me when I first met her. Or... met her again. It was confusing.

I didn't feel a sudden rush of attachment. There wasn't any sudden mental snap and glorious remembering of every moment, nor a returning emotional outburst between us. Our memories had been desperately stripped by our own actions and they remained so. Just because we knew what had happened didn't mean we remembered the feelings as normal ponies would. That made things a little more difficult to explain and to comprehend.

We were friends. Yet it was like being told by life itself that we were supposed to be deeper friends than we'd ever thought or known without feeling anything different in the *present*. Imagine somepony told you to just 'like someone more' right out of the blue. That's what it felt like.

Were we still the same ponies as back then? We'd both changed so much over time. My first flight alone spoke volumes of that. Now we were left together after landing with a moment for me to try and explain this all to her.

I'm sorry, I'm stammering at random here. It's just so confusing.

"Take your time."

Unity had said she loved her buck from before. Had we really been more than friends? Was it just something below the surface that had gone unspoken before, and only came to mind because her subconscious was all that remembered anything? Had it all been misinterpreted in the memory removal and there was nothing more?

I'd learned what it was to fly and be free. But learning to deal with a lost part of my life in the blur of Fillydelphia's nightmares would take a little longer. At the very least, it was a positive and happy thing. We were reunited. I had to tell myself to keep focusing on the upbeat side of it. *We knew the truth.*

No matter what confusion it caused us, whatever came at the end or whatever we were before, I cared for her and I knew she did for me. A burden had been lifted, and while I was still in shock, I couldn't deny a certain part of me that had longed for somepony for so long suddenly felt contented. A weight on my shoulders I now recognised as the responsibility I'd felt every time I was near her. I knew she felt the same way. Unity had dragged me out of danger just as many times.

Now we'd just have to focus on getting out of the city. We'd sworn 'together or not at all' once before, even if I hadn't known it.

Well, we were together again.

"So that was another big check off the list then, huh? Unity's issue sorted. Supplies found. Sunny was back with you. You had the orb to activate Ministry Station. Just the foals to go, isn't it? This is one long tale you've told. Surely this is it. This is where it starts to end."

Yes. It is, but not exactly in one sweeping motion. We still had to find a way into the Station again. We *could* risk the outer metro and the asylum, but no pony really wanted to use that route again. Not with foals and such a large group. It was at the centre of a nexus of conspiracy though—

"Told you, poetic."

I, um, s-sure? Whatever, I knew there had to be other ways. Glimmer knew too and was working on it when she could. There were complications to come, some huge. Yet even before they happened there was one big issue. That was Protégé.

He'd gone back to Red Eye's regime in an attempt to stop the madness that was unfolding in every slave den and work pit. An enemy was descending, and before the next day was out

I would see them with my own eyes. Terrible news was due to arrive just before them, and Shackles' play for power was accelerating with every hour to take advantage of it.

Protégé was alone amongst all that. One pony trying to stand against a city that was, without its great leader, now beginning to change for the worse. They'd labelled him a traitor, he had enemies at every level. He had no proof, and no pony to help him from within.

He was being more idealistic than he would care to admit, to even dare walk into that lion's den. I desperately wanted him to come with us. I wanted to show him the same thing he'd told me to find for myself. Help him find his freedom! As far as I could see, he was a slave to the core and he needed my help. I just needed to talk to him. Get through and let him realise that he could say it. He could ask to come with us and I would let him.

"You wanted to help the stallion who'd fought you on a mountain, shot at you, and tried to stop your only chance to escape?"

Only because he'd been ordered to! He was still trapped in the same way I had spent years!

Now his *orders* and the ideals he felt he *had* to adhere to were dragging him back into a slave city that was ready to pounce on him in his moment of weakness. He was already set to answer for things he'd done with the best intentions, but they weren't going to let that be all. They wanted to throw him down and destroy him before all others. Celestia help me, I felt *sorry* for him! I wanted to help him find a better life more fitting of who he was inside.

Yet this day, after he strode back to Fillydelphia's authority in the face of things ready to crush his dreams and harm him in ways perhaps only I could understand, he would have to do something he'd never had to do in his life before by the end of it.

Make a choice.

Unity and I scampered across the street as the large fuel wagon convoy passed, sticking to the cover of the foul tasting dust it kicked up from the road. I had to hold my breath as the hot particles tickled at my throat and nose. It mixed with the smog in the air. It was thick in this part of Fillydelphia, drifting heavy in the air from the surrounding refineries and radiation engine outlets. The buzzing hum of intense power at work filled the air with an unsettling vibration that shimmered in the heat around us, offering background noise to make our escape. As Unity and I rolled off the tarmac into the ditch at the opposite side, I had to hold my mouth to the inside of a leg to stifle a harsh cough.

The ground was such a very filthy place. Nothing like up there. My eyes found themselves wandering toward the cloud cover, searching for any little hole away from the clammy ambience of the ground.

"Murky, in here!" Unity hissed from nearby as she gently pressed open a loose wooden door to an abandoned security gate station. One side of it had been charred to a near pitch and gleaming black.

Keeping low to the ground to evade the watchful eyes on the creaking walkways above, I followed the cream mare inside before bucking the metal rimmed door closed behind me.

It had taken us over an hour to get out of the refinery we'd landed in. Over an hour of hiding in rank waste rooms, sneaking behind thick smoke clouds, and squeezing through tiny holes of the surrounding walls. Now we were moving through the plant's outer areas to

try and join the main thoroughfare of Fillyldelphia where we could hopefully locate a sewer line to reunite with the others. For now though, we had to stop. Until the shift change the roads were too barren to use, and frankly, we were exhausted and sore after the landing. (Yes, landing. I was going to call it as such and that was final, even if Unity disagreed.)

Inside, I was surprised to find the lights still active on the upper floor. After we trotted upstairs, we found a long broken window overlooking the roads in and out of the refinery above a panel long stripped of its circuitry. I presumed they'd once been for alarm buttons and gate switches, yet now there only existed an empty hole where the controls had once been. While musty and humid, it was a good hiding place. We could see over the fences into the pathways outside while being able to bunker down in and rest for a while. Stripping the worn and only slightly moth-eaten cushions from the guard chairs gave us something to sit on too.

Finally, for the first time since we'd landed, the pair of us fell back against the wall and closed our eyes. We didn't speak, instead just taking a moment to get our breath back after the mad rush of activity in the last couple hours.

Outside, I could hear bands of Red Eye's soldiers marching past, their hooves sending a slight shiver through the ground. By the sounds of what they were saying, they'd been collecting fuel for flamethrowers and fire traps. If I peeked over the edge, I could see a thick mass of the clumsy Pinkie balloons as the city's reserves launched to keep a wary eye on the skies around Filly. Even in the distance, the Wall's high walkways at the top looked more crowded than usual. There was a fever of activity starting up in the city.

As I sat back down, I found Unity looking at the empty orb from the mountain. It glittered, sending sparkles of magical light around its core, and even seeming to drift off it in Unity's magic. The red glow of her telekinesis set the orb twinkling with various other colours too. It never seemed to settle on one colour, always just 'off white' with some shades I couldn't bring my eyes to focus on. It never settled on one solid shade, always drifting between the colours of the rainbow with a white crystal tinge. Unity's wide eyes gleamed as they reflected the non-specific colours, before turning to me.

"What did you see?"

"War." I muttered quietly, despite knowing I had no experience to state what that was or wasn't, "Protégé told me about it. The Enclave is coming."

"The nation of pegasi?" Unity seemed disbelieving. "They're just legends. Myths."

"Well, I'm here, so pegasi have to exist," I pushed a smile onto my face, "After all, I did just take off and land. That sort of proves we can really fly. What's so hard about believing they live up there to get away from all this?"

Unity snorted in laughter. "Land? No, Murky, we crashed."

"That was completely a landing!" I protested with an outstretched hoof.

"Well then I'd hate to see you crashing." She stuck her tongue out. "You crashed."

The nerve of her! Just cos I fell on my back screaming after she'd had to save us from really crashing didn't mean it was a... a crash. Maybe a heavy landing. Yes, that was it! Murky logic wins again!

Unity laid back against the wall again with a chuckle. She must have seen the insulted look on my face. I'd show her a landing someday, prove I could. But till then, I figured I'd rest off the cra-heavy landing. I settled down beside her, head on the stone wall as I tried to tune out the sounds of army leaders' shouting to their troops and the distant crack of firing ranges all around the city.

Sharing brief moments of humour with a friend in this city. It almost felt out of place after everything I'd come to think of it. Orders, pain, humiliation, and crying. This was a world away despite being in the exact same place. Friends really did make all the difference. I didn't want to lose this.

It was then that I realised I still had to tell Unity about what Glimmer had discovered.

Suddenly, the fear and worry settled in. Peeking an eye open, I saw Unity lying with her head resting on the edge of the security station's dashboard, seemingly sleeping. Only her eye suddenly opening reminded me she—

I pulled my head away. Instantly trying to 'unlook' at her, trying to appear as though I'd just been searching all around the whole room.

"What is it? Did you hear something?" She asked quietly, clearly tensing up as she brushed a lock of her wavy mane from an eye.

"No, no. Just... no, nothing."

A voice inside was screaming, 'Just tell her!' It pushed my mouth to open and say something, put my trust in Unity being the good pony she was, to not think I was insane, yet it simply felt dry and thick, unable to form proper words. What if she thought I was trying to exploit it? No, I had proof on me, and back with Glimmer. Then why not wait till then? Yes, wait. Give myself time to think on it and—

"Murky, what's wrong? You're sweating. I know you well enough to know when you're worried."

She got up, shifting her cushion closer and gently turning my face toward hers. It was hard to really look at her. I knew this mare more than I... well, *knew her*. Or did I? Why didn't I feel like I knew her more then? I was still seeing the mystery mare I'd met for the first time just before the Pit. My mind knew the truth but it didn't *feel* any different.

Of course, I didn't remember. Knowing the truth and *remembering* those days were two very separate things.

Instead, I tried smiling. Immediately, I saw her expression soften as I shook my head and lay back against the wall, trying to think of what to say. Quaking, my chest tightened in worry, the thick mass inside me thumping and burning as I felt my windpipe tighten. Turning away, I coughed harshly, my lungs surging in pain as my bone-dry throat clenched.

"Murky?" Unity's hoof rested on my back.

Waving a hoof behind myself at her, I shook my head. I was okay. I had RadAway back at the pumping station. I'd been in a reprieve with access to RadAway lately, but I knew how quickly these tainted lungs could turn nasty. The mountain had proven that. I was still badly sick, merely treating the symptoms, not the ever-growing disease inside. I would be out of here soon, get proper help somehow. I'd beat this. So long as I didn't have to stay in here.

"Just a-a lot of things going on, worried for what's going to happen. Excited that I..."

"That you *flew*." She broke into a wide smile as her hoof wrapped around mine and helped me back up. "I couldn't believe my eyes up there. Seeing you sweep in on the winds, wings spread and those goggles on like a real pegasus. I can't tell you how happy I am for you."

Unity's hoof came down on top of her other one, squeezing mine between the two. I did the same, until we both broke down in a fit of excited giggles, mine fighting to not choke and splutter again. Talking over one another, the moment finally settled in.

"I... I just... it was incredible!"

"Up *that* high!"

"When we went between those smoke stacks?"

"And soaring so fast in a dive!"

Really, I couldn't help but laugh. The emotions from those minutes in the air were still surging too strongly, and for the first time since coming down, they really returned in full. I'd been too concentrated on escaping the refinery to really think about it.

Now however, I felt the shivers returning. The great big grin of excitement and unbridled joy. I'd felt free. Oh so free, like I could do anything.

Like I could... do anything.

If I could do *that*, I could tell her this.

I got up, twisting around to sit in front of Unity. My wings flapped out a little, stretching as I moved away from the wall. The pain in them as the sore muscles worked actually felt good. A satisfying ache of post-exercise success. I swallowed deeply, biting my lip, before me she sat upright and looked a little confused. She was asking questions inside her head. Why had I moved away a little? Why was I looking nervous and happy at the same time? Why was I gripping her hooves tighter? I could read her face like a book.

"Unity... I... it's..."

I felt like my lip was about to draw blood.

"...me."

Her eyes betrayed the confusion immediately. Oh right, no subject, didn't say what I *was*. I wanted to pull away, frantically make an excuse up.

"The one y-you're looking for, it's really confusing and sorry, I didn't mean to just say it but I didn't know how and... it's me and I don't even know because I didn't know and I want to try to tell you but I don't know and..."

I took a breath, screwing my eyes shut in anxiety and praying I did everything right. So I did my best, and told it to her face, trying not to let my voice break as I said the words.

"I'm the buck you were looking for... and you were the mare I'd been dreaming of trying to find."

Unity didn't say anything, her eyes just widened, almost in denial or finding it too absurd. So I quickly spoke again, explaining the rest.

I wasn't the greatest type to talk about it. Really, I just stammered, blushed, and backtracked my way through it. I told different bits in the wrong order, and showed her my journal long before it should have been relevant to explaining things. I had to fight to stop myself from letting a few tears slip out as I felt it all well up inside me.

Yet through it all, she just listened. A look of shock and confusion maybe, but she never interrupted or accused me of anything. It took me a few minutes before I figured out why. Unity was in the same boat as I was. She trusted me more than her heart knew. If I'd heard this from her, I might have reacted the same way.

Only as things reached the end, only as I told her my full name did I see the worry set into her eyes. She knew the initials on that love lock. She knew I couldn't read well to have known back then.

She trusted that I wouldn't lie to her.

Then there was the horrid silence. The moment after I realised I had no more to say and stopped speaking. We just stared at one another. Unity was shivering on the spot, holding herself up against the wall to stay steady. I just sat still, one hoof wrapped over the other and almost bleeding from the lip at biting it in nervousness.

"I..." Unity started to speak, before faltering and shaking her head, "I just-sorry I can't..."

1..."

What was I meant to say? I really didn't know. My mouth opened a few times, my hoof tried to move and gesture, but I just fell short every time.

Suddenly, she shook her head hard. "I just... I need some air, I need *air!*"

Unity got up and galloped past me, half-limping after the crash, as she headed for the stairs to the roof. Her head was down, her magic still carrying my journal with her after I'd hoofed it to her. Briefly, I saw her face look wet, two trails seeping through the dirt and filth any slave in Fillydelphia had. Hooves clattering on the creaky wood, she disappeared upstairs before I could even raise my courage to say or move at all.

"Unity! *Unity, wait!*"

The roof was visible from the outside! We were higher up! Likely out of sight, but it was a risk! I got up and hastily followed her. I could feel the aches setting in as I started on the stairs, my back between my wings especially. Tripping twice, I more fell onto the roof than stepped. It was surrounded by a high parapet for armed guards to watch from, easing my worries a little about being seen. Looking frantically around, I spotted Unity with her back against the lip, breathing hard with her hooves covering her face. She was crying.

Suddenly, I felt very guilty indeed.

"What is *wrong* with this forsaken city!?" Unity spluttered to herself, her head shaking into her hooves. "How can things like this j-just *happen*? Why does it have to? I just wish I could have stayed in Friendship City that day, not gone out and gotten taken away! If I'd stayed in I'd still be with my family and not all this, doing things I don't understand! This is just... my life is... *I don't even know anymore!*"

The journal lay open by her side, showing the same image I had first seen. I wish I felt like the same pony that was cuddled up to her in that drawing, but I wasn't.

Slowly, I approached. Partly to not rush her, but also because I needed time to think of what to say. My own eyes felt swollen and sore, and my breath ragged. Eventually, I just sat nearby.

"I'm sorry, Unity." I spoke quietly, not looking at her. "Sorry that... that this all had to happen. Fillydelphia is..."

Is evil? A nightmare? A blight on this world to cause horrors within that forever hurt you deeper than simple pain and hunger ever could? What other place could have caused such a thing to happen? To put two ponies in this position?

I didn't even finish the sentence. Instead I just watched as she got up and paced indecisively in circles. She was avoiding looking at me, instead just letting her eyes look across the hell of Fillydelphia on all sides. The crude refinery, the glow of the crater, the restraint of the closest wall from life outside, the jagged mountain peak above it.

Slavery and memory. The two things Fillydelphia had been hurting ponies with since long before the balefire, and for centuries after it; only growing more foul with every generation nestled within its cruel heart. We were no different, merely the latest ponies to have fallen prey to it.

I put my head down, feeling something trickling down my cheek, and I felt all too young and meek again. Like I was about to just break down like I used to.

"Murky?" Unity's voice was quiet. Her hooves ceased moving. Her face turned to me, red and wet across her cheeks. "Who are we?"

I forced myself to my hooves. I couldn't sit and look for sympathy here. We were *both* in this.

"I don't remember." I spoke quietly, not quite looking eye-to-eye with her. "I know who. I just don't remember that time after I was brought here."

It hurt me to look at her. For the first time I saw her not as a fellow slave, but as the pony she should be. Just a young learner from Friendship City who got pulled away from her life and cast into this pit. The filth that covered her body was wrong. Her mane that should have looked wonderful was bedraggled and twisted. I could see who she *could* be. A bright, optimistic, and wonderfully heartfelt pony with a beautiful talent for friendship through memory. Somepony I would look to and know I wanted to be around them like I did all the others. She was—

A few breaths shuddered through me as I looked more directly at her. "B-but I know one thing? I know who *you* are."

I swallowed.

"You're my friend. No matter w-what."

I raised a hoof as I said it. A small gesture, but one I saw her eyes follow as I lightly placed it over my heart.

"And I want us to both get out of here. Forever."

I couldn't really hold it in any longer. I let my own sobbing take hold as I looked away and covered my eyes with my raised hoof.

For a moment, I thought Unity was about to collapse in emotion, but instead she cantered and then almost leapt forward. Her hooves squeezed me tightly, as did mine to her. Both of us had been about ready to lose it without somepony else there. Even within the hot metal stench of the production quarter, the warmth of a friend is something entirely different.

Atop that rooftop, in the middle of slavery, even as the horn for the shift change sounded and the processions of ponies trapped in here with us began to march to the rhythm of forced industry, we simply held each other tightly. Muzzle to shoulder on both sides. There was no individual comforting. It was mutual. Not loving, just an act of caring. One little island of peace.

"Murky... I don't know what's happening. I don't know what we are. Who we really are, other than what we know. I don't care about the past and if whatever we were before ever happens again."

Her voice sounded frail, but at least she could put words together. Something far beyond me at this moment.

"All I know is you're my friend too a-and we'll... we'll figure it out. Together."

I sniffed and squeezed tighter.

"Together, or not at all."

There were perhaps very few ponies in Equestrian history quite as glad as the two of us to see a sewer pumping station in all its filthy glory. After a couple hours making slow progress over the entire city, we wearily trotted through the rancid gunk coating the tunnel floor into that familiar area of our hideout with borrowed clothes around our mouths to block out the smell.

There'd been a couple close calls as we made our way over roads, with how thick the city was with activity. It was as much a blessing as a curse. It meant more processions of filthy

and hobbling slaves we could blend in with, but it also meant more slavers. They were on edge, red-eyed gas masks peering down at everypony they saw from platforms above the roads. The tension in the air was thick, driven on by the presence of fully-armed soldiers waiting at many corners with shining, new weapons mismatching against their individually unique and scavenged barding. Some of my older routes to sneak through weren't available anymore, as Red Eye's army was taking over abandoned buildings to construct anti-air batteries on their rooftops. Quad barrels or long, thick cannons protruded from edges, all angled toward the main gate.

End result, we were physically tired, mentally frustrated, and emotionally exhausted by the time we made our way through it. I just wanted to collapse and let my mind shut down for a while. Yet at the very least, the journey had given us something to focus on other than the awkward glances and half-sentences to one another. Friends or not, this wasn't easy.

Regardless, I couldn't help but feel relief at the first face we met in the tunnels outside the station.

"Hey, kids!"

Nonchalant, Glimmer looked up and smiled from the platform above us, just beside the stairwell leading to it and our hideaway. That effortless and confident smirk was just enough to help me feel more at ease. Big sis was here, that meant it'd all be fine.

I sped up a little, trotting up the stairs to meet her embrace, hugging tightly into her shoulder. I actually squeaked when she crushed me in return.

"I'm so proud of you, lil'bro. I watched you from that crane. Saw you soar."

"It—ack!" I was cut short as the wind went out from my lungs again. Coughing and gagging, I backed off as Glimmer let me go and gave me a thick slap on the back. I went rigid as my sore wing muscles jerked and sent my wings jerking around stiffly.

"It was *incredible*. Just relieved you two are okay, I couldn't see where you landed."

Unity followed me up, coming alongside my sis and I with a small grin.

"Well, actually—"

I cut in. "We landed near the—"

"—we crashed off the—"

She and I found ourselves looking at each other with narrowed eyes. Off to the side, I could hear Glimmer's unrestrained howl of laughter.

"Oh, you two are too much, sometimes." Glimmer wiped her eyes before fixing me with a look. Its meaning was clear.

Have you told her yet?

Hesitantly, I made a couple of tiny nods.

"Quite the couple, so I hear." She teased carefully, looking over at Unity before slowly pulling her in for a hug of her own. "I know this must be hard. I'm here for you too, okay?"

"Hugs like this do kinda help." Unity joked, before making a small sniff and squeezing my sister tighter, "We talked it out a bit."

"And? How do you two feel?"

Glimmer sat down between us, a leg over each of our shoulders to hug both of us in to her sides. With Glimmer there, somepony more mature and confident than both of us, things felt a little more stable to talk, so we took a moment to stumble and stammer over what we'd discussed on that building's roof.

"Well, we decided that we wanted to, um..." I stammered, before Unity finished for me.

"We wanted to figure it out together. As the friends we became again."

Glimmerlight squeezed both of us tightly. I could have sworn I heard her go ‘Aww.’

“Then you both made the right choice. Now, you two know what I’m like. I’ll joke, I’ll tease, but I’ll not ever push either of you for real, okay? Just take it easy, there is no need to rush any of this. Be who you are *now*, not what you feel you might have been then. There’s no pressure for anything, right?”

We both nodded. Glimmer was right. Honestly, it just felt odd. If I was honest with myself, I had spent years kind of wanting somepony special for me. I’d felt envious of Unity for having someone when I was still alone. Yet now I didn’t feel any urge to grab hold of any chance.

Was it awkward timing, the confusing situation, or had I just matured a little?

Again, if I admitted my real feelings to myself, I did *like* Unity. She was quiet and thoughtful, easy for a nervous pony like me to talk to, and had a slightly offbeat way of thinking that I found very interesting. Perhaps after all this I just felt exhausted at the thought of two ponies being forced together by fate rather than by a genuine, evolving connection. After all, wasn’t that what relationships were?

That was, assuming we really had been anything before. I presumed that’s what we were trying to figure out.

Glimmer let go of us both, sweeping to her hooves with a musical hum. “Now, let’s get inside, kids. Listen, I’ve told the others. They’re good ponies, they’ll *all* support you, but I’ve asked them to give you a little space on the issue. You two do what you need to, but don’t hesitate to come to us if you need somepony to talk to.”

“We won’t.” Unity had to bite back a little sniff.

“Thanks, sis.” I added.

Glimmer saluted and spun away to trot her way back inside.

“I’m still totally reserving the right to find a stallion for Murky, though!” She shouted over her shoulder as she turned into the doorway and disappeared.

Unity blinked on the spot, confused, before turning and giving me a quick once over, looking half-way between smirking and confused. “Is there something I should know?”

I was already cradling my head in my hooves.

“Yes. That my sister is *evil*.”

The others welcomed us with quite significant relief and excitement. Coral held us both tightly, as I felt Brimstone’s give me a wink and a prod with a smile. I could tell when he was showing a little respect for something I’d done. (Hang on, was a wink a blink for him now? Nevermind.)

Mister Peace, as ever, was about as subtle as a balefire missile in his appreciation for our safe return. It took us both some minutes to convince him to put us down from his shoulders again. Even Sunny offered Unity a smack on the back and praise for her daring leap onto the wagon.

I felt myself turn around in the middle of it all, hunting for somepony else. Somepony who wasn’t there. My heart sunk a little more than I realised it would, before I was dragged back by Coral into another tight squeeze and asked to tell the story of what had happened up there. (It was my story to tell, so I told the *correct* version about how we got back on the ground.)

Surrounding us were the supplies we had stolen. It made me realise just how close we were. We had enough food to last us a few weeks in the wasteland if we accounted for Sunny and Brimstone's hunting skills. Enough medical supplies to keep us going, most especially my sickness. We had weapons, ammunition, and tools. We had maps of Equestria, camping utilities, and even pop-up tents. All of this was in the middle of being arranged into several saddlebags and thick cargo hoists that Brimstone and Mister Peace would carry. We had Sunny with us again. We had discovered the truth for Unity. Glimmerlight had all she needed to look for alternate routes into Ministry Station, and even if she failed, we had an alternative one, albeit at great danger.

All that remained now on our group's plans was to solve the issue of the foals. They had been taken back to the Alpha-Omega Hotel by Grindstone's own word. He was a silver-tongued liar through and through, but I saw no reason to doubt that he had here. Kidnapping foals would be too obvious, even for them. Chirpy Sum, Lilac Rose, and Starshine Melody were coming with us and now awaited our rescue from one of the most heavily guarded buildings in Fillydelphia.

Thankfully, it wasn't up to us to break in.

I pointed my hoof at the hotel on a map of Fillydelphia while the group looked on. Everypony knew where it was, but it made me feel important to do it. I knew the foals best, having met all three, so this was my little call to make

"Starshine Melody broke out once, that's how she got caught by the ghouls in the crater and taken to that underground base place. She knows how to get a foal out of the hotel and, as far as we know, Red Eye's assistants in there never figured out how. Chirpy Sum also got out to sneak onto the train with us. He's permitted to leave for study under slavers."

I felt my wings clench back. Everypony was looking at me saying this. I bit my lip and swallowed, trying to force myself to keep talking. I knew sneaking, this could work!

Catching Glimmer's eye, I saw her smile a little. The sight made me take a breath and calm down a little.

'Believe in your sis', Murky.' I told myself, and continued.

"When I got Lilac Rose into the hotel and later met her, I told her and Starshine to watch out for a note in the way that she got out last time. A drainpipe has a hole near it on the fence. If I leave them a note there, then they can sneak out themselves to meet us down the, uh..."

I struggled to remember, tapping my head.

"The... the old servant's staircase! Yes! So we can just wait in a hiding spot till we see them! They'll never even know they disappeared until it's too late."

Oh yes, feel proud, Murky. You just detailed a *plan*! I felt myself stand a little straighter up. Like a pegasus, yeah!

"Well, someone's happy with his idea." Coral smirked and patted me on the head before looking at the map where I'd been pointing.

I lowered my eyebrows. Aww, c'mon, ruining my moment here with all this patting.

"We aren't leaving without them." Coral's words brokered no argument. "If we're going to pick them up, we'll need to take some things to keep them warm outside the hotel. Fillydelphia's hot but the winds can be bad for foals. We'll need three ponies in case we have to gallop off and carry them. I'll be going with you."

I nodded. There was no way I wasn't. Starshine hadn't met anypony but Brim or I, and the big stallion was hardly the master of stealth.

"I'd love to come get that little rascal," Glimmer spoke as she waved some metro and city maps in her magic, "but I've got to find us a way down. Got a theory about that place you mentioned though, Murky. That crater base where the ghouls were. But I'd rather us find a shorter, safer route. There has to be one. I'll fill you all in later if it pans out. I'll be busy though, can't go."

"I'll come with you." Unity stood up. "I'm good with kids. My first job was minding the nursery at Friendship City, and your son already knows me."

Sunny rolled her eyes, and looked rather relieved.

"Glad you stepped up, can't stand the little bastards. Give me a dog any day."

"Why, Sunny..." Coral raised an eyebrow as she began to pick up for blankets and warm clothes for the foals, "not the maternal type?"

Sunny leaned back on the wall and rolled her eyes at the older mare with a shake of her head, blowing smoke from a cigarette she'd somehow acquired on our looting. "You've got time though, no need to rush there. Shift change isn't for an hour by my estimate, and forget moving before that."

I agreed with Sunny. We'd just come in from outside, and Fillydelphia was getting worryingly bare on the streets with so many slavers around by the time Unity and I had reached a sewer opening. Going back out would be unwise.

To that end, we used the time packing up what we could. Weapons were stripped and maintained by Sunny, while Glimmer put her efforts to mapwork. Coral and I sewed repairs on the fabric we'd gotten, as well as strengthening and waterproofing our bags. We'd pass them over to Brimstone and Unity who would stuff them full.

I did have to admit, it *was* pretty funny seeing the small mare and the massive raider sharing the task in silence. They were both as happy with quiet work as the other was.

The tasks didn't last forever though, giving way to a short meal of canned fruit (I might have actually made a stiff little flap of my wings in joy at the *taste* after a lifetime of gruel, oatmeal, and stale bread!) and a moment to rest before heading back out. I sat and drew, bringing the imagery of Brim and Unity to life in my journal with the newly reacquired charcoal sticks.

"Hey, lil'bro?" Glimmer dropped in beside me with a thump, maps held in her telekinesis, but immediately leaning over to watch what I was drawing. "You know, you always draw her mane like it wasn't dirty."

"Cuth it thoodn't be." I muttered around the charcoal before taking it out, "I draw your mane pretty as well."

"Eye for the manes, eh?" She prodded my side and leaned in. "What about ponytails?"

I giggled and nodded, I could entertain her. "Ponytails look really nice. I like them a lot to dr—."

Her laugh was louder than I had anticipated. What had she made me... who did I know with a ponyta—

"Oh." I sighed and rolled my eyes.

"Too easy," Glimmer shook her head, "now listen. We've got a little time left before you head out and, uh..."

Her voice died a little, as she motioned me through to a side room of the pumping station. A little confused, I got up and trotted after her, leaving the journal behind me in the main room. Leaving those working behind us, we went to the back room. It was dark, but the driest area where we would often use to sleep if we had a moment spare down here.

Numerous woollen rugs and blankets were laid out, everypony had their own little space.

Glimmerlight settled on her lime green blanket and turned to me as she drew across her bag of orbs. Unity was keeping the special orb safe on her. Given what she'd done to get it, I couldn't blame her.

"Murky, I think this is the one where it happens."

Her magic held up a memory orb. Deep blue, shifting and shimmering just below its glasslike surface.

"It's the last main piece of my memory from back then. I wanted to use it when you were away but I... well..."

I gulped, "You wanted me here?"

In the dark, I could just see my sister nod slightly. If I didn't have pretty good night vision, I likely would have missed it.

"It's not that I'm scared and need you here, Murky. Just that you've helped me with this. You've seen everything, and you've never judged me. It helps justify myself having somepony I trust here to do it with me. Gets it out in the open. So, would you go this one more step?"

I didn't hesitate. "Always, sis'."

Her hoof ruffled my mane, before I felt her kiss my forehead and lean close. "Knew I could count on you. I don't know what's going to happen in this. The village is attacked and we're taken for slavery but I... I don't know what it involves or how it goes down. Bringing Diamond home caused it, I know that now, but I have to see it to prove to Coral that I'm not who I was then. That I can face the past."

I took the memory orb in my hooves, feeling the magical tingle on my body. The light from it offered just enough to see Glimmer's face in a pale blue haze.

"Coral still cares for you, Glimmer. You've proven it in the present. You might argue occasionally like really bad relatives, and I know she holds grudges for a long time, but she knows you're doing this and she wouldn't let you put yourself through this if it contained anything too much to handle feeling. Not something that would hurt you today."

Glimmer sat silently for a few seconds, clearly thinking deeply on that. I'd only ever heard or seen hints of her worries about that time. While it might be painful to watch through this, I had a feeling it'd help let her finally *know*. To beat what had once become a hurtful coping mechanism for her. I trusted Coral wouldn't have let her go through with it had it been anything too traumatic on a personal level.

"Well then..." Glimmer took a deep breath before just shaking her head and grabbing the orb, "screw it, let's just do it and I can put this away for good."

Her horn lit and I felt everything drop away around me.

Glimmer didn't waste any time on returning to the village. Carrying the heavily injured Diamond between them, she and Coral threw open the door to what I presumed was the hut they held any meetings in; a taller building of thickly woven dry branches and packed earth.

"Madam Beau! Madam Beau!" Coral galloped ahead, past the rows of benches and toward a door behind a frayed flag as Glimmerlight hoisted Diamond onto a central wooden table supported by piled stones.

Her hooves grasped at Diamond's cheeks, peering close to see if there was any life left in

his eyes. I (She) could see a faint movement of his pupils, confused and scared.

“Hold on. Just hold on, Diamond. We’ve got potions! We’ll save you! Hold on, please just hold on!”

Her rapid breathing betrayed a panic. Looking up at the sound of two ponies returning quickly, I saw Coral Eve and the elderly mare I’d once seen as the village’s leader.

She shuffled with haste, if not speed, carrying an old medical pack on her side. Coming alongside Diamond, she began immediately digging for something in it.

“I do not know why you bring an outsider here, Glimmerlight. We shall deal with that afterwards, but I won’t watch a pony die in my village before me. Wrap this around the barrel of his torso, quickly!”

A thick dressing was shoved into Glimmer’s hooves. I could feel her shaking as she set to work, physically hauling with her limbs and lifting with telekinesis to turn Rough Diamond. Coral Eve helped her, both their hooves becoming matted with slick, warm blood from the deep stomach wound.

“What happened to him?” Madam Beau spoke firmly with her creaky voice, not once stopping her work to gradually pour the potion down an unresponsive Diamond’s throat.

“Raiders.” Coral spoke the single word curtly, before having to hold down Diamond’s kicking legs. “Out in the woods nearby. We killed the ones that attacked him, but there’s never just a few on their own.”

“There can be, Miss Eve, if we are beyond lucky. Hold him down! He’s going into shock!”

Diamond’s limbs were shaking so hard it was actually causing him worse pain. Glimmerlight smothered him in her telekinesis, and Coral leaned her weight over his bottom half. It made Glimmer’s job difficult. I could feel the complexity of the magic to hold him down while also working with her hooves on a tricky task to tie a dressing around their patient. I couldn’t explain it in words. I was no unicorn, I just *felt* the difficulty.

“Madam,” Glimmerlight didn’t look up as she spoke, “will that potion work?”

“Gutshot. Not really meant to take anything by mouth, but potions work a little differently. Not as though we have much choice, young lady.”

They worked together, holding him still, feeding him the full potion bit by bit and keeping the dressing tightly secure around the wound. Blood seeped around it, gradually slowing over time. Diamond’s breathing began to settle as he lay back into the Madam’s hooves. He was very pale.

“Now, Glimmerlight,” Madam Beau looked up, “did anypony follow you?”

“No, we didn’t see anyone.”

“Did anypony see you leave with him?”

“I...”

“Why were they this close? How would they know? Why would somepony on the run come this far out?”

I could feel Glimmer’s eyes turning wet under the tone of interrogation. Coral Eve remained silent and stern, watching from across the table.

“Glimmerlight, you know our rules. If anypony were to—”

She was cut off by a rasping and distant call from the outside, far off.

A drifting blare of a crooked and out-of-tune horn crept in over the village from the surrounding forest. A chill ran down Glimmer’s back as it repeated, closer this time. A warbling and uncertain note that hung in the air each time it sounded, harsh and cutting.

The three mares looked at one another in silence as it was followed by the not-so-distant

howl of rough pony voices. Animalistic and feral.

Then came the sound of hooves upon the ground. Many hooves.

Coral Eve moved immediately, galloping to the hall doors and blasting them open with a harsh spark of her horn. A blood red sunset cast its light across her and into the village hall, as though coming from the forest itself; spreading across all the ground. Dust could be seen rising from shaking trees by the passing of something out there. Something coming closer.

Slowly, Coral's head turned from the sight, open-mouthed and clearly afraid.

"Madam... Madam get everypony inside! NOW!"

The howl turned into a roar as the ice broke, and the stampede from far off began to close in. Raider cries were unmistakeable. Even I could feel the sensation, that of 'It'll always happen to some other village.'

Now it was happening here. To her home.

Madam Beau turned back into the hall and pulled a switch on the wall. Outside, I saw the glaring white flash of the town's perimeter lights spring into action. In the same motion, she frantically pulled a rope that set a bell on top of the hall clanging madly.

Glimmer turned her head away from their leader to gallop toward Coral and the door. Her magic snatched up Diamond's heavy rifle from the ground, and loaded it from his own bags.

"Where is Chirpy!?" Coral shouted from beside her as two stallions ran toward the hall entrance carrying four foals between them. The youngsters were pale white and confused, scared but not understanding the true weight of the terror approaching.

"Last saw him at your house! He might be hiding!"

That was enough direction for Coral Eve. She ran out into the growing madness that was the panicking village. Ponies pushed and screamed at one another to move. The worry was obvious on all their faces, they couldn't fight an attack off. Not a hope in hell.

"Coral, wait!" Glimmerlight shouted after the mare, before running outside too. She cast a look behind her at the prone form of Diamond on the table as she went, before everything became quickly too manic to see into the hall with so many ponies pushing into its thicker walls. Ponies bore grim faces, filled with distant eyes of denial.

She ran across the warm gravel after her friend in the direction of Coral's home, breathing hard. Behind her, there was the small *pop pop pop* of flares being fired from the forest by the raiders. Three red lights erupted in the sky, casting a flickering crimson haze over everything below, damaging what reassurance the bright lamps meant to ward off timberwolves were doing.

"Coral! *Coral!*"

Her words went unheard as she watched a blue tail vanish into her home, leaving Glimmer amongst the few remaining ponies outside. Two mares were seen dragging leather armour onto themselves, while a young buck struggled with a hunting rifle. Hardly a force against—

A great roar emerged from behind her. Glimmer stopped and turned, her face twisting into a look of horror.

The raiders broke the treeline. A wave of huge hounds bounded forth, rough-haired and lean. Foamy spit dripped from their gnashing jaws as they surged around the buildings and threw themselves at any ponies they could meet. The screaming began in earnest. Ponies were caught between their homes and the hall, and dragged to the ground amongst a frenzy of teeth and savage barks.

Behind them came their handlers, just as crazed as their canines. They carried nets and hooks, backed up by crossbows and old target rifles. Painted coats stood out with white and dull yellow designs below their armour. Some wore nothing and simply charged with the hounds, insane ponies who leapt and bit alongside their pets. After that, the swarm of armoured raiders with higher quality guns could be seen cheering and whooping when they cleared the forest and found their prize. They carried flaming torches that stood out under the shadow of the trees. In the glow of the flares above, they were like creatures from the depths of a fiery pit.

They had sought to get everypony inside to ward off a gang. They'd been wrong.

This was an army, and Glimmerlight stood virtually alone in front of it. No pony was trying to help any other now. Fear had taken the village and they scattered toward the forest.

From behind the hall, a raider wielding a trident stopped and turned, yellowed eyes spotting her. For a few seconds, my sister was frozen in front of his howl and his eager charge.

Her rifle took a long time to move, before finally snapping up and barking its own report into the air. The recoil was heavy, bucking madly against her magic grip. The raider snapped backward, the round punching him head over hooves, and leaving them writhing on the ground in circles, braying like a stuck brahmin.

To her side, the two mares both fired and shot down a raider before he could throw a burning stick onto the town hall. Their resistance didn't go unnoticed, for one of them jerked and fell amongst their cry of 'Got one!', a raider's bullet punching through her light armour with ease. She didn't make a sound, until the shock wore off and she began to wail in pain from the ground. Helpless as the rest.

Glimmerlight started moving again, aiming for Coral's home even while her magic struggled with the heavy bolt. Some huts were already burning, raiders flowed through the gaps between them, silhouetted in the flames of their rampage. Ponies fled from some of their homes as they caught fire, right into the nets and powerful blows of their attackers.

She ran past ponies struggling with raiders. The bigger villagers wrestled in the mud and gravel with raiders jingling from their number of piercings. Diamond's rifle fired again to knock one from the roof of her own hut. Then again at a hound that ran near Coral's house and missed. She kept running. Running and shouting as her home was torn down around her. I wasn't a master strategist, but I could see they had no hope. They were massively outnumbered and the raiders were hardened and brutal. Already the town was becoming an inferno. Out of the corner of her eyes, Glimmerlight could see ponies that fled for the forest being pulled down by raiders that seemed to leap from the shadows of the trees.

Creaky Hollow was already a ruin, scant minutes into the attack. Behind her, there was a bestial roar. A quick glance saw a rather familiar and massive horned beast on two legs act like a battering ram on the hall's main door.

It splintered into tinder, before he and the raiders swept inside to the Madam and those who had sought refuge.

I'd seen raiders. I'd even fought them and met some of their worst individuals. But the scale and ferocity of a full raider attack, of the Bloodletters in their prime, working as one; it terrified me through time itself.

Glimmerlight finally caught up to Coral at her home, yet as she approached, the wall exploded outwards, with two hounds hurtled along with it. My sister was thrown from her hooves as debris flew past her face, her vision whirling. Coughing, she pushed herself up.

Through the hole, Coral Eve clutched Chirpy protectively, her horn flickering like a beacon in the firelight. The two beasts that had gotten inside lay shattered upon the ground, their bones snapped like brittle twigs.

"The hall's gone!" Glimmerlight screamed it at her friend as she staggered over the wreckage of a once cosy home, "They got in! They're killing or taking everypony!"

Those words must have hurt to ever have to say. Behind her, I knew she could hear the events she was alluding to. The sounds of foals and their parents begging and crying out from within the building. Its bell still rang again and again.

Coral moved beside Glimmer and stared at it with tears in her eyes. Her hooves held Chirpy tightly to her chest. She spoke fiercely and accusingly.

"You did this."

"I didn't! H-he wasn't..."

Coral Eve's horn sparked violently, before I felt a wave of pain crash through Glimmer's body. Everything became a dark blur as she was thrown backwards across the ground to in front of her own burning hut. Her eyes saw it when she gasped and held her chest, lingering on her home as it cracked and fell into itself with a spray of little embers. Her jaw slowly dropped open as the little Hearthswarming lights she'd put up exploded and sparked one by one. Her home after trying to escape a life of servitude to the Rangers... gone.

Only then did her eyes move back to Coral.

The unicorn simply stared at Glimmer. I could see the Coral I had first met. Bitter, angry, unable to fix things and letting it all bubble over in deep-set rage. Coral didn't even turn her head to look at the huge raider she sent hurtling head first into a wall with a sickening crack of bone on stone, her eyes remaining fixed on Glimmerlight's through the pain this use of her broken magic was causing her.

Slowly, her mouth moved. Inaudible as Glimmer gasped and tried to stand. The words, however, were clear.

"You. Did. This."

With that, she disappeared behind a cloud of smoke drifting from a hut between them. I knew she didn't get away, but it hardly made it any less upsetting to see. Coral Eve leaving Glimmer to try and save her son alone.

My sister simply lay there, eyes stinging from tears and smoke.

The growl was the only warning Glimmer got. Something barrelled into her, sending another shock of pain through her body as she was thrown onto her back and launched upon by a filthy, wet-smelling mass of writhing muscle. A snapping canine jaw went for her neck. Screaming in frustration and anger, Glimmer didn't even hesitate to punch it directly in the muzzle and give herself time to get the rifle between her and that mouth. The hound's paws lashed at her, drawing blood as it leapt upon her. Pinned down, Glimmer could only jam the weapon into the beast's mouth to stop it closing around her flesh and kick at it with her hind legs.

Straining, clenching her teeth, she fought it from the ground with a desperate strength. I felt her magic activate and rack the bolt that was inside the hound's mouth. The motion caught its flesh in the mechanism, making it whine and pull back. It gave her a little space, not enough to escape. The hound spat out the ejected round and rushed forward, its weight slammed down on her from behind, pinning her. A low growl began rumbling in its chest, leading to the bark that would come before its rush forward to—

The weight lifted off her completely. Glimmer could still hear it snarling, before falling

silent as though on command.

Slowly, she tried to rise, reaching her rifle.

A fierce grip of magic snatched her around the neck and dragged her back. I felt the choking pain grip tight and cause her to gag as her entire body was lifted from the ground and turned to face a mangy, white-coated unicorn. A manic grin stretching from ear to ear met her around a crazed fringe of all bright colours in existence, one eye twitching in place to its side. Wildcard.

He stood above her, holding Glimmer's struggling body in his magic with his personal hound gnashing and wanting to get at her. Reaching down, he patted his pet before leering at my sister through a face lacking that same cruel scar I'd seen in the present day.

"Come along, Glim-Glim."

Glimmer's eyes widened, the obvious question.

"Oh, I know who you are. We're going to be the *best* of friends, aren't we? We can *screeeeam* together! ARRRRRGGHHH! Eh?"

His screaming face was shoved into ours. I wanted to move her limbs for her, do anything, but I had to sit and endure, feeling the throat tighten and tighten.

"Aww. Well, come on then!"

His magic loosened, sending her crumbling to the ground, before a rope attached to a meat hook dragged her away by wrapping around her upper body, the metal claw worryingly close to her chest.

The village had fallen in but a couple of minutes. It had never been a battle, simply a massacre of rending and exultant looting. Glimmerlight was dragged breathlessly to the front of the hall where ponies were being led or dragged out. Many were badly injured. Foals were being thrown in wicker cages, and slung over the bigger raiders' backs. Their crying and screaming was haunting, young voices that you just never wanted to hear in such a situation. All around them, the village burned to the ground as the sun began to go down and bring darkness to the remote area. The air felt thick with heat and smoke, all too familiar to the reality we were in outside the orb.

"Release the foals at once! Let them go! They're nothing to you!"

The creaky voice of Madam Beau met Glimmer's ears as she tried to force herself out of a raider's grip. She flung herself at Wildcard, reaching out to him.

"Have you not thought for the young?" she pleaded, falling to her knees. "Even if you take us, let them—"

Wildcard's machete flashed in the red light. A stream of blood followed it, before the Madam's headless body fell to the floor.

Many villagers, Glimmer included, called out to her. Many shouted her name. Wildcard, however, just stood and held his hooves to his head in pain, shaking it madly.

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up, SHUUUUT UUUUP!*" He shrieked at them all, overpowering their voices. "When will you all *just fucking LEARN!?*"

He paused, breathing hard on the spot. Slowly, he coughed and waved a hoof to the raiders.

"Nah... nah. Lapsed, I'm cool, it's all cool. We're all veeery cool, right, right? Just a mistake, I'll make it up to you all. Now, go have fun kids."

The raiders knew the signal. They streamed into the remains of the village or back into the forest to chase anypony who'd run. A mad dash for the prizes. It left Wildcard and just a couple other raiders waiting with their couple dozen prisoners in the light of the fires. Some

of it was spreading to the dry forest itself.

After what he'd done though, nopony wanted to dare say anything to a twitching pony in their midst. I found Glimmer looking at the others nearby, spotting that minotaur stomping around the raiders and slapping those who found anything he wanted. What I now knew as Wildcard's hunters (who would become his gladiators in Fillydelphia) prowled around with as much shivering and foaming at the mouth as their leader.

"Glim-Glim! Come here, Glim-Glim!"

I felt the fear run through her as Glimmer turned her eyes back toward Wildcard. He was advancing on her as he waved to the other two ponies with him. He stared into her eyes. Past them. It gave me a horrid feeling as he looked deeply at her. No, he wasn't looking at her...

No, no, just my imagination, it had to be.

"I've got a gift for yooooou! A little truth. That's what you wanted, right?"

"What are you? Who are you?" Glimmerlight spoke with a raspy voice. Her clenched throat and the smoke made it hard to speak up.

Wildcard grinned and narrowed his eyes, a worrying glint of him actually staying consistent appearing in them.

"How I found this playhouse, little cutie." He patted her head. "Let me introduce you again."

He turned her head to the side by force. She tried to resist but simply hadn't the strength.

Ahead of her, the two raider's dumped Rough Diamond in the dirt beside Wildcard. He leaned down and sniffed at the earth pony's mane, taking a deep whiff of it with a big smile.

"Such a good smelling... not-totally-a-raider kind, hmm? He couldn't drink, y'know? He never ever *ever* came to any of my three birthdays! I even *told him!* Not one of us, no, but that's fine. He does his job, I do mine, the order of the universe, right?"

Glimmerlight didn't look at him. Her eyes were fixed on Diamond. He was awake, slowly stirring in pain as he fought to figure out what was happening.

"No... he-he said..."

"He said a lot of things, Glimmy." Wildcard whispered far too close in her ear, "Bet he told you about wanting to pack up and leave the 'traders' too. Always a good one for the more cautious that. He really is goood."

Glimmer sat still as the embers of the burning hall were blown past the three of them. I could only imagine what she was feeling right now.

"I'm sorry."

The breathy voice came from in front of her. It was Diamond. With a cry of pain, he pushed himself upward between the two raiders. His eyes stayed put on Wildcard and Glimmer, but I spotted the sickening sight of blood dripping from his stomach wound again.

"Glimmer, I'm so sorry." His voice was thin, his accent weak under it.

"You did?" Glimmer barely said it above a whisper.

"He did." Wildcard hissed and giggled, hopping back between the two and glancing each way expectantly, "I do so love a little drama, go on! Make some blame! Burning village theatre!"

Rough Diamond looked at Wildcard with a sudden rage.

"Why do you keep me alive? You want me gone to make room for Bonecrusher! You don't think I'm a proper raider, not deserving of the Big Four, and you're *right!*"

He stepped forward and stumbled, nearly falling completely.

"This time, I *did* want out. *You* tried to have me killed."

His eyes fixed Wildcard accusingly, before he spun his head to Glimmer.

"Why would I lie now? They've won. There's no need for a charade. I lied, at first maybe, but I thought I could use the hidden village here to get away! I wanted *out* of all this when I couldn't convince Brim to—"

"Liar liar, pants on fire!" Wildcard chimed. "Big guy getting soft and bringing you in as one of the four doesn't mean you're one of us, or that you could ever leave! You don't *leave* the Bloodletters. You enjoy the fun or you get ripped and—"

"SHUT UP!" Diamond snarled, barely taking his eyes off of my sister. "Glimmer! I'm so sorry I led them here. I didn't know where else to go... I... I did my job even when I tried to get away from it..."

Glimmer stepped forward a little. I couldn't feel if she believed him or not, whether she felt upset for him. In the middle of all this, everything was too confused in her body language to know. At least, until she spoke.

"I... I believe you. I saw them trying to kill you!" Her words grew in strength as they went. "I *knew* that made no sense if it was a ruse!"

She brought a hoof out to support Diamond where he stood. I felt his rough coat on her own, matted with blood and sticky, yet she didn't shirk back from helping him.

"Glimmer, look at me... look at me." His voice was quiet, dropping to a whisper.

"Diamond?"

"Run."

I could feel her having to fight reacting too obviously.

"No, don't, you—"

"Pink dream. I'm going to do this for you. You gave me a gift. The bullet. That magic-enhanced bullet. Never used it, because it meant more to me than just a good bit of ammo. You showed me that there was another life I could have had, one my birth took away. One where ponies were nice. Knowing... knowing that at the end I had someone who would have accepted me, that's enough."

Glimmerlight was shaking her head. "Diamond, don't do this. We'll find a way, you don't have to—"

Wildcard began to stomp forward like a petulant child. "Speak up! I wanna hear!"

"I wanted out, but I couldn't *get* out. This life wouldn't let me get past its walls. If you can't get out... go to Br-Brimstone! I know it sounds insane, but he's starting to change! I've seen it! I tried to bring it out in him! I just hope I'm right about him, but he might be your only hope. So, please, take the only apology I can truly manage... and run!"

He cried out in pain. The motion tore at his stomach wound, but he spun on the spot to bite, draw, and sink a hidden knife into Wildcard's face so deep I heard it clink against his skull, the raider leader howling in pain. Diamond's legs bucked out at the two raiders either side of him, before he shoved Glimmer away. I felt his hooves impact on her side hard, spurring Glimmer to take off.

"Go! Go, Glimmer! RUN!"

Raiders looked up as they heard the shouting. Most of them seemed more surprised than anything, yet Glimmer's frantic vision noticed a dozen break off and chase her. Skidding in the dirt, she turned and fled to the forest, looking back for Diamond.

She was just in time to see Wildcard, his face looking carved in half, tug the stallion in

with his meat hook and bring the two machete's down hard. There was no scream.

Even through the orb, I felt Glimmerlight's heart sink.

Slowly, that wrecked face turned to her. It bubbled blood as he roared across the clearing she was sprinting away from him over. Each word gurgled through a wound, howling after her.

"HAVE YOU FIGURED IT OUT YET? I ASKED IF YOU KNEW WHY YOU HATE ME! SEE YOU WHEN YOU WAKE UP!"

His psychotic laughter echoed and bounced around the valley after her as Glimmer powered her legs to an effort that could only be drawn from emotion and desperation combined. The raiders and their hounds followed her down the forest path as she fled. Fled for nowhere, anywhere but here.

The black branches reached down like claws, the darkness falling around her as she aimed for the thickest parts of the woods, only to find that escape would not be possible. Not possible at all.

Through the forest, the main force of raiders was coming. They surrounded her by the sheer width of their line, the biggest and most heavily armoured ones she'd ever seen spreading around to box her in. Many wore parts of Ranger armour as vambraces or helmets. Giants of ponies. Most of them older than the young maniacs that had raided the village, all of them clearly weathered veterans. The hardened core of the Bloodletters. They didn't run. They didn't need to. They simply plodded on thick, boney hooves to surround my sister. She stopped as they parted to let their leader through to face this one stray escapee.

Heavily armoured behind slabs of metal and a dragon shaped mask, taller than anypony else and shaking the ground with his steps; the Great Warlord Brimstone Blitz gazed down at the terrified and shivering mare like a small child. The mask showed two beady eyes behind it, old and weathered as they stared into hers without a word. The greatest of raiders in this band regarded the cowering, bloodied and dirty mare before him without a word.

Behind her, Wildcard's hunters entered the clearing, catching up. They exulted, charged forward, screaming that they had found her.

They stopped at the sight of their leader, who made four precise steps around Glimmerlight, keeping his eyes on her. Those four steps were enough to put him between her and them.

"Bring the villagers to the wagons. Unharmd and untouched. They will go to the city."

Glimmerlight kept watching the massive pony, twisting her head, before she saw one of those dinner plate-sized hooves reach out.

Before everything fell away into the void.

The bleak darkness of Fillydelphia's underground felt all too small to wake up to. With my eyes struggling to adjust, I felt around for Glimmerlight, finding her stirring body as she too got up.

I expected to have to perhaps hug into her or find her upset. Yet as I blinked my eyes and got a clearer view, I only saw her move away and stand up away from my reaching hooves.

Glimmerlight wasn't showing much on her face. She simply looked up and around her, before I realised she was taking in the world as a whole down here, probably thinking about

the city above us. Her eyes were wet, but not crying. I'd never seen her look so stoic and yet emotional all at once.

"He wanted out."

Her voice was quiet. Soft but tinged with a solemn note, yet it built. I felt her frustration and rage bubbling below the surface of my normally cheery sister.

"He was trapped and wanted to be free, Murky. Wildcard had him murdered for petty raider advancement, chased him toward our village and butchering it! He killed a pony trying to be better. He killed Madam Beau! He was the one. *He* is the one who did this! Fucking *Wildcard*. If I get a chance to pull the trigger on that psychotic's head, I swear... I'll avenge them all."

I began to trot over to her, before stopping as she turned directly to me.

Her growing anger stopped, as she sighed and kept calm.

"I was to blame, yes. Yet now I know that I did the right thing, helping somepony find the same thing we're trying to do now. Escape. The blood of the village lies on Wildcard's hooves. He is the one who needs brought to terms now for Creaky Hollow to rest easy. Rough Diamond. I'm sorry I forgot that you were a good pony at the end. Thank you for what you did for me."

"Sis..."

Her hoof patted my shoulder, before absentmindedly ruffling my mane without really looking at me.

"Thanks, Murky. That's the last orb I'll need to see. The last sight to the truth. It isn't what I thought, for better or worse. But I did what I promised, even if it hurt."

She paused at the doorway.

"I just need some time to think now. I should get back to work, and plan what I'm going to say to Coral... and on how I'm going to end that multicoloured bastard if he comes for us again."

"If, um, if I can help—" I bit my lip, sitting down on the blankets again.

Glimmerlight looked at me for a few seconds before nodding. As she left, I saw the real feeling inside from how she moved and felt. Not a tragedy, nor a relief. Nothing but a bittersweet victory.

Fillydelphia was unusually quiet.

We had moved out with the shift change, using the period of activity to leave the sewers and start moving toward the Alpha-Omega Hotel. Yet after getting past the industrial sectors was done, the air seemed to deaden to the point even my ears heard only distant noises. We weren't too close to the factories, yet even these outlying areas approaching the FunFarm usually had processions, riotous slaver activity, and construction going on. It occurred to me that anypony not essential had been transferred to the more distant arms factories or to preparing the Wall.

The city was not silent, but felt more like it was holding its breath.

Coral, Unity, and myself had moved through the same ruined buildings we'd once used to get Lilac to the hotel safely. I knew the route, knew the hiding places, and after a little observation, had seen only a few slavers in the area. Most were clustered around fire barrels inside the husks of slave pen huts, speaking in hushed whispers. A couple moved between

the buildings, heading to or from their daily tasks. Some had slaves in tow carrying their possessions, while others slept as best they could. Most slaves picked at the meagre slop they had been fed, an all too familiar taste coming to my mouth at the rank 'food' I'd had to eat all these months, if not all my life.

There was a curious lack of griffons in the sky. Likely, they were all flying further out from the city on patrol. Despite that, we had to take cover inside one of the smaller and unused hotels as a Pinkie Balloon's bloated mass lurched overhead. I could hear the soft burn of its flame igniting to gain height before it drifted away toward the army camps.

"I think I prefer this to last time." Coral peered around the edge of a blown-out window, looking toward the lit windows of the Alpha-Omega Hotel.

Squeezing in beside her, I mentally charted out the route we could take. Some organised piles of cleared-up rubble would make good cover until we reached the next of the hotel buildings. They hadn't survived as well as the Alpha-Omega, but they had enough structure left for hiding in. This must have been some old holiday goer street near the FunFarm, for I could see numerous hotels, gift stores and cafés around, punctuated with ticket stalls advertising the Farm itself. The large building behind the lines of money traps, I realised, was the same I had zip-lined Lilac from last time. If push came to shove, I knew I could reach the hotel with my saddle from there.

The three of us edged from cover to cover. I would go first, followed by Unity, and then Coral afterwards. The slavers weren't really paying any attention at all, their eyes staring into the fires, so I felt somewhat more confident to hurry things up. The faster we got there, the less chance we had of another group coming back and blocking us off.

The hotel we'd chosen to overlook our target was empty and half-collapsed, made up of three floors. After checking each of the rooms, we finally settled on the ground floor nearest the perimeter fence, inside what used to be a common room.

We blocked off every door, set up a few hiding places with blankets, and checked our escape routes. We'd have to stay here until we next saw Starshine come out to check her secret hole. That could be hours for all we knew, if not an entire day. The group back at the sewer knew to give us time, so we didn't leave anything to chance. This had to be our little hidey hole under the nose of the most important building in the city.

Which made me wonder why I didn't see anywhere close to the amount of guards I had last time. Stern really was pulling them off for defence duty, it seemed. Inside the fence was empty as always, but there had been far more soldiers last time patrolling the outside. Or was that just because Shackles had set a trap for us?

Either was possible. He knew we wouldn't leave Chirpy. But with any luck, he didn't know the foals could get out, as opposed to us going in.

After Coral composed the note, and I had sneakily placed it under the fence where Starshine knew to check, we settled down in the uncomfortable ruin to watch and wait.

We took turns being the one to keep an eye on the Alpha-Omega Hotel itself. The other two would stay out of sight and rest or eat as they needed to. Coral Eve and I would sew together, with her teaching me how to do more than just a basic practical stitch on one of the blankets. On my turns watching, I could hear Unity asking about Coral's son, quietly chuckling at the stories. Glancing over my shoulder, I could see Unity idly carving a broken chair leg into the figure of a pony: Chirpy Sum.

When it came to my turn to rest with Unity, we looked through my journal. All of it.

"Uh, this is, um, how I first saw Coral Eve. Sick in a hospital bed. She can't take proper

RadAway, you see.”

Unity nodded, turning the page. “Brimstone and your sister? She looks sick too.”

“Y-yeah, she was in the same condition when I found her. Brimstone was watching over her. I think she was the one that made him, y’know, be better?”

Recent sights made me question if the big raider’s transformation hadn’t begun earlier, long before Fillydelphia. Somehow, I doubted he’d like to be asked about it.

We didn’t really go in any order. Sometimes we’d flick forward to recent things for a bit of casual conversation about them. Other times we’d dare to delve into the ones from times neither of us could remember. Doing so, I found images I never knew I’d drawn. Only having her there let me find the courage to look at drawings I’d long been terrified of seeing. Some were shockingly unskilled compared to my work now, but I could see my talent’s work in them. The same style, the same hidden emotions in imagery that only I could truly spot for myself.

The truth was anything but dreary though, if a little melancholic, as Unity lifted a page in her magic to find one of herself, sitting lonely and away from the other slaves. She paused to look more carefully, speaking quietly.

“That’s me. I mean, that *is* me. Away from the crowd, trying to just pretend I was somewhere else. Think this was how you found me, like those other pictures?”

“How do you know you didn’t find me?” I countered, “You did the second time when I’d fallen... and the third time... and the fourth.”

Gee, come to think of it, she’d had to drag me out of a lot of trouble.

Unity shrugged, looking up at the ceiling and pushing her wavy mane from her eyes. “That was different. I’ve helped ponies in here before, stood up for a couple, but I felt this... this *urge* to rush in and help you that time. Like I didn’t even think about it. I never even thought about it. Now I know why that was. I *knew* you.”

She smiled, a touch of that pure innocence in her eyes.

“It’s quite beautiful when you think about it. Friendship found a way through all the adversity of a world trying to make us forget each other.”

“Y-yeah.” I might have blushed a little. I just didn’t know what to say. Unity was poetic and flowing when she got like that in a way I’d never be. It always left me so dumbfounded on what to say back.

“Now, what’s this?”

She flicked all the way forward to more recent images.

“W-wait!” I reached forward, trying to get my hoof in before her magic. The page turned to the mare from the Roamer Inn on my birthday who’d asked me to draw her in a somewhat, uh, sultry fashion. I tried to turn the page, but Unity’s magic lightly tugged back.

“Aww, c’mon! Let me see!” She laughed, nudging my shoulder. “Felt like drawing more of that stuff, huh?”

“S-she asked me! She really did!” I felt my voice go squeaky, this was the truth! “C-Coral! You were there! Tell her!”

Coral Eve turned her head slightly from the window and grinned. “Sorry, my dear. I’d already left by then. What raucous things the rest of you got up to aren’t my concern.”

Groaning, I felt my wings and ears both slump down at the incessant giggling beside me, as Unity continued to flick on through.

From places to friends, to battlesaddles. Old images of the two of us together for comfort, to new pictures of what I believed my mother looked like. Drawings of the wasteland areas I

remembered, of broken chains, mares, and flying. We shared the journey. Quietly, we laughed together, confided in feelings of the more depressing imageries, and even once leaned against one another in a fashion similar to that of the old pictures when a majestic sketch of Aurora Star in her prime was turned to. I'd done that one mere hours before... with little stars of black charcoal twinkling around her. We went right back to the start. Many pages had us individually. Then laughing, alone or together. I saw Mister Peace in one of them, looming over a tiny pony that was too smudged to make out as either of us.

Yet one image hadn't come up yet. The most important one of them all. After seeing all this, spending this time with a renewed friendship, I couldn't ignore it any longer. I (politely) pulled the journal from her magic and started flicking through pages rapidly till I found it. One she'd seen recently too. My ongoing greatest work.

My friends.

"Murky?"

"After all this, how can I not? You're one of us, you always were." I looked up and smiled at her, seeing a little blush on her cheeks.

Then I set to work.

There had been a space on the left of me ever since I drew it. Had that been deliberate without even realising it? Everypony else had been to my right. Glimmer then Caduceus, Chirpy in front of them, his mother's hoof on his back. Behind them loomed Brimstone. Yet to my left there had been empty space. It was time to set that right.

I pulled the charcoal from my pocket and leaned down. So softly, I let a thin edge weave and drift. Nothing heavy, not like Coral's strong and defined lines, or Glimmer's wild and varied arcs of charcoal. These touches were wispy, short, and light, never letting the charcoal touch the paper for more than a second, and with every line curving into the next. Gradually, they built up, forming a smooth contour. This wasn't drawing. It didn't feel like it. This was a shape I knew well. One I'd done since the moment I'd come to this city and been helped back on my hooves during my very first shift.

The nib drifted and twisted back, refining the outlines of a pony. Adjusting the leg shape, pulling it inward, scaling it all down to just slightly taller than myself. Rapid bursts of sketching for wavy lines around the head. Hundreds of individual touches for every strand getting thinner and thinner toward the edges as a mane was crafted around two large and bright eyes. Then, finally, I allowed the lines to *draw*. Following the masses of guidelines that formed the exact shape I wanted, that of quiet grace using fragile-looking thin lines. No, not fragile. *Gentle*.

There, beside me, I drew Unity. Finishing with her eyes and that soft smile to bring her to life on the paper with the rest of us. Just to my left, and close. Close enough to make up for lost time.

Shivering a little, I drew back from the page. The entire thing had felt so natural. No mantra, no thought. Just a smooth memory on paper. Unity took the drawing in her magic, smiling as she glanced at it.

"I'm still struggling to get over all this, what we are. I think I need some time before we really go over it all, but seeing this helps a lot. Knowing that you consider me enough of a friend, regardless of what's happened, that you'd put me on here with the others. Thank you."

She'd asked me to draw her when I got out, to not forget. We weren't out yet, but this was that one. Through a lot of time, pain, and strife from that moment in the FunFarm to now,

I'd kept my promise. For a brief moment, I just looked over at her, watching somepony enjoy my work. Her eyes glanced sideways, seeing me looking. I—

Across from us, I could see Coral Eve turn and briefly pause as she looked at us. However, she took a breath and nodded toward the Hotel.

"I think you two better come over here."

"I don't see anything."

My eyes scanned around the hotel's grounds, fence, and wall. There was no movement, nopony hiding that I could hear, and all the lights were on inside as usual. The hotel's thick walls and carved granite pillars that had seen it through the balefire surrounded still windows with no motion behind them.

"Coral, what is it? There's nothing there," Unity whispered as she peered out the window to either side.

Coral Eve nodded. "That's exactly it. There's nothing. We've been watching this for hours now and there's not been a single patrol. We've not heard a single foal shout, nor seen a single movement in those lit windows at any time. It's like the hotel is dead."

That was a point. Now that I thought about it, the last time I had been here I'd smelled the warm food from the kitchens. Yet there was nothing but the burning stench of Fillydelphia meeting my nostrils, giving rise to a filly-pitched sneeze as I took too hard a sniff.

It wasn't hard to see the growing concern and frustration on Coral's face. Her son and a foal she'd promised to adopt as her own were supposedly in there, but now it seemed utterly empty. Even the kitchen ventilation pipes gave off no steam into the warm air, not even a wavy bit of heat.

Something was wrong. Something was deeply wrong. I could *taste* it in the air.

"Do we wait?" Unity asked it to both of us, but her eyes were on the hotel's windows. "We've not given it the whole time yet."

"If something is wrong in there, then waiting might put us further behind it." Coral rubbed her chin.

Squinting, I peered at the little depression in the earth that marked where Starshine had squeezed through on her escape long ago. Our note sat hidden in it, a hole just big enough for a foal or somepony only a little bigger than a foal to squeeze through.

Oh, why did this always have to happen? It *never* ended perfectly.

"I'll go take a look. Alone."

The other two looked back at me.

"More than one is too easy to spot! That place doesn't have a lot of shadowy areas. I'll just poke my head in! See if anypony is inside. Maybe they're all just clustered in one room to be safe with this attack coming? The basement? If I see the foals I can bring them out too. I'll be real quiet!"

Coral and Unity shared a look. I could see the concern about this idea on both their faces, but after a moment they nodded.

"Don't take risks. You *don't* want to be messing about with the Alpha-Omega, dear." Coral set a hoof on my shoulder to talk seriously. "Red Eye won't let anypony go who trespasses."

"I won't be long. I got a look inside it before with Protégé. I know my way in it. I can always glide off from the roof, right?"

My smile brought something of a small grin to Unity's face, yet I could tell she was serious.

"Maybe you can try actually landing this time. Be careful."

I collected my things, mostly just my saddle, grapple, and *Rarity's Grace*. The PipBuck was tied to my hoof and my goggles set on my forehead. After a brief glance to the surrounding area, I crept out through the window and crawled my way to the fence and Starshine's hole, feverishly trying to remind myself why I had decided to do this.

The servant's door was, much to my relief, open. Trotting my way across the inside of the perimeter fence had sent every hair on the back of my neck upright with worry. If anypony saw me there wouldn't even be a shouted warning. I was in truly forbidden territory now, more than ever before. I was treading upon Red Eye's core values by being here as a slave, and I'd heard of the punishments that had awaited those who had trespassed before.

Trying to ensure the old oak door didn't squeak on its hinges, I opened it slowly. Just enough to squeeze inside through the gap. Within it lay a tiny staff room with a time stamper on the wall for employees starting their day, and a line of hooks bearing identical green jackets. Past them was a set of dark stairs leading upwards into the building.

Cautiously, I trotted in and reached out to the door, pulling it behind me. Through the gap, I saw Unity and Coral watching me, before I shut it entirely. The click sounded deafening, but I couldn't leave any trace to follow me by.

The stairwell was made of roughly hewn wood, clearly not an area for guests to see if they allowed such base construction. It was just for the use of servants entering at the start of their work day, it seemed. Squinting in the sudden darkness, I took my time on the steps and tested each one with a hoof first. A few squeaked, leading me to do awkward stretches and half hops to bypass them. I'd learned that trick long ago on the rock farm when I had to steal food. My master there had deliberately kept a few loose. Thankfully, there was no guard dog here listening for it as there had been then.

At least, I hoped not.

The stairs curved round an exceptionally tight corner, even for me. The edges of my saddle scraped and rubbed at the warped walls, raising a thin smell of old polish. Goddesses knew how normal ponies were supposed to do this for getting to work!

Mercifully, I could see a crack of light beneath a door at the top. Sitting and listening, I could hear absolutely nothing beyond. No voices and no hooves. Certainly no young ponies.

A swell of nervousness began to settle in. Something felt very wrong in here.

Strangely, the door's pull handle was in the centre of the door, not to one side. Why would you do that? Some sort of equality for left-hoofed ponies? Regardless, I felt it swing the normal way as I cracked it open just a smidgen and pressed my face to the gap.

Pressing my head against the door, I poked an eye through and squinted hard at the flare of light. Bright, powered lamps and hanging glass gemlights glared at full power to illuminate the entire lavish hallway that lay outside. I could see the familiar design of carved wall rims and the thick, patterned carpet that I'd felt beneath my hooves last time. Tables

with plastic flowers sat at intervals near stained glass-paned doors. A set of windows were further down, looking inside the building on some unknown room. I couldn't tell at this angle, but I could remember the dining room or canteen had those types of windows. Beside them there was some sort of black mess on the floor, scattered and spread around.

More to the point, it was completely deserted. The worrying emptiness in my gut began to clench harder. I had to go in further. I had to *know*.

My teeth clenched. I pressed open the door and poked my head through properly. Looking down the other direction I still saw nothing, only the hazy windows to the outside world, not clear but smoky to block out the horrors just outside the building. Gulping, I stepped more fully out and closed the door behind me. I didn't even have a shadow. The light was so complete on all sides, leaving me feeling terribly exposed.

Hooves close together, I meekly ambled my way along the hallway toward the interior windows. I passed familiar doors to the old guest rooms that I now knew were used for the foals' bedrooms. Each had drawings and (unreadable to me) nameplates with crayon or stencilled letters on the outside, but none of them had any sounds of occupants inside. Daring to peek in, I saw bunk beds with untidy blankets and covers on them. Some had fallen off entirely across the lines of soft toys and train sets that sat on the floor. The second was much the same, yet I could see in every single one of them the covers to their beds were thrown off onto the floor.

The third had a bunk bed entirely knocked over, and a smashed hoof mirror. This wasn't just untidy nature, it was too chaotic. Something had happened here for sure. Backing out the foal's room, I went back to the main hallway and cantered further down at a faster rate. The temptation to run out, to tell them and look for new information was clawing at me, dragging me back to the door, but I had to know. If something had gone wrong in the internal struggles to involve the foals.

Oh Celestia, protect their little hearts.

The silence was, in its own way, deafening. I had hypersensitive hearing (Protégé had taught me that term!) and even I couldn't hear anything in here. My own almost silent steps clipped much more loudly than I would expect in such a lush and soft carpet below them out of a lack of anything else to hear. I kept worrying somepony would pick them up with how out of place my presence seemed. Every few steps, I would spin and look over my shoulder with a gasp, but see nothing other than the length of hotel hallway I'd just walked down. I hadn't gone far, just ten feet from the door I'd come in, yet every moment I expected somepony to wander out into the corridor.

I came to the mess on the floor, that as I got closer I found to be one of the false plants that had tumbled... no. Been *shattered* across the floor. Its pot had been smashed, dropping fake chunks of plastic soil everywhere. It lay just across from the interior windows looking in on what I now saw was the dining hall.

One of the windows was smashed.

A cold fear started to overtake my body. I felt my muscles start to gear up to bolt off. The glass lay near my hooves, invisible with how clear it had been till I got closer. Following it, I saw it lead toward the plant, where a bullet hole had been made in the wooden wall behind the jar. Something had shot from inside the windows out here. Below me, I could see the soil was trailing in hoofprints away from where I'd come from. Somepony running from a gun.

I hopped up to the broken window and looked inside. Yes, this *was* the dining room,

only looking from the opposite side as when I'd visited last time. I could see the door where I'd been standing, drooling behind at the sights and smells of this place on the far side. Inside there were lines of white wooden tables near to several knocked over stools and cushions scattered everywhere. Meals lay half-eaten, some spilled on the floor. Pottery had smashed and I could see some fabric sacks scattered around that were quite out of place in here. I knew them. They were mass produced here for the slavers. Not something you'd ever get inside here.

Gunfire, some sort of mass panic, clearly. The bedrooms having been ransacked made horrible sense now. Someone or *something* had gotten inside the Alpha-Omega before we had. Oh, let the foals be okay, they had to be hiding silently somewhere, right? Foals weren't dumb! They'd be okay! They would be! Fillydelphia couldn't be *that* cruel.

Carefully, I pulled myself up and through the window into the canteen. Small tinkles of broken glass knocked away by my hard hooves made me twitch and stare around, but no other noise followed. Alone, in this most precious of Red Eye's buildings; it was driving my wits to the breaking point. My eyes hurt and I had to blink as I realised they'd been going dry from staying fixed open so long. My heart thudded and my tainted lungs spasmed with my faster breathing, until I gulped greedily at my RadAway to prevent a coughing fit.

There was very little glass on this side. The gunshot had gone outward. I trotted between the benches and poked my head into the kitchen. Among the clearly newly-made appliances and cookers lay massive pots of stone cold soup and stew. Poking my hoof in and tasting it revealed a clammy taste of something that had been sitting unattended. It was cold. Whatever had happened wasn't too recent. And I'd have heard that gunshot I'd found, had it happened while we'd been waiting just outside.

We'd missed whatever it was. With worry clenching at my heart, I decided to go back outside and—

The moment I wandered back into the canteen proper, I saw a shadow at the doorway.

It moved quickly, yanking the door open with a flare of magic on the handle. I dove back in the kitchen, my hooves skittering on the slippery clean tiles as I yanked open the first cupboard I saw and pushed myself inside it, trying not to make too much noise on the pots and pans I was squeezed in around. Why was I doing this? It had seen me! Why else would it move quickly!?

Somepony galloped across the canteen, coming this way. I heard their hooves on the tiles. Heard a couple of cupboards opened.

What choice did I have anyway? There was *nowhere* to properly hide quickly in this bright place.

Instead, I got myself ready. The moment they opened it, I'd rush into them and make a break for it.

The cupboard next to me opened. I heard them trotting closer. I braced myself.

"It's all right! No pony's going to hurt you, little one. Come out. It's just me! I just want to know what happened here! Are you okay!?"

As the cupboard opened, I didn't move. The concerned voice had struck me by surprise, so much so that I didn't run, and pretty much just fell out the hiding spot instead. I looked upward at him while upside-down, with a forced 'I'm innocent!' smile on my face as the clatter of pottery tumbled out around me and over his hooves.

His face was a mask of surprise.

"*Murk!?*" Protégé blurted.

He half-shoved and half-helped me onto one of the benches outside, keeping me ahead of him and pushing me along with his magic.

"I'm going to give you five seconds to tell me exactly why you're... no, never mind. I *know* why you're here and it ends this instant! You will not drag these foals into the insanity you seek! *What have you done!?*"

I waved my hooves frantically, leaning back as he leaned over me.

"This wasn't us! I just found all this! Why are *you* here then? What's going on?" I didn't much feel like getting into the same argument all over again. "There's bullet holes and it's all empty and torn up!

Protégé stopped on the spot, trotting away from me briefly. He wore one of his scholar shirts and had his mane tied in a ponytail again, but nothing else.

"I received a note from an anonymous source. Somepony who had seen Shackles' plans for themselves, possibly List Seeker. They spoke of something about to happen at the Alpha-Omega Hotel. I came to see what it was, to warn them. Only to find this."

He waved his hoof around. I could see the anger in his eyes as he began to trot to the other side and investigate the way I'd come from.

"No. No they'll just be hiding! Downstairs or—" I started.

"I've been there! I can't find any of them, they're just gone! I don't even know what happened to the guards and teachers! The foals all know to get quickly to one side of the building and try to lock themselves in, though. I was on my way there now, there's still hope. But what was that you said? You saw *bullet holes?*"

"Y-yes!" I hopped off the seat, pointing over to it and guiding Protégé to look through the window.

His expression turned hard at the sight.

"Don't get out of my sight, Murk. I will chase you if you try. Regardless of our feelings right now and going separate paths, I might need your help if the worst has happened. I just hope that we shan't come to oppose one another this time if we find them."

I coughed. "You mean, less shooting each other?"

"Hopefully so."

"Hopefully!?"

Ignoring my pouted exclamation, he spent some time examining the impact, looking at where it must have been fired from. After a few moments, his magic lit and lifted several objects from the other side of the room. Brass casings; six of them.

"Magnum rounds. Six of them in one spot. This was a revolver reloading here."

He froze for a moment, his eyes shooting open with fear.

"Protégé? Protégé what is it?"

"There's only one hole, so the other five shots from this weren't done in here."

A look of horror shot across his face.

"This wasn't just a raid. This was a shooting... oh no."

Protégé took off toward the door, dropping the rounds as he went in a frantic rush that dropped all dignity in his haste.

"Protégé! Protégé!"

I galloped after him as he rounded out into the same hallway we'd once visited before,

near the main stairs. He turned left, running down the other side of windows, toward the classrooms.

"Where are you going!?" I screamed after him.

"The place they go! The place of safety! It's a sealed room! They have to be there! They have to be!"

Struggling to keep up, I galloped through the empty corridors. On the wall, there was a streak of blood that had smeared for a good ten metres before disappearing inside a door. Protégé stopped briefly, opening the door to reveal a young teacher, not much older than him. His skull had been shattered open across the far wall, a dripping star of red fluid staining the polished wood behind a shocked-looking and pale face.

There had been killings in this place of foals.

We couldn't stop. I felt the same drive, the same panic rising. I didn't want to think about what we might find where we were going. They had to be there! They had to be safe! More bullet holes, more broken windows, and a door that had been bucked clean off its hinges into a foal's bedroom stood out along this area.

Protégé uttered a denial before he turned and barged through the main oaken double door to the classroom itself...

...to be met with the sight of a massacre.

Guards and teachers lay together. Massive exit wounds had gouted dark blood across the lush carpet. One mare lay beneath her desk, huddled up with a rigid scream of terror still on her face, rigidly clutching her stomach. Another had fallen with her hoof still stuck in the far door's latch. Two stallions clung to one another in the corner, riddled with holes. The blackboard was streaked in red, impacts having shattered its brittle surface. A dozen ponies in all, cut down without mercy. None had any weapons on them.

This hadn't been a scene of a firefight. It was the scene of an execution.

Protégé and I stood at the verge of it, horrified. The smell gushed from the room, filling my nostrils with the sickly odour of death, enough to make me feel light-headed. My whole body shook, and my stomach turned. I had to turn and leave to throw up on the carpet outside, gagging as the foul taste stirred my throat into a heavy, wracking cough. Behind me, I could hear Protégé try to find words, but only producing a pained moan as he staggered forward.

Spitting acidic bile, I tried to move in again, and saw the broken desks and exploded cushions of the foals' area.

"Murk. This is—I... I..." Protégé clutched a hoof to his mouth as he moved through the room, looking through the back. As he pushed the doors open, it gave sight to the missing ponies from elsewhere. The cook, two of the guards, and a doctor had been cut down in the playroom. A place of joy, turned into a charnel pit. They had all retreated here to get away.

The guards lay unarmed. The only weapon I could see was beside me. A scoped magnum revolver lay empty, its drum poking out to the side in a sticky pool of cold gore. Six shiny brass casings lay around it.

I knew that revolver by sight.

Protégé turned back to me, somewhere between desperation and horror as he saw the revolver held gently in my hooves.

"That's... that's mine." Protégé uttered, "That means it was *him*. *Shackles* took my weapon. How... why I... I..."

He opened his mouth and screamed upwards, clawing at his mane with his hooves as he

turned this way and that, uprooting desks and pulling aside curtains to reveal the hiding ponies who had bled out in pain here. He checked their threads and eyes, trying in vain to find a survivor amongst the workers. There were none.

I was gasping, trying not to hyperventilate as it sunk in to me as well. I'd never hated the non-slaver workers in Fillydelphia. Many of them weren't *bad* ponies. To see them cut down, the fear frozen on their cold faces. They had only taught foals, not whipped us. Yet now the innocence that had still resided in here had been shattered by Fillydelphia's most brutal slaver.

"Why? *Why would they attack here!?*" Protégé outright screamed ahead of me, throwing over a desk in anger, even as his cheeks were wet with tears. Yet he kept moving toward the back of the playroom, toward two huge doors sealed with massive handles. Gunshots had struck at its locks, but failed to penetrate them.

"Why?" Protégé repeated over and over again, "How could this happen? There are guards! Where were they all? Please all be in here safe, don't, oh please don't. They couldn't have been—"

My ears twitched. I heard movement. *Close* movement, from someone who must have been unmoving to avoid detection, before the reinforced double doors of the foal's panic room slammed open as a heavy stomping and a rattle of metal broke into the area.

There were no foals. Only one massive earth pony stallion.

"**Couldn't have been in my service? As ever, you are a naïve fool, upstart.**"

Chainlink Shackles stood before both of us, armed with his blunt-nosed shotgun hanging around his neck. His beady eyes twitched toward me, a slow grin spreading across his mangy face, before he surged forward and struck Protégé harshly, sending him hurtling back into me. Gagger in pain as his weight crashed into my chest and crumpled me to the ground, I found myself staring upward at the hanging lights.

"**With a little luck on the side too. Welcome back to me, Number Seven.**"

I couldn't help a whine of fear as I started trying to squeeze out and get toward the door. He was right here, right before me, but had a gun. I couldn't flee.

"You won't find Fillydelphia standing for this, Shackles!" Protégé hissed toward the massive slaver, pulling himself off me, "The foals are sacred to this place! You have attacked our very core! You've—"

"Become its saviour, *traitor*." Shackles cut him off with another savage backhoofed slap, moving forward till he was looming over me instead. His hooves squelched through the blood-soaked carpet under his bulk.

Protégé fell again, face down but turning as he pushed himself up to his knees. "Saviour? You are no such thing! You—"

"Saved the foals." Shackles sneered. "Got them out of the building, after a rogue slaver continued his rebellion by trying to assassinate the next generation of ponies. The same one who tried to kill a higher rank multiple times on a mountain excursion. That would be you."

His hoof pointed toward me, still holding Protégé's revolver.

"**Your weapon, slave!** Manufactured in this city, identifiable as yours. Ballistics will match the rounds. We **are** a weapons industry after all, we have the experts. Dozens of slavers saw you on the peak in your sabotage attempt. You were seen with the escaped slaves at the Ministry of Arcane Science. This revolver was stolen back during your ambush—"

"*No it wasn't!*" I shouted out, trying not to sound too squeaky, but I balked the moment

Shackles glared over at me, killing my protest on the spot with his presence. Within just five feet, he was a towering monstrosity of filth and power.

“—stolen back, and used to commit an atrocity in here. Thankfully, I was here to stop you with my cohorts, moving the foals somewhere safer and secret till we have ended this war and rooted out the **traitors** like **you!**”

His deception laid bare, there was a moment of quiet for him to drink in the look of shock on Protégé’s face. The unicorn looked over to me, his eyes focused on the revolver, then around to the ponies cut down by his weapon.

I felt sick again. The *foals*. The foals had been taken by *Chainlink Shackles!* No. No, no, NO! That *couldn’t be true!*

Every horror I’d been through, every fear I felt when I saw him moving that hoof closer to me, every memory of the whips, the collar, the mental torture, and humiliation; imagining that on to every one of the foals under him. No. *No...*

“Where are they, Shackles!?” Protégé shouted up at our attacker, before hissing more quietly. “I see it now, you sent that note.”

“Not so clever now, are you, eh? You expect I’ll say?” Shackles chuckled, keeping his shotgun ready as he almost lovingly stroked a hoof around Protégé’s jawline, “What you going to think when they trial you? Punish you? Maybe you’ll get to be mine again, eh?”

Protégé was seething with anger, his teeth visible and clenched.

“This will never pass. I’ve done nothing but help the foals!”

That thick, dirty laugh rumbled out from my old master. His hoof moved up, patting Protégé’s face, drawing both of us together. My hooves felt rooted down. Every instinct said run, but every bit of sense knew he would happily gun me down. He’d once talked about that shotgun being loaded with something he called ‘pegasi shot’, to not kill. It was to stop his slaves escaping by ravaging them with tiny pellets, like it had once done to Sunny.

And he seemed completely confident.

“And yet who, little upstart, will believe you now?”

His hoof drew back, grabbing a collar that hung on a chain around his neck. Lunging forward with a laugh, he sent it dropping down toward Protégé’s neck.

“Now both of you get to come with me. Your ‘friends’ will come to try and get you, Number Seven. Only they won’t be able to. You’ll get to watch me break their pride one by one through you. It’ll be a fitting way to punish you for defying me. Yet first...”

The collar crept closer to Protégé.

“I have an *old* slave to reclaim.”

It stopped in mid-air, surrounded by a red magic field.

Protégé looked up, tears welling in his eyes as his horn strained and glowed brightly. He shoved me to the side, making me stumble away over a chair. Tumbling, I looked back up to see Protégé staring down the gigantic earth pony from below, the collar held tight in telekinesis.

“I’m not coming with you. I escaped you before.”

Shackles growled, his hoof raising.

“You insolent worm! **Remember your place!**”

The hoof descended, yet Protégé didn’t let it land.

“You *will not* own me again!”

The collar surged upward and struck Shackles across the face in a harsh blow, making the massive earth pony stumble and stagger off to the side. Roaring his anger, Shackles threw a

hoof in a backward motion, lashing out at Protégé, only to miss as the small pony ducked below it, turned, and bucked Shackles in the throat.

For a moment, I found myself spellbound as I heard Shackles gag and retch. The second swipe from him, however, came powering through like a freight train, as Shackles thundered into Protégé's skull with a left-hoofed swing even as he choked on the strike to his throat. The young pony was sent flying off his hooves, tumbling through the air to crash through a foal's desk with a cry of pain.

I saw the shotgun swing up.

"Protégé! Watch out!"

The words tumbled from my mouth. My hoof twitched, sending the mouthpiece of my saddle snapping out before I bit on it three times. Each time sending a shot from *Rarity's Grace* across the room into the unmissable target of Chainlink Shackles.

They didn't even slow him down as the tiny rounds buried into his skin. One even deflected from a buckle. But it did get his attention away from Protégé.

He didn't even lose his grin as he began to turn his head and trot toward me, a second collar trailing on the ground behind him that dropped from a hook on his torso. Two thin trails of blood went down his side from my shots. He wasn't even affected, the tiny rounds meant nothing to his size.

"Attacking your Master, Number Seven. Such gall and insolence, COME HERE!"

Screaming as he picked up the pace, I ran to one side to avoid his bulky charge before diving away from a huge hoof reaching for me. Terror *surged* through my veins. Chainlink Shackles was trying to attack me! Memories of him lashing my back and crushing me below his hoof repeated over and over in my head. He was trying to hurt me again! Scrambling, I crawled forward, trying to get up. I felt the huge dinner plate-sized hooves grab at me.

Protégé shouted across the room.

"Where are the foals, Shackles!?" Stern will never allow anything to happen to them!"

Behind me, the shotgun around Shackle's neck twisted in a red magic field, trying to aim upwards at himself. Protégé charged from the side of my vision, lowering his horn as he attempted to impale the slaver's neck, only to be smashed aside by a shoulder. Protégé landed hard, rolling away from Shackle's brutal stamp on the ground.

"Oh, they're quite safe, **slave.**" Another missed stamp **"Ready to become the new generation as I intend."**

We were fighting. I was *fighting* Chainlink Shackles. The thought just wouldn't leave me, yet I couldn't leave Protégé to it alone. He wanted to take the foals. He wanted to use the memory on *them!* He was going to make a *whole generation of ponies like I had been!*

The thought. It... it just made me so *angry!*

Changing trigger, I steeled myself and fired from the floor, sending the grapple hook out to grab the shotgun and keep it from aiming at my comrade. Pulling on it dragged its muzzle away before it fired. The loud retort sent a shooting pain through my head in the enclosed room as I heard it smash a window somewhere off to the side. Suddenly I was being dragged, pulled on the wire toward Shackles as his hooves wound around it.

"Murk!"

Protégé shouted from behind the slaver, hurling a chair at his head. It impacted *hard* across Shackle's jawline and staggered him. Protégé's magic tore the shotgun from around Shackle's neck in the brief space he got. He tried to take it for himself, but it flew toward me as my grapple hook retracted, bouncing and rolling away into the next room.

"You... little worm! You think you can hurt me? You are no slaver! You never were!"

Undeterred by the attacks, Shackles turned and hurled the chair *back* at Protégé using that unreal strength, impacting on the unicorn's side and sending him falling into a corner.

He lay still.

Fear was settling in hard. Protégé was down. I was alone with Shackles. Putting aside the sickening feeling of the slick red stains below me, I attempted to get away, slipping and pulling myself as best I could. I could hear the stomping behind me.

"All alone once more."

He sung it, no doubt grinning at his sing-song tone that dripped with sick delight. Whining, I limped faster before an almost casual strike knocked me on my side.

"All alone where he belongs."

I tried to get up, before a hoof landed on my chest *hard*.

"Oh no, you do not slide away, Number Seven."

I wriggled, before he *leaned*. Some of his huge weight crushed down, as I felt my ribs flare in agony, felt them *shift*. I screamed, batting his leg with my tiny hooves.

"Isn't this familiar, little slave? Disobedience means punishment! You think you've been heroic and brave, staying away and accomplishing things? Do you really think you'll escape?"

He pressed down, as I threw my head back, unable to stop a squeal of pain coming forth.

"I—argh!"

"You think you've been special, Number Seven. Just because you merely *glided* for a while, so I hear. Because you have friends? Because you've not been in chains for a few days?"

His face leaned down, yellowed teeth and sweaty mane dropping to fill my vision. I tried to block it away with my front hooves.

"You think that puts you closer to escaping? Well let me tell you something, Number Seven..."

His face crept in uncomfortably close while his hoof kept me pinned. His lips slid in beside my ear, within an inch. His smell was overpowering, it made me want to gag. I was covered by his hoof, his mane; trapped in such closeness to the foul slaver as he whispered.

"You're no record holder. Others got closer, *much* closer to escape than you have. One even got seventy miles away from Fillydelphia in the old days before the Wall. Got married. Had a kid, all just before I caught up to him. He lived ten months thinking he was *free*. I dragged him from his bed right in front of his family, dragged him screaming all the way home, where he lived another eighteen years in my service. You see, there's nothing special about you, Number Seven. Nothing I haven't seen a dozen times before. He got so far for nothing, and you're still here with ME!"

I cried out as his last word screamed into my ear, dizzying me. The weight on my chest disappeared, before I rolled on my side and held my sore ears and head. Yelping as I felt his hoof bat me onto my back, the terrifying feeling of one of my wings being dragged out from my body and spread onto the floor set me wriggling madly. No! Of all things, my wings!

"These made you think you were something more? A foal's belief. Perhaps you need to be reminded. *Broken* back in the way you first were!"

One of his back hooves landed on my back, crushing me to the floor. One of his front hooves pulled my wing right out. I screamed.

Glancing over my back, I saw his other hoof lift up, ready to stamp. A whole host of

horrible feelings from the past raced through me. I could feel the cold floor like an anvil, see the same fury in his eyes. The same intent! I couldn't help it, I begged. I wailed for him to stop, but that hoof only stopped rising and surged down like a hammer.

Protégé's voice screamed as he launched on to Shackle's neck. Gripping around him, forcing the slaver away from me by the momentum of his charge. I saw him drive a broken leg of a chair into Shackles' side, hurling a solid metal typewriter into the slaver's face with magic at the same time. The slaver roared, tossing the smaller pony around as he tried to get him off.

Protégé was *fighting back*. I couldn't just leave him.

I could *fight* Shackles.

Struggling to get my breath, I stood up, grabbed the fallen chair leg in my mouth, and rushed in, drawing it back to swing across the slaver's face! He'd wanted to break my wings! The wings I'd only just learned to *love*!

I swung with all of that pent up hurt and anger.

The impact hurt my teeth as the wood snapped on contact. He was still distracted by Protégé, so I turned and tried to buck at him but even connecting with the attack sent me bouncing off him.

Stumbling over, I dropped onto my face and rolled back up to meet his bulk surging toward me! With a simple barge of his body, I was knocked clean over the table, sending it clattering atop the bodies in here.

He twisted enough to drag Protégé off him, roaring at me the whole time. I had to ignore the words, ignore the orders. I knew what freedom was, I couldn't look back now!

I knew he was big, but in the context of having him actually furious and throwing his weight at me, Shackles was *massive*. Every swing of a hoof sent me scurrying away. His furious eyes promised retribution and punishment for every second I defied him as I dodged and ran away from his chase around the room, hopping over a table and diving under the next one to stay away from that huge weight. Protégé was all that kept me going, as he tried to use his magic to hurl items and attack the slaver alongside me. Having an ally, somepony brave enough to fight this monster, was what I needed to find the courage to keep doing this.

My grapple hook would hit him in the face every time I got some room. Protégé ducked and weaved, throwing himself away from those haymaker-like sweeps of Shackles' hooves. My hook cracked off Shackle's temple, drawing blood from the impact and giving Protégé the space to get out of the corner Shackles had backed him into, sending a whole filing cabinet collapsing onto the huge pony. The heavy item knocked the slaver's pack on the floor, where its leather buckle snapped.

The tinkling of metal announced its contents scattering all over the floor. I saw the magnum rounds he'd used with Protégé's revolver roll and bounce through the blood. Shackles shook his head, groaning and scowling. The hit had dizzied him! There was my chance!

Grabbing a shard of sharp metal from a broken school desk, I galloped forward and hurled myself off a desk to try and land atop him. I'd stab down and—

His rear hoof came up and *bucked*.

The huge shape flying toward me being the last thing I saw, I passed out from the impact for a good few seconds. Knocked cleanly unconscious, as pain flared through my head to push me into the black void.

Awaking, scant seconds later, to a splitting headache, I found myself lying against a wall outside the classroom.

Somewhere on my back I could feel a sharp pain and wet blood. Around me lay shards of glass from the window I'd been sent flying through. My forehead was swelling into a thick lump where he'd even just glanced it with his buck. Even blinking sent a shot of pain to the very core of my head. If that had hit me directly, I'd likely just have had my neck broken on the whiplash alone.

The adrenaline was wearing off, the rush to fight ebbing away. He was so strong. It was like fighting Brimstone as a normal pony. His weight, his surprising speed on a bulky torso, his sheer power.

I could hear his roars and Protégé's thinner cry from inside the room as my consciousness dipped in and out. My eyelids felt heavy. Thumps passed through the floor in time with Shackles' movements, waking me up every time. Eventually, hissing in pain, I staggered up in time for the heavy retort of a revolver to send a sharp whip of pain streaking through my head all over again.

Wearily, I pulled myself up to the interior window and looked back in.

They were gone. From the opposite side of the building I heard gunshots. First the brutal roar of a shotgun, then the heavy snap of Protégé's revolver. On shaky legs, I staggered and somewhat galloped toward the area, before the sounds began to move downstairs.

"How long can you avoid coming back to me, my old slave!"

Three shots from Protégé's revolver answered him, followed only by Shackles' laughter. The sound reverberated around the Alpha-Omega Hotel, as I started to find the chaos of their moving gunfight on my route. Holes were torn out of old paintings, and parts of the carpet exploded upward from buckshot. I turned into the stairwell, frantically trying to reload *Rarity's Grace* on the way and fighting the temptation to lie down and close my eyes.

"You will not hurt the foals! I will not let them come to harm!"

"They aren't yours, upstart. They never were! Slaves don't own anything!"

I burst into the main hallway just in time to see Protégé rush out the main doors to the streets of Fillydelphia. He was hurt, one side of his cheek swollen and bleeding. While he hurried, I could see him pushing through pain. Skidding to a halt, I saw him point the revolver. Shackles was in clear view near the gate! The open ground of the hotel's exterior held no cover until the far away buildings of the next street over! He had him!

"Stand down! You are surrounded!"

A griffon's voice shrieked through the air, and multiple large figures dropped from the sky, their long rifles aimed directly at Protégé.

Sneaking forward, I poked my head through a window to look outside. The moment I saw what had happened, I recoiled in dismay.

Other griffons hung in the air, weapons pointed cleanly at Protégé. He was surrounded by at least a dozen other ponies that were now advancing from the ground. All were armed. Most were soldiers, not slavers. Yet he stood with his revolver pointed firmly at Chainlink Shackles. Two spotlights were centred on Protégé, watching him. At least a dozen ponies and griffons were repeatedly calling for him to throw down his weapon.

The big slaver stood in the perimeter fence gate, grinning and leering at the small unicorn before him. Masses of rifles were pointed at Red Eye's apprentice.

The revolver shook in the air. I could tell Protégé wanted to pull that trigger. He had Shackles dead to rights, the gun was powerful enough to shatter anypony's skull. I heard the

slaver speak, just loudly enough for Protégé to hear.

"I know you want to. Go on. The eternal chain keeps on moving with or without me. There's others who'd do it. So go on. Come on upstart, colt cuddler, *slave!* Throw away everything to end me. Won't it make Fillydelphia so much *better?* Will it?"

I could see Protégé's teeth clench as the griffon shouted again to him.

"Throw down the gun, Protégé! You are accused of traitorous acts, we will hear your side in trial!"

"Come on upstart. What are you waiting for? Think of all the ways I hurt you, made you beg back in the day. Or all the ways I hurt the runt to break him."

Protégé's face tightened. I saw the magic around his revolver grow stronger.

"Put! It! Down!"

Shackles kept his head high.

"Revenge for all of it. Give it all up to kill me, worth it?"

There was a moment of silence. It might have been a couple seconds, but it felt so much more. I wanted to run out, to tell the truth, but they'd never believe a lowly slave. I couldn't help him. I just had to watch this happen.

His eyes were wet, and his teeth clenched. I could see how much he *wanted* to. He was being blamed for hurting the very thing he believed in. He could end the tyrant of Fillydelphia right now!

Gradually, his whole body shaking, Protégé dispelled his magic, and the revolver clattered to the ground.

Chainlink Shackles only smiled, and let a low chuckle rumble through him. He watched as the griffons descended and chained Protégé. He *enjoyed* the sight. Standing there all triumphant, as though he was the one in the 'right.'

The sight made me sick to see.

Then he cast his eyes to the Hotel and me, and I had to flee.

I didn't have a choice. He'd have come for me.

I fled through the hotel to the servant's entrance, passing over bloodied floors even as Protégé was no doubt led away in chains past a mocking Chainlink Shackles. I heard ponies behind me begin to filter into the hotel to find the devastation from Protégé's own weapon he'd been caught carrying in his magic. Feeling my muscles seize up and joints ache, I fell into doorframes and tripped on stairs during my hurried retreat. My head still felt dizzy, the lump throbbing.

It was a tiring effort to reach the servant's doorway. Galloping out, crawling under the fence, and diving into the ruins, I simply fell to the ground upon reaching Unity and Coral. Exhausted and stammering, I began desperately trying to tell them what had happened. The loss of the foals, the proximity I'd come to that evil slaver again, the framing of Protégé, the massacre in the hotel.

The fact that Chainlink Shackles had played us and won.

I winced, squeaking as the wet towel was held against my stinging forehead.

"There we go." Unity whispered, pulling one of my own hooves up to hold the cloth myself, "Just let me get this potion open."

"Thanks. I can d-do it myself, though." I murmured, before inwardly biting my tongue at

maybe sounding ungrateful. Really, I was just disappointed and worried.

"Then humour me." She smiled, albeit thinly, popping the cork of the potion with her magic before taking over holding the towel again.

My hooves free, I drank the tingling magic liquid. Slowly, I felt the pain subside. The hot lances of pain firing through my skull every time I moved it died down to a dull thumping. "Um, thanks."

"No problem." Unity seemed a little hesitant to smile any more, before putting the empty potion away, trotting back inside the pumping station to do so. Sitting back, she sighed and lowered her head.

We'd returned to the sewers a few minutes ago. The news did not take well amongst the others, Coral least of all. She had ranted and raved, repeatedly asserting the atrocity that such a tactic by Shackles was. I'd never heard her curse before until now. In fact, her vengeful mood had scared Glimmer completely out of talking to her regarding the orb.

I didn't blame her. Coral's anger was not something approached lightly at this moment. Even Brimstone had kept his distance.

The foals were likely somewhere beyond our reach now, kept hidden by the most dangerous of slavers. It was clear to us all that they were probably in the metro slave den, but that didn't help them feel any less distant or ease the worries of what they might be going through right now. Of what he might do to them. We'd never gotten into that lair of Shackles' before, and if possible, we wanted to have avoided it forever. A world entirely devoted to just him and his madness was something I wanted to stay far away from. Yet with the foals in danger, it was feeling like a very worrying reality that we'd have to attempt to get in there.

Only, it lay beyond the reach of our abilities. I'd seen how heavy the guard was down there personally. Even with Mister Peace, Brimstone, and Coral at her best we couldn't penetrate such a fortified underground place. Not that it had stopped her from trying to suggest it compared to considering them beyond saving. Eventually, she had accepted none of us were even thinking of that.

Unity returned, sitting beside me. Part of me couldn't miss the fact that we instinctively sat a few feet away from one another. There was still an awkward air, despite our friendship.

"Your sister was saying she's closing in on a way in, you know? I tried to ask more, but she's just got her nose in those maps. Something about the crater? A hidden base? She wasn't very talkative, for once. Like she's really sad about something right now."

I sighed and leaned back. Honestly, my mind was elsewhere too. I kept seeing Protégé being led away and feeling a horrible fear creep over me. He'd already lost his precious Mall, then much of his reputation, then his friends and allies. Now he could lose so much more.

"Murky?"

Snapping up, I yelped as the back of my skull hit the wall harder than I expected.

"Yow! Um, oh, sorry. Yes, the crater place... thing."

I certainly remembered it. That and seeing it go deeper, the tunnel the ghouls had chased me from long ago had went somewhere yet unexplored for sure. Given Magister Heartcare's connection to the zebras, it seemed likely that the chamber I'd been trapped in might be linked to the outer metro and Ministry Station. From what I'd heard from the others though, the issue was where it actually met the trainlines. Running into the outer metro with no knowledge of where we were was suicide of the most horrible sort. Those ancient tunnels were not meant for ponies any more.

"You sure you don't need to rest it off?"

It occurred to me that I was still sitting in the middle of a conversation. My mind was everywhere, even with Unity right beside me. Shaking my head (and quickly regretting the dizziness as the potion did its work) I tried to force a smile back at her. It failed.

"No, no. I'm just, um, worried."

He was being marched away in chains. No aid forthcoming from any slaver. They could do anything to him now! I couldn't just—no. I had to know for sure what was going on, but I knew the others wouldn't agree to me going out.

"In fact I—" I coughed into my hoof, getting up and pulling my saddle back on. "I think I'm just going to get some fresh air."

"Murky, we're in Fillydelphia. There isn't any fresh air. Outside is thicker with chemicals than in here."

I turned, surprised. I'd never heard Unity pull a deadpan comment before. I met her with eyelids lowered and a thoroughly disbelieving face.

She had a serious look to her face, I wasn't fooling her.

"You're going to hunt for him, aren't you? After what you saw."

Slowly, I nodded, and my hooves shifting meekly together as I lowered my head.

"Want some company?"

That took me by surprise, but it wasn't possible.

"I'll, uh, I'll be okay, thanks. I won't take any risks, promise."

I tried to smile, but the look of disappointment on her face hit me hard. Feeling guilty, I made to explain how I needed the grapple and gliding to get where I was intending to go, but she spoke first.

"Murky, I know we have our moments of bonding and friendship, but things are still a bit, y'know..."

"Awkward?" I offered, hesitantly. It was right, for every warm shared time there were countless little 'glance across the room nervously' moments as we each had our own thoughts about the truth.

Unity nodded, quietly sighing and looking to the side, her thick mane hiding her face from this angle. "I don't, um, I don't make you uncomfortable, do I?"

A thousand words at once tried to explode through my mouth. Instead I simply produced something more akin to 'ablurgghh'.

Eventually I corrected myself. "No. No. It's just like, um..."

She finished for me.

"You look over and wonder what kind of friend you see or not? If it's the same pony you knew in a time you forgot?"

I just gulped and nodded. It was about the best either of us could vocalise it. Unfortunately, her slightly unsure look at the reply didn't fill me with confidence.

"Be careful out there, Murky. I'll let them all know."

She briefly embraced me. There was a moment that I felt her move, similar to when she'd kissed my cheek weeks ago near the FunBarn. Only this time, she paused a few inches before contact. After a few seconds, she pulled away, as though reconsidering it. Letting go of me, she trotted back to the pumping station with soft and slow steps.

As I left, I had the distinct impression I'd done something wrong.

Outside, I had to try and push down my worries.

Unity was safe down here with the others, but Protégé was not. The foals were in lethal danger, yes, but I couldn't do anything about them right now until my friends figured something out. Protégé, however, was perhaps reachable. He had done a lot wrong to me over the time I'd known him, yet I felt wrong abandoning him to all this alone.

It was because of that feeling that I moved to the rooftops of factories and buildings to approach the FunFarm once more. With the grapple on my saddle and even a few short (and wonderfully confidence boosting) glides from roof to roof, I didn't find it difficult to traverse Fillydelphia. There were enough scrap-built covers from the acidic rain and heavy industrial vents to hide from the balloons and griffons after all. Moving like this felt invigorating, free of the same boundaries I was used to.

Eventually, I crossed into the old amusement park. Soaring over its fence and firing my grapple to the top of the helter-skelter. It was an old hiding place and one I felt intensely comfortable in. Even better, it was close by to the FunBarn itself, close enough that I could see and hear the commotion going on outside.

Amongst the grounds strewn with raw metals and lumber, a large group of ponies had gathered. Consisting of mostly slavers, they clustered in the FunBarn's outer area near the gate. Keen guards were posted in newly raised watchtowers at each corner of the Barn, while I could see slaves crawling all over the Barn welding metal plates of armour to its walls, giving it the impression of a metallic tortoise. The gathering of slavers was as much directing the workers as it was discussing their own things. They were preparing the headquarters for battle, that much was obvious. The slaves involved had been worked to the bone, many of them looking little more than skeletons as they tiredly hammered away to bend metal around support struts.

Below them, slavers and guards came and went in rapid succession from the main group. I recognised many of them from the time I'd spent at Protégé's side within that building; Red Eye's higher ranks. The organisers, generals, and master slavers. Several griffons loomed in the crowd, fully armed and holding rifles ready around the unmistakable form of Stern herself. Her rifle alone speared above the rest to end in that thick lump of metal that was its barrel end. Big Brutus was visible, standing stoically behind Grindstone with cybernetics humming and hissing as they flexed and pivoted. Upon his cubed artificial shoulder, I could see the symbol of a dragon crossed out to proclaim his victory on the mountain.

With a little careful peering, I saw List Seeker in there too, then Mister Mosin and Wicked Slit. Some clean-uniformed unicorns stood talking to Stern, bright red with golden bands on their shoulders. Diplomats for Red Eye? One was shaking his head despairingly, as though bringing bad news. I tried to pick out what he was saying from my place of hiding. I could hear the voice. Perhaps if he'd been the only one talking I might have figured it out, but with everypony blabbering at once, it was impossible.

That was set to change. With a great shriek, Stern caught the attention of every pony and griffon in the area. I clamped my hooves over my ears. Even the slaves all stopped for a second. Stern stopped, lowering her head and looking around as she claimed the moment as hers to speak by force of authority.

"We have received word that the survivors of the Cathedral will be returning shortly. You will all prepare supplies and aid to integrate them into the defence of Fillydelphia immediately upon their arrival. Red Eye's great city will take the advantage of every griffon,

pony, weapon, and shared of ammo it can for the coming battle!”

A murmur passed around. This was not the best of news. Apparently Red Eye had *lost* at the Cathedral? Was this Enclave really that strong? The thought boggled me. Red Eye was *the* power in the wasteland! I remembered hearing about rivals being bought out or stomped under. He had paid many times my price to get me, and considered it cheap. Nopony messed with him on a large scale! Yet the Enclave had beaten him?

“I have assigned you all a Talon representative who will bring my instructions to your appointed zones via air. You will follow them to the letter. Fillydelphia will not fall. Do not share this information, it needs only be followed. These pegasi are known to be able to intercept radio signals. Those of you in the factories have designated delivery sites. All of the Pit combatants are to be released into the fighting arm. Volunteer forces will be assigned to the rooftop defences. I want hourly reports from every sector via Talon dispatch flight, is everyone understood?”

There was a chorus of shouts and stamps.

“For our great leader. For Red Eye. For Unity.”

“*We will sacrifice!*” came the reply from the assembled ponies. Some more zealous than others.

Stern nodded firmly, beating a clenched talon off her breastplate before leaning toward the elderly donkey standing near her. “There shall be no dissent now. We must act as one. Those who dare to do so will be harshly brought down upon after our inevitable victory. Grindstone, you say that one alleged traitor has been uncovered that you brought to my attention.”

“Indeed, Ma’am.” Grindstone coughed, waving to an aid, who turned and ran into the FunBarn. His hoof wobbled to touch the ground again, as he spurned the help of a young buck carrying Grindstone’s belongings now for him.

“Then bring them forth. An example will be made in this moment, while all are gathered.”

I knew exactly who they were talking about. Creeping forward, I peered further out of the helter-skelter at the events below through a snapped hole in its red and white, rotted wood. Ponies were stamping, outraged and shouting in the crowd as they heard of such a thing. Wicked Slit in particular held a foul look, repulsed that such a thing could exist. They were fanatical.

There, from the FunBarn, I saw Chainlink Shackles emerge at the head of a security column. Walking proudly and taller than I’d ever imagined the big slaver being able to do, he led them through the crowd toward the clearing in front of Stern. Behind him, manacled around all four hooves and reduced to awkward stumbling, was Protégé, surrounded by four of Shackles’ own slavers bearing electric prods and the hardwood sticks slavers loved so much to swipe across a chest or a rump.

Protégé tried to walk with his head high, but short steps and heavy chain made it difficult. No doubt this was Shackles’ exact plan. The huge slave master strode into the centre of the clearing, grinning as he nodded to Stern and turned to face his prisoner hobbling after him. At his motioning, the guards threw Protégé into the centre of it all, causing him to stumble and fall into the dirt. I couldn’t see too clearly, but I wondered how badly they’d mistreated him. I knew what being alone with Shackles was like, the way he broke you down, worked at the chinks in your pride to lever open a gap to exploit.

Red Eye’s apprentice’s presence lit a wave of reaction however. They all knew who he was.

Some were clearly shocked, but many saw it as a chance to let their rage come out at somepony they'd often see as 'favoured' above them by their leader. Howls and insults filled the air, before Stern's rifle butt rapped upon her wooden platform and drove them to silence.

"Chainlink Shackles, Grindstone. You are aware of who you accuse?"

"Oh, absolutely. The one *none* of us would have expected, eh?" Shackles didn't take his eyes off Protégé as he spoke.

It almost lit a fire of hope in me as I saw Stern glance down with confusion, perhaps even disbelief. Protégé stared right back at her, an intense look in his eyes.

"Stern! This is nothing but a grab for power by—*argh!*"

Shackles struck him over the face.

"Silence! The accused does not speak!"

Protégé fell again, gritting his teeth and trying to get himself back up on his hooves.

Stern rubbed a talon on her beak, scrutinising the scene before holding her claws out. All those assembled fell silent.

"This is Protégé. Once slave master and now logistics manager of the primary district. He stands under accusation by Masters Chainlink Shackles and Grindstone of traitorous acts. They claim evidence to his crimes!"

The crowd jeered, shouting their support for the two slavers. I wanted to scream out against such things, they were setting him up! At the very least, I could see List Seeker remaining silent.

Stern's rifle thumped again for quiet. "He has offered loyal service and learning under Red Eye for years, as such I request to hear of this evidence and from those you claim witnessed it. I shall stand as adjudicator as Master Grindstone offers prosecution on this alleged turncoat. I shall hear your side with those in attendance as those to bear witness to justice. Protégé, young one, you may be granted one to speak for you, if any wills it?"

Stern looked to the crowd, scanning it. Many slavers shook their head.

Protégé I saw looked only to one, List Seeker. Their eyes met. I could see the pleading in Protégé's face, the silent willing for any help at all here.

Yet List Seeker only lowered his head and looked away, looking sick to his stomach. Too afraid to stand up here, likely worried for the slaves he cared for too. Before him, Protégé let his shoulders slump.

"Very well, you shall speak for yourself." Stern turned to Grindstone, lowering her eyes. "We are at the brink of war, Grindstone. This will not be drawn out or given to break periods. Make your case *now* or do not make it at all."

Grindstone nodded serenely and began to trot forward into the clearing. The crowd fell silent for the old slaver as he moved toward Protégé and began to circle him. Coughing, he cleared his throat first.

"By now, you may have all heard of the unsettling events at the Alpha-Omega Hotel."

The crowd roared their displeasure. Stern only nodded.

"We have at least twelve ponies and griffons of the inner wall security who will testify that *this subject* was found at the Hotel, wielding the weapon he is known to carry, the weapon used in the killing of twenty members of foal-care staff!"

Protégé whipped round, held back by the chains but forcing his head toward the donkey.

"Those are *lies!* I found Chainlink Shackles over the corpses of those who protect the children! My weapon was stolen!"

"And yet who do you have to back up your side of the story?" Grindstone rolled it off his

tone as he closed in, coming almost muzzle-to-muzzle with Protégé, “*Chainlink Shackles* is the one who has *saved* our precious foals from your attempts to undermine us! You deny that he could reveal the foals in safety? You deny that he could *prove* they were evacuated and have been kept unharmed?”

“I *do*. Stern, if you would permit us to an investigation of—”

Stern shook her head. “I have seen the foals myself the moment they were evacuated to the FunBarn while security handled apprehending those at the scene. Shackles’ aid Wormtail brought a message from his master that requested to move them underground for safety in the coming war, to which I agreed. Grindstone’s motion stands.”

“They are lying to you, Stern! They—”

Grindstone swept in front of Protégé, cutting him off. “You have attempted to lie in trial! It is not *us* with countless witnesses who need to answer to *you*! I have witnesses! They are all here!”

He threw a hoof around himself. The slavers liked that one, they clamoured and stamped their approval. Indeed I recognised many of them from the mountain or the wagon ambush. I was feeling frustrated beyond measure, this was all lies and slander against him! He was a good pony! Why wouldn’t the others listen!? This wasn’t a fair process!

“You attacked the Alpha-Omega Hotel alone!”

“I did not!”

“You attempted assassination upon the mountain expedition mere days ago where dozens of slavers saw you firing upon their friends in service of *slaves*!”

“*Under Master Red Eye’s orders!*”

“That same slave group that has gone rogue was seen stealing from the very convoy that held the weapon we found in your magic at the Hotel! You were seen with their war machine! You have been enamoured with ponies from that group ever since you petitioned us to allow you to own the pegasus! You are a turncoat and a traitor!”

“I AM NO TRAITOR!” Protégé screamed at him, trying to push forward, his eyes locked on Stern, “I have done nothing but serve Master Red Eye! He was afraid of this! Afraid of this very thing happening, Stern!”

That got her attention, appealing to her loyalty. Protégé took a deep breath, moving around Grindstone. I saw Chainlink Shackles’ grin dip slightly.

“The assassination of Master Grizzly and of my associate Ragini is proof here! They had flawless records! In Grizzly’s case decades of service, yet in Ragini’s case she was a sister to your faction! A Talon! They were murdered by Shackles’ group on that mountain top, the expedition that Master Red Eye bid us infiltrate to root out corruption at the very heart of Fillydelphia! He had the raider Wildcard end her life!”

Stern’s gaze turned harsh. This was a dangerous game Protégé was playing. I knew well how intense the Talons’ feelings were for their own. To attempt to use Ragini’s death for this was playing with serious fire. Yet Protégé met her gaze right on.

“There are those who can see the reality! That’s why they were killed! They murdered a Talon in cold blood to prevent you hearing about their lust for control of this city! She was family to you, a comrade to me! She died in utmost service to the one her duty told her to protect. You knew *her*, Stern, and she fought beside me up there. Would she have turned traitor if what they say is true? Would a Talon turn against you?”

Silence.

Stern did not move. Her fierce gaze never left the small unicorn before her. I could see her

talons gripping the rifle so hard that it was shivering.

“Ragini... would not have turned. She was sister to us all.”

“Then you kn—”

“Silence.” Stern interrupted him, “If you claim this, then what proof do I have that you did not betray the Talon I tasked to protect *your* life. In the face of everything else, *that* is what I see is the most likely story here. That you killed my sworn sister! You kill one of us, you hurt all of us!”

Stern was seething, her wings snapping harshly behind her.

“I seek to bring her killer to justice! I have grieved for her!”

“Then explain your lack of appearance to her funeral!” Stern bitterly roared, almost looking like she wanted to leap off the platform. “Shackles returned her body to us with full honours after the desecration the slaves and their raider met out to her corpse.”

No we hadn’t! Brim didn’t touch her! *We’d fought with her!* How dare he claim that!

All those protests and more rung in my head over and over.

“Chainlink Shackles presided over her cremation. He spoke of her courage in trying to help his and our vision by attempting to put a stop to the rogue slaves, but now I see the truth is worse than I had thought. You were scheduled to be on trial for things *other* than the Hotel shooting already, out of suspicion. With confirmed witnesses of you attacking and murdering Fillydelphia’s ponies, why should I believe this one element alone? Especially from an *ex-slave*.”

Protégé was quiet. I could see his mouth opening a little, trying to find the words, trying to think of anything. The temptation to glide down there and shout my support of him was overwhelming, but they would never believe me.

They’d never treat any slave’s opinion as anything. That thought hurt deeply to my stance in this city.

“You see?” Grindstone turned, smugly grinning to his supporters, “He is without evidence, without witnesses, and incapable of defending himself. Loyal though he may have been, it seems his existence as a slave elevated has clouded his mind and confused him into supporting a dissident cell’s cause! Caused him to attempt to kill the spirit of Fillydelphia’s young on the eve of *war!*”

“NO!” Protégé outright screamed it. I could see the absolute pain on his face, standing in the city he had dreamed of restoring, being accused of tearing it down. “There are those who know! Those who have seen this insurrection among Fillydelphia’s ranks! Blunderbuck, Mosin’s assistant!”

“*Pizdet!* He is fool!”

Protégé turned and shifted across. I saw him moving to List Seeker, speaking directly to him, quieter.

“You... you know of the blackmails, please. *Speak out!* We can stop this! Please! You want to protect your workers! Then help me!”

In the crowd, I saw List Seeker only offer a sad look. He just stood and shook on the spot, before silently shaking his head.

Dismayed, Protégé backed away into the centre again. He pointed at the huge slaver as best he could with his chained legs.

“Shackles is wanting his power back! He was our *enemy* once! Master Red Eye fought this city from him at great cost and now he is only one rank from ruling this place once again! Can’t any of you see this is an obvious powerplay? You all know the games and politics! You

saw the vote! You would all elect him? The pony who made this a place of terror and darkness? The one we had to rebuild this place from!?"

They laughed at him, Wicked Slit's voice shrieking above it, "I think somepony is *jealous!*"

The crowd jeered.

"Just because he's not the teacher's pet!"

"Not a real slaver!"

"Never *earned* anything!"

"I saw him slipping food to slaves he liked best! Medicine too! Only certain ones!"

"He shot my fucking brother on the mountain!"

The insults and accusations spun around the circle of the trial. The slaves up above watched it. Some were grinning, a couple looked upset. I recognised the latter ones from the Mall when Protégé had been in control.

"Listen to yourselves!" Protégé hollered at them, "Just listen! We were here to build something greater! Something more like Equestria deserves!"

His voice broke on the last word. The crowd quietened down. The passion in his voice was unmistakable. Impossible to fake. Yet he sounded desperate, as he clearly saw himself on the brink of losing the only thing he had left. His dreams.

"To restore Equestria, ushering in a new era away from the wasteland! We weren't just slavers, we were sacrificing for a new world! We achieved that through his direction, his plans, and the toil of the work... of slaves. How many have suffered here? How much will it be for nothing if Fillydelphia becomes the city of darkness that it once was again? Look at all we created. *Master Red Eye* gave us purpose! I have done nothing but serve! *Nothing!*"

The sound of a rifle butt rapping on wood filled the air. Slowly, Protégé turned back to Stern.

The huge griffon was looking very grim. To her right stood Chainlink Shackles, atop the platform with her now.

"Nothing," Stern began, "is precisely what you have now to make me believe anything but the advice of dozens of ponies, griffons, and the words of elected superiors of yours. Chainlink Shackles has shown exemplary service since abdicating to Red Eye years ago. Once I thought you might show the same over time. I trusted Red Eye's opinion to once vote for you, young pony. I now see that in his absence you have revealed your true colours."

My hooves tightened on the ledge of the helter-skelter.

"You are found guilty by trial. You are stripped of all rank and your status among us considered invalid. Red Eye would be very disappointed in you for disgracing his trust in you."

Protégé's expression utterly sank.

"Even aside from your other crimes the punishment for assaulting the Hotel is simple death, normally via arena combat. However, in the absence of time for such an event..."

Her talon's blurred, pulling the rifle from her side. I clumsily tried to get my wings and saddle ready. I had to try, I—

Her rifle was stopped half way down to aiming at Protégé. Shackles' hoof had met it.

Stern gazed at her second in command sideways, clearly spotting the small smile on the huge pony's face as he stared at Protégé.

"With your permission, Stern, we need every bit of aid this city can get right now. Every bit of time. Every bullet..."

His smile turned to *that* grin. That lustful and controlling power fantasy I saw in his eyes

at the opportunity to rule over another. He'd always looked at me like that.

"...every slave."

Protégé remained on the spot, but I could see the twitch go through him and the slight movement in his hind legs as one of them shifted backwards.

"Stern, please listen to me, I—"

"*Silence!*" She shouted harshly at him, not turning her head from Shackles. "He's yours. Assign him to the Mall. Perhaps he'll learn something being in his old cell. Protégé, you are hereby rescinded from your status as a member of Red Eye's city. You will return all equipment given and your personal possessions will be auctioned."

He staggered backward, sitting down as his legs clearly went weak from the crippling realisation.

"Furthermore, in shame of what you have done, there will be no allowance for access to the three methods for freedom. Not by six Pit victories, not by crater work, and not by two years of hard service. If you wish to serve as you say, you will do so as the foundation of our work. That is your punishment for betraying he who gave you purpose."

"Master... I didn't..." Protégé's voice was so quiet, I barely heard it.

"This meeting and trial is over."

Her rifle butt struck the floor once more, announcing an end as the final humiliation was set home.

The slavers cheered at the resolution, supporting their leader. I saw Protégé at the centre of this maddened sham of a fair trial. His head fell low, as the dispersing witnesses cast their real thoughts about him aloud. I saw some slaves applaud, those that knew him stayed very silent and turned back to their work.

I simply watched from the helter-skelter, hooves over my mouth and tears in my eyes as the FunBarn emptied, and Protégé was left behind with only a few others. Those that guarded him and one malicious figure who now began to stride down from the platform to claim his prize. Chainlink Shackles advanced on the slave who had once escaped him long ago.

The glee in Shackles' eyes was obvious as he dropped the collar around the immobile unicorn's neck and bent down. Protégé didn't move as it clamped shut, seemingly at a loss of spirits, but his nose wrinkled as Shackles' sweaty and horrid bulk drew close.

"It's the same thing I tell every slave who thinks they're going to escape soon, little upstart. Same as I told you back then."

Protégé looked up at him, trying to keep a reaction from his face.

"They aren't as special as they think they are. Even if it takes years, I always get them back in the end. You can't break the eternal chain. Welcome home, eh?"

I couldn't do anything but watch and shiver, trying to fight the guilty sense of selfishness for feeling terrified for myself at his words. He'd said that to me too.

Protégé gagged as the chain was tugged hard, yanking him from his hooves. I saw the sight that my friends once had of me, of seeing somepony you care about humiliatingly dragged behind their Master on a chain.

Gathering myself, wiping my tears, I stood up and got ready to follow them.

I needed a chance, just one chance.

They moved through the same route he had once taken me. The wide primary roads of Fillydelphia that would lead any visitor from the main gate past Wicked Slit's factory and deeper into the city toward the Mall. He was parading his new prize, taking long side routes and sticking in the open. Even now he had come back around from the 'tour' of one district, and was passing by the parasprite pits nearby to the main gate again.

It hurt me to watch Protégé having to amble along, falling every time the chain was pulled. My route was far off to the side as I stuck to the cover of the buildings, leaving me unable to get close enough to attempt anything. Could *Rarity's Grace* penetrate a chain? Could I sneak up and detach it from Shackles?

Taking a breath, I sprinted through the office I was hiding on and leapt from the window into the next building along. Skittering on my hooves, I almost fell through a gaping hole at its centre, hurriedly grasping a nearby pillar to avoid the splintered edges of the drop. The floors in here had collapsed from above me to the very ground below.

"Hey! Look who's back where he belongs!"

The shouts had continued the entire way. Protégé had no shortage of enemies among the slavers. Some just looked confused while others turned their backs on the whole ordeal. Shackles paid them no mind, instead simply lavishing in this moment.

"You remember this, slave? How many years ago, when you first came here?"

He didn't turn around to look at Protégé, who simply trotted with his head held low, the chain to his collar dragging through the dusty road.

"Oh, don't worry about trying to look like you don't care. We'll have you back to the same whimpering slave you once were quite soon, hehe. I've got time."

The chain whipped hard, catching the unicorn's chin and whipping his head up by force. Briefly, I saw his pained look. He was understandably terrified, but mostly just looked lost.

"That's the look I know. Now—"

"They're here!"

The shout went out from across the street. I poked my head through the nearest window and looked down to see a small group of Red Eye's soldiers galloping out the bottom floor of this very building. One of them was faltering under the weight of a huge wind-up radio set on his back as he moved.

"Patrols have seen them! The survivors were followed! They're coming! *They're here!* Look! LOOK!"

They rushed past, before gaining a small following of other ponies. Other slavers downed their tools and followed. A group became a crowd. A crowd became a horde. The entire block was shaking from running ponies. Even slaves joined it as they all ran for higher ground to try and see something. What in Equestria was going on? Who was here? I couldn't see anything with how high the factories in this district were.

Fillydelphia was coming alive. The breath was exhaled in a sudden surge of energy and action. I saw soldiers rushing to stations, numerous balloons changed direction in the air. Below me, even Chainlink Shackles stopped and began to trot backwards with Protégé in tow. Griffons took off, massive guns mounted on rooftops swivelled. A momentum picked up on all sides of me as ponies shoved and clamoured for the best vantage points.

It couldn't be.

I began to gallop around the massive hole through the centre of this building until I was at the opposite side. In the distance, I heard Fillydelphia's balefire sirens began to wail, its deathly howl picking up volume and sending shivers down my back as one alarm after

another joined the chorus of nerve-shredding sounds that drifted across each district. Voices and shouting were coming in from all over the city to my ears, like everypony in it was talking at once. The ground shook at the crowds outside the building.

Aiming up, I fired the grapple to the rooftop through the hole and immediately pulled the trigger to winch myself up. Dragged out over the hole, I felt the saddle take my weight, sending me soaring upwards. I bit hard, making the mechanics whirr and hum with the sound of wire being dragged in too quickly past floor after floor. Up above me, the blood red clouds broiled and flickered as they grew closer, until I *launched* out of the hole, hurtling past the point the hook had stuck by a good ten feet, propelling me into the air above the office building. Legs flailing, I fell forward and downward toward the rooftop, only just getting my wings out in time to soften the landing.

Yes. *Landing.*

Picking myself up, I coughed out the dust from where I'd skidded and looked up in the direction of Fillydelphia's main gate. I stood atop a tall building, legs wide as I ran out onto a stray girder poking out from the side of the building for some extra height and truly saw what approached the city.

Beyond the Wall, in the skies above, they were here.

I thought they were clouds, but truly they were not. They were formed *from* clouds. Two gigantic fortresses hanging in the air as they seemed to slowly shift toward Fillydelphia from far off like moving mountains. Castles in the sky.

The longer I looked, the more the scale began to settle home about their true mass. I saw the twinkling lights of windows and the all too obvious shape of siege weaponry bristling on shaped mounts. Their shadows on the ground below covered the mountainsides forming the valley outside Fillydelphia, casting the land into further darkness by their presence. How could anything in the wasteland stand against such titans of war?

Around them I saw smaller vessels. More streamlined, surging forward on the winds to guard their colossal vessels. They moved far faster than anything that size had any right to, and I watched as one suddenly pulled upward and shot into the sky, above the clouds. Between them, I could see chariot-sized vehicles moving in formation, surrounded by tiny dots. I watched them spin and veer with perfect control, inches from their co-fliers. Groups of individual flyers that took off and landed from the huge floating citadels.

An army of pegasi. I could barely believe it, after so many years alone, and yet the sight filled me with nothing but terror for the powers that were about to clash in this corner of the world.

The Enclave had come for Fillydelphia.

"Get the gate closed behind them! Move it! Pass the word up! Get them all in! NOW, NOW!"

Tearing my eyes down from the giants of the clouds, I saw an overseer race onto his balcony below me and scream at those on the ground. Casting my eyes across, I saw what he meant. The open grounds beyond Fillydelphia's main entrance were in chaos, and the cracked concrete surfaces that once had been a site for wagons to park was filled with commotion.

Through the gate streamed a convoy of battered wagons and limping ponies. Most were wounded, some carried on stretchers or mounted on trailers. They were soldiers, primarily, the survivors of the Cathedral who had come back alive from Red Eye's last battle against the Enclave. I'd heard about how well equipped they had been, with armour bypassing

rounds and even rumours of some massive ally alongside the alicorns, but they had been laid low. What chance did we have?

Teams of medical ponies rushed forth. I saw Doctor Weathervane and his own trained healers among them. He raced to those who were falling the moment they got through the closing gates. Many of them bore fresh wounds. Clearly the Enclave had been hounding them the entire way.

Across the walls, an arsenal of weapons began to point out toward the sky, but the Enclave seemed in no hurry to continue the pursuit. Their smaller ships would veer closer, sometimes even drawing fire that rippled across the wall in bright flares, but the ships would whisk away on the winds before any impacts were made at this extreme distance. The missiles and huge anti-air rounds instead collapsed into the suburban outskirts of the city, devastating already ruined buildings with dull thumps, taking a few seconds to reach my ears. I couldn't see the impacts, but I heard crumbling architecture and saw the smoke billow up from beyond the Wall.

Even I could see what was going on. The Enclave were testing Fillydelphia's range in preparation for later.

"RETURN TO YOUR MASTER, SLAVE!"

I froze at the words, yet I realised they were aimed elsewhere. Letting my eyes fall in the direction of the sound, I saw their unmistakable source on the ground. Much as I felt guilty for it, I was relieved they hadn't been meant for my ears.

Below me, I saw the form of Chainlink Shackles ramming his way through the crowd, hurling ponies aside as he chased after Protégé. My heart leapt, he'd gotten away!

Up ahead, the black unicorn ducked and dived between ponies, trailing his chain behind him with his magic. He must have unclipped it when Shackles was distracted!

Immediately, I turned and ran off the girder, back onto the roof, and tore over an unused walkway between the two buildings. I cantered past two guards who were far too busy looking elsewhere in my efforts to try and keep up with Protégé. Once he made a break for the buildings and cover, I could swoop down and get him away!

That wasn't what he was doing. Not at all.

He wasn't trying to get away to the buildings, he was trying to get toward the survivors.

Even at this distance, I heard his impassioned cry.

"Master Red Eye! Master Red Eye!"

He ran from group to group, staying ahead of Chainlink Shackles as the slaver closed in. Other guards began to circle around.

"Where are you!?"

He was trying to find the one pony who could prove his side of the story.

My gallop subsided to a trot as I stumbled to a hiding spot overlooking the square inside the main gate, and watched as he fled from each slaver, desperately sprinting around asking anypony he saw as they made their way in. Tired soldiers and some scientists looked at him. Some shook their heads before he would move on.

"Where is he? Tell me where he is! TELL ME!"

His hooves grabbed a high ranking soldier, shaking the pony before he was knocked off. Slowly, the procession of Cathedral refugees began to move by. Protégé watched them group by group, but they lacked Fillydelphia's leader. He became more frantic, more hysterical, and demanded it of anypony who would look his way as the back of the column neared.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Chainlink Shackles stop. He saw what was going on.

He was letting Protégé *try*. He *knew* something.

It didn't take me long to realise what it was. To figure out why Shackles was happy to let this continue. To stand there with his filthy grin, and watch as Protégé continued his anguished search among the wounded.

Red Eye's apprentice didn't stop crying out. I watched as he threw open the doors to closed medical wagons and stood among the slowest movers. The final ones through the gate before its thick doors heaved shut, cutting off the outside world that had clearly taken something from him.

I saw Protégé standing slumped as those last ponies moved by him, asking them with a quiet voice, one I couldn't hear. I saw light glint from his cheeks, before the entire procession moved by at last. The final pony merely patted Protégé on the shoulder before shaking her head and moving on.

In our travels, I had sometimes seen Protégé at his weakest. I'd seen him scared, upset, or in terrible pain. But this, as the pony who had given him what he believed to be his only purpose was taken from him, was something else.

It hurt me to hear that mournful cry, as the reality hit home.

I couldn't help him. He was much too surrounded and in far too open an area. Instead I was stranded, only able to watch as he collapsed, his head falling onto his grounded front hooves.

The disgust flowed through me as I saw Shackles advance at the moment Protégé was most vulnerable, to gloat quietly, in words I could easily guess at. To drive it home as he pulled the unicorn up with his hooves and reattached the chain.

The sight of Protégé obeying was simply the worst part of it all.

I had to return to my friends. I had no choice. With the Enclave present, I could only flee before Fillydelphia's rooftops turned into a lethal zone of readied troops.

There was nothing I could do. Not now.

My friends were debating the plan. *Again*.

"If the wee foals are in the metro station, we *could* get them on our way there."

"If we know the way there at all," Coral chimed in, "and if they're kept in the inner metro we're without a hope on our own! Shackles' own slaver den is separate from Ministry Station down there, even though they're joined by tunnels. We *will not* leave without them by risking it all to an assumption they aren't in the section we can't fight into!"

"Aye, we won't."

Brimstone Blitz spoke simply, but with great power. He sat towering above them all, regaining some of his old strength as his wounds gradually healed.

"But until we know where they are or not, it's a right bastard to know what to do, Coral. Perhaps getting an inside-pony somehow."

"And how long will that take?" Sunny's voice piped up from across the room. "Who the hell would want to go into that place anyway? Hey, Glim-gal, you know where we're going yet?"

From the back of the room, my sister wiped her brow and stood up, holding up a map with charcoal scrawled over it. She had a thin smile on her face. It seemed distinctly underwhelming compared to her usual expression.

"You bet. Finally managed to work out what part of the tunnels the crater corresponds to. It's not exactly close to where the station is, but hell, it might even be what used to be Aurora and the zebras' main route to it compared to the long one we took before, given what Brim said about indoctrinated ghouls down there last time. Only thing is, I don't know the conditions of the tunnels on that side. And the way into the station itself will be blocked."

"We planned for that. Peace and I'll handle it." Brimstone added.

"So we get in there and hope it's less defended on the inside." Sunny shrugged and tapped her rifle. "We could spend forever trying to be clever here, and get nowhere."

"Then what about the foals? I can maybe get us there but we still don't know if—"

"Everypony, we're going in circles here." Unity raised her voice to the group, an unusual enough sound that it caught their attention. "We're all trying to plan the big thing. Why not take a moment to plan how to locate the foals first, and how to deal with the fact we'll have maybe dozens of them on our hooves. We can't just take three and leave the others down there, can we? What would we be to sacrifice that for an escape?"

I had just returned, but they hadn't seen me. Hiding in the shadows of the doorway, I leaned against the cold metal and listened to Unity speak.

"We aren't just escaping slavery. We're escaping evil, we're trying to break free from the nightmare that this city has become, from what started with Aurora before even the balefire. Leaving somepony behind we could save, I don't think that's who we are. I know you didn't intend that, but we don't want to be caught with it by accident. That's what happened to Miss Star so long ago when it all got out of control. We must step back, look at this, and find a way to know. Not let excitement drive us to being predictable. They've outsmarted us every time, why wouldn't they do it now? If we play their game, we lose. So let's play our own, how we want things to be."

That quietened them.

Unity was right, we couldn't leave those behind that we could save, if given the opportunity. We'd never get everypony, but to walk away from those in need went against every lesson I and the others had learned. Friendship and caring had pulled us this far, pulled us through all these nightmares.

And now we had to use that friendship we'd forged to pull others out of theirs.

"Protégé."

They turned at the sound of my voice, as I strode back in. I baulked, it hadn't occurred that they wouldn't hear my hooves.

"We're going to get Protégé."

Coral Eve's eyes turned harsh. "Murky, my dear, he has made it clear he does not want to come."

"I don't care!" I felt myself tremble as I dismissed an older pony's point. "It went bad. Real bad. They framed him, called him a traitor! He's..."

I took a breath.

"He's been given to Shackles as a slave, now that Red Eye is dead."

There was a silence.

The pony that had enslaved us all, who had led Fillydelphia into what it was to ruin our lives, was now gone. That voice we'd all heard a thousand times on the loudspeakers would speak no longer.

"Fillydelphia is going to be led by Stern and Chainlink Shackles now." I continued,

quietly, "Stern's a battle leader, she'll no doubt leave Shackles to run the industry and slaves until it's over. He'll have full command to do as he wishes, and if Stern dies in battle, it won't ever end."

I took a shallow breath, feeling very small in this mouldy cave below the city.

"Chainlink Shackles will control a slave city again."

Coral Eve let her mouth gasp silently open. Brimstone glowered in thinly veiled rage.

"That's why we need to get Protégé." I paused, and took a breath. "He would help get the foals, I know he would; no matter what he decides for himself."

Coral didn't move her eyes off me, but I saw them soften. Appealing to her son and the other children no doubt helped. Almost as though she had forgotten her criticism, she nodded.

"You think he might know something we don't about Fillydelphia, or how to get the foals?" Coral gestured with a hoof. "So where is he then?"

"And do you think he'll, y'know, stay?" Glimmer chimed in from behind.

"The Mall! It's easy to get in there! I can get in and speak to him, but I don't know what he'll say. He really believes this place could be better. I know you may not, but he does. He'll help but after that he might stay, even though it sounds stupid. It's a... born slave thing. We get attached to ideas."

I felt oddly embarrassed, talking about that. Like it was some sort of racial stereotype.

"No matter what he does after, I'll need all of you to get him out again, though. He might be our only chance to figure something out, so we'll have to be ready to be, um..."

"Proper bloody violent?" Brimstone offered for me with a wry smirk.

"...yeah, that." I gulped, meekly ending the sentence.

"Then what are we waiting for?" The whirring of Mister Peace joining us from the sewer tunnels shifted in behind me. **"A classic case of storm the castle, get the stallion for Miss Fluttershy here, and if possible, install complimentary organic ventilation for the bad guys."**

Glimmerlight snorted. She bumped the side of Peace's newly repaired chassis with a hoof.

"You seem eager."

"These overgrown crickets in tunnels offer not the satisfaction for my compulsions, my dear."

A cigarette was thrown down and stomped out from the corner.

"I didn't hear anyone else coming up with a better plan of our own. Least this is something, so grab your shit and let's rock." Sunny Days flipped her new lever action up on a hoof, catching it in her mouth. "Timesh washtin!"

Mister Peace's screen displayed a goofily content stallion.

"Protecting Miss Fluttershy while surrounded by fighting mares who share in my enthusiasm. Truly, my life is a good one."

It was decided. Rest was over, the next stage of our plan had to go into action right away. The heavy saddlebags were left in the dry back room on top of old staff tables with only the required weapons and tools carried on our backs. It took a little while, we hadn't been planning to need any more trips here, but this was worth it. Any information on that area underground or who might be bought out could be helpful.

"I'll try and sneak in to him. Can the rest of you get into the old cell through the door?" I asked to them as I struggled with one of Brimstone's tool bags.

"I'm sure Peace and Brim can get the jammed door open. Just give us the shout if you

need us, Murky. With or without Protégé.” Glimmerlight ruffled my mane. “We’ll be ready.”

We moved out as one group. Somehow, this time I found myself at the head of the group to move through the tunnels toward the Mall. I cantered ahead, eyes fixed only on the way to go.

Protégé. Please, let me get through to you this time. Don’t let this become your life again.

I heard the crack of the whip before I even left the ventilation shaft.

Stopping on the spot, I felt immediately sweaty; my back crawling with unsettling feelings. The sound was too familiar, and too painful. Memories of standing unclothed and alone in *his* room as he lashed it across my bare back were still too fresh. Especially so, as I was now exiting into that very same office.

Yet as I finally pushed myself to drop out of the duct into the Mall’s upper floors, I could only too well feel the fear of that same whip flaying once again. Dark stains against the corners told where I had bled.

Poking an eye through a crack in the room’s door, I heard it again. A hiss of pain followed the sudden snap of leather. My stomach turned as I crawled out and began to move toward the sound, keeping low against the cold stone walls of the Mall. That noise would lead me to who I wanted, and the knowledge that it did filled me with disgust.

That direction took me to the balcony overlooking the slave pens in the Mall’s plaza. My old home.

I stood alone upon the platform that I had once been bucked off of, looking down onto the slabbed floor and multi-levelled shopping centre. The fountain, long broken now, still vaguely stood after hasty repairs while the walkways were now finished, connecting all areas of the upper levels to one another. Shop fronts held scared and weak slaves, as sick and as frail as we were on the run. Immediately, I had to suppress the urge to cough. The smell in here was sweet and foul, attacking my nostrils with its noxious scent.

They had gathered at the shop exits for they had something to see, something to watch. I came upon the sick theatre of Shackles’ intentions laid bare. Nobody in the entire hall spoke, a silent audience of fear from all sides around the show.

Slowly, my attention fell to the ground itself, past the punishment pits and hanging cages where slaves would be locked for disobeying. My eyes trailed to where slavers and slaves alike watched what was happening. Mister Mosin stood beside a distraught-looking Blunderbuck, while Wormtail trotted to and fro, watching with a smug grin from all angles.

Shackles’ whip blurred through the air, and drew a light spray of blood when it connected. Its target, the young, red-maned unicorn, was chained by his front hooves to a pole; in clear view of the plaza’s occupants.

Protégé gasped in pain, clenching his teeth and falling forward, slipping from the wooden pole to hold himself up on one hoof only. His back was already bruised and swollen, he last hit having only now broken skin. He tried to stand, before it struck again with a meaty slap that echoed around the halls and set him to seethe and growl, trying to deaden the pain. To keep it in as he rested his head on the base of the pole.

“It’s no use trying to bear it, slave.”

The crack of the whip filled the air.

Protégé cried out, before exhaling sharply, trying to cull himself, closing his eyes tightly.

"You know I'll keep going."

That same, wicked sound snapped out, the blur descending again.

I saw all too clearly the splitting of the skin, before he yelled in pain, gasping between stammering breaths.

It fell once more, the quick snap throwing its target forward.

"You have *years* to answer for! Now you will! Before all those you tricked into thinking you were free! You are nothing now but mine, you can stop resisting now. As soon as you do it will stop!"

He paused, before a wholly more savage blow fell, the crack so loud that its deeper, wetter sound echoed.

I saw his head go back, crying out in pain. His whole body shifted in muscle spasms, trying to instinctively get away from the pain. My eyes spotted Wormtail closing in, leering from beside Shackles as he drew back and struck again and again. Each time weakening Protégé's pain resistance a bit more. Each time eroding his strength as the blood trickled around his back. I could see tears in his eyes, unable to hold them back before two more lashes descended. The second one striking home hard. Hard enough to surge past what he could stand.

The look on Chainlink Shackles' face was naught but satisfaction at the loud and pained shriek.

I'd been there. I knew how badly it hurt, and I wiped my eyes, wishing that my understanding mattered. The fact that anyone would eventually be driven past their point of endurance until they were screaming, no matter how strong they were, was not the point. Shackles was trying to attack his pride, and the confidence he had gained when he had gotten away from him. Trying to force him to fall so much further.

As each one landed, drawing those screams again and again, I had to turn away and hold my ears closed. It was too much. There was nothing I could do for him. I simply waited until it was over.

Finally, mercifully, once the slavers had their satisfaction from his agonised wails, I heard no more strikes. Only a low and weary moan of pain.

"You! Get this wretch a potion. He must be able to work his shift tonight."

Chainlink Shackles stepped forward, moving around Protégé where he lay on the ground, breathing hard. One large hoof lifted the unicorn's chin.

"Now listen here, slave. You've got work to do. You'll go to your old office and you will put everything there into crates to be *sold off*. You'll do it yourself, to remember with every item why slaves don't own shit, eh? **Go.**"

Protégé sipped the magical potion eagerly, eyes locked on Shackles as he did. Cautiously, he nodded, before trying to limp away. It took three attempts to move properly, seething and gasping as his back muscles moved.

"HALT!"

He stopped, turning back to the massive slaver who was simply looking around to every assembled associate and slave around.

"What do slaves say?"

Protégé didn't speak, he just stared with red eyes. I could see the disgust on his face, the pain and fear. He didn't want to say it. I pleaded silently with him, just say it and get out of there!

"Go on."

Slowly, I saw him take a breath, shivering and hating every letter.

"Yes... master."

"Louder."

Protégé grimaced, turning away with his eyes closed.

"Yes, master!"

The words were weak in his tortured state, but they were enough for Shackles to wave at him to leave. One slaver joined him as guard, but I saw Wormtail grin at Protégé as he went by. It occurred to me that the slimy little assistant was wearing Protégé's eyepiece.

"Not such a brave one now are you, huh? What would Red Eye think to have heard you *squeal* like that. Guess you'll be taking orders from me too now!"

Protégé clearly tried to ignore him, but a warning glance from Shackles was all it took.

"Yes... *Master* Wormtail."

"That's right."

At last, that was it. Protégé was led out toward his office. Everyone began to disperse, several slavers clustering around Shackles.

"Mosin, have you and your assistant collect the required equipment to defend the station. We will not let those winged rats in, should it come to it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master!" Mosin replied sharply, clicking his wooden hoof on the ground.

"Then move."

Both Mosin and Blunderbuck hurried away, before Shackles began to amble toward the exit. I noticed now he still moved with a limp. It seemed that Shackles had not fully healed from Brimstone's attack. It was a good enough memory to let me not break down after what I'd just seen.

"The rest of you, get the chosen slaves ready for transport to the metro tunnels! I'm going there now to prepare for their arrival. Do NOT be late. Bring them before the Enclave attack, Wormtail will organise it here. GO!"

That was my cue. I began to gallop off toward Protégé's office.

It hadn't been hard to distract the guard. Repeatedly bucking a steel door around the corner until the annoyance drove him to investigate, I looped around via the corridors and approached the door before he returned.

How many times, so long ago, had I approached this heavy carved door as a slave? As somepony called to his master to report or to answer? Its flaking wood stood imposing as ever, hard to the touch and heavy when I began to slowly pull on it. I had to resist the urge to knock.

Behind it, I half-expected to see Protégé at his desk, with his eyepiece on and scanning across documents and letters. To see him with numerous books floating around, looking up with that worryingly genuine smile to greet the slave he had called. It made me meek to fully open and trot through with that image in mind. Of days when things were better for him and worse for me, not now.

Yet within, there was no such thing.

There was no pony at the desk. The books had been scattered, not in the 'messy but somewhat organised via the floor' way as before, but left open on their spines or torn into

heaps. The window at the back was cracked, letting in a small breeze of thick and warm air. Muddy hooves had been treading around on the old musty carpet. If I looked down, I could see a small trail of bloody drips leading toward the desk.

Tentatively moving, my hooves making little sound on the soft floor, I saw that Protégé's side rooms were open, their beds stripped clean. Nopony was present in them. Instead, I simply heard a short breath and sniff. Several in succession, alongside gentle sobbing coming from up ahead, behind the desk.

Part of me felt invasive to approach, to trot up and move around that thick desk after what I'd seen happen over today. The silence felt impossible to break, to announce I was here and suddenly impose myself upon this.

I swallowed my doubts and moved around the desk.

"P-Protégé?"

He looked up sharply, as I found him hunched over, sitting inside the space the missing chair would normally push into, as though it was a hiding space. His front hooves were curled around his rear ones as he sat with his head resting on the wood, cheeks thoroughly wet and eyes sore. Up close, I could see the treatment he'd undergone. Bruises, cuts, and lumps all over, held back only by the healing potion they'd given him to keep his servitude from ending. The small part of his back I could see was a ragged mess.

The moment he saw me, he almost looked ready to bolt. He gasped and rubbed his eyes.

"Murky?"

The name caught me off guard. He'd only ever called me 'Murk' before.

His face betrayed the shock of me appearing here of all places.

"You shouldn't be around. H-he'll come to check on me, somepony will. Go before he gets you too!"

I simply shook my head, biting my lip as I moved closer and sat down with my back to the desk, and looked ahead out of the window to the clouds above.

"I came for you." The words were clumsy, stilted even as I said them. I tried to look at him, but his eyes avoided mine, instead looking at the ruined floor beneath us. He showed no reaction to my words, but merely shook his head.

"He's gone, Murky. He's not coming back." He shook again as the words stammered out, a hoof going to his brow as his eyes screwed tightly shut. "I went t-to the gate a-and..."

"I know, Protégé."

He turned to look at me, surprised.

"I saw it all." My lip quivered, as I slowly reached out and placed a hoof on his shoulder. "I was watching you. I'm... I'm so sorry."

Red Eye, a pony who'd made my already ruined life even worse. Yet in this case, I knew the issue was deeper down. Red Eye wasn't simply a bad pony in this moment, he was a comfort, a meaning to somepony who'd never known it. I'd once believed, still believed, in a hero who I discovered to my shock was not without her flaws. We'd each chosen one pony to help us out of being born into slavery. It was a matter of a constant in our lives being broken. I'd been through that.

Here, Protégé was experiencing the very same thing.

"I don't know what to do, now. He's *gone*! He gave me so much, so much!" A fresh wave of anguish poured over him, as his teeth clenched and he leaned his head back onto the desk, seemingly ignoring my hoof. "I... I tried to do what he said. Tried to *help* Fillydelphia and now I've... I've lost. It's all gone! They took everything from me."

"Not every—"

"Yes! Everything!" he turned back to me, red eyes sore and dripping, "my rank, and the position I went through hell for two years to earn! I worked my way to a better place and they took it away! My allies, my friends the wo... the slaves I tried to help are *his*. *I'm his*. He's going to keep hurting me until he's taken all the pride I tried to give myself! Now Master Red Eye's been taken too. He was like the father I never knew, Murky."

I looked away in shame, trying to avoid staring as he let out the emotion, coughing and having to wipe his eyes again. I remembered the pony I'd first met long ago. This was not the same Protégé, but I had a sense this was the real pony beneath. The pony who'd once been dragged into Fillydelphia, and thrown in a cell.

A pony hurt so terribly by slavery.

"I... I'm sorry."

What else could I say?

"They think I'm a traitor. They're going to break me, Murky. Break me in front of everypony that I tried to be better for! It... it..." he moaned, a hoof reaching around to his back, gasping through his words. "...it hurt so much."

His mind still had to be whirling in pain and horror. Close up, I could see his back now. Even after the potion it was carved up. He would bear scars for certain, even with magic. Pink streaks of re-knitted flesh stood out over the blood-stained coat.

I couldn't bear to see it. Without a word, I drew the bandages from my saddlebag and sat behind him. Protégé didn't protest as I began to wrap it around his torso, although he winced as they lay upon the swollen lines or reopened cuts, continuing to weep. It occurred to me how much he trusted my presence that he would not try to hide his feelings now.

There wasn't anything said for a long time. I felt him jump and heard him gasp in pain every time the bandages lay across any open wounds. Every so often, I would see him look up, as though wishing or hoping for something to come to mind that would make this all better. I knew that look, every slave did it now and again. Just imagining something correcting all this for them, before the crippling realisation settled in again.

At least I could give him this. A fellow slave looking out for another by tending to their wounds. Reminding them that they weren't alone. I reached around his torso to wind the bandages and tie them up, seeing over his shoulder that he was sitting more still, with his eyes closed.

"Th-thank you..."

"I want to help, Protégé." As deftly as I could manage, I pulled another line around his chest to try and hold it in place.

"It doesn't matter. I'm his again. You don't get away. I thought this place could change; Master Red Eye s-showed me. I thought this city could be good! That I could stop as much pain in it. That we could, agh... restore the wasteland!" Protégé spoke more solidly, as he dried his eyes with a loose bit of cloth I hoofed him.

"I know."

"But now it's ruined! It's been ruined!" he almost shouted, "Chainlink Shackles has destroyed it! He's taken the foals a-and gotten rid of the good ponies, and now he's going to undo it all! They're hurting without reason. It's not a sacrifice anymore. Murky, when I was there, he was suggesting to Stern to use slaves as living shields against the Enclave!"

He turned, seeing the look of abject horror on my face. How could they consider that?

Protégé let his head hang, as though in shame.

"Fillydelphia is turning back into what it was long ago. It's not the same city I once believed in, not the same one that grew and recovered. I once thought we'd actually make it! That I might s-see a good Equestria. I had it all planned, Murky! All of it! Wh-what I was going to do and w-where..."

His magic lit, as something floated across from the floor. It was that old photograph of Equestria before the megaspells, cracked and faded. He held it in front of my face as I smoothed out his bandages with careful strokes.

Taking it in my hooves, I stared at it closely. A quiet town of wood and yellowed rooftops. Bright green grass and blue sky contrasted beautifully around the centre building. A thick tree. Tall, and possessing strong branches that filtered out to the sides. But I saw windows in it, a balcony to one side and a door on the front; somepony had turned a tree into a home. To its left, I saw a sign with an open book.

A library.

"I always sat in here and told myself, when we restore Equestria, I was going to live there. Right there." Protégé's chin quivered a little as he took the photo from me, "When we had made everything right again, I'd find it. Just like it is in the photo w-with real grass, and an open sky for the sun! A-and the tree would have had leaves just like this, not brown and dead ones."

I felt for him, I really did. Dozens of times I had heard his swearing to help Equestria, but only now did I truly see the gulf that lay between his wishes and reality.

"It'll n-never happen now. Murky, these slavers are of the old wasteland. A different generation to you and I. They will turn Fillydelphia into an abyss of suffering and fire under the excuse of needing to fight a war. It's exactly what happened to Equestria. No doubt Shackles has his assassination efforts ready for Stern. I've lost."

His tone turned quiet.

"I have failed Murky, and I am afraid. I thought I'd escaped, but I never had."

Slowly, he turned back to me, meeting my own rapidly wetting eyes with his. His hooves grabbed me by the sides of my shoulders, his words solid and intense.

"I think that's why I took interest in trying to know you. You were always stronger than I, was because you had friends who believed in you. I think I hoped that maybe you'd help me, even if I didn't realise it. Help me see I wasn't free. I wasn't the one teaching you.

His eyes were deep, and honest.

"I'd hoped you would teach me."

"Protégé..."

With a shake of his head, he cut me off.

"Now I'm just lost and laid bare for all to see all that I am. Stuck back where I was, and feeling what I knew I felt of you this whole time. That I was not generous to you... I was envious of you, Murky."

He screwed up his eyes.

"For so long I just wanted to say it. And I just don't know what to do now. Other than, well... I don't know if I should. Or if I could. Murky, please. I wanted to... to ask you something and..."

There was another long silence as he let the sentence drift off. We sat close together. Every so often he would turn to me, then away again. Protégé was clearly thinking of something, his mouth opened and closed a few times.

Eventually, he turned and began speaking softly, little more than a timid whisper. The

words were hesitant, almost fearful.

"Murky, can... can I come with you?" His still face cracked, looking away as I saw another tear drip to the floor. "I want to be free..."

There was nothing more to say. In the red light of the window, I leaned forward and pulled him into a tight embrace, pushing my head into his neck with his into mine. I felt him grab my torso in return, letting the last of his pain out after this day from hell and the fall of everything he thought he had. I felt myself sniff and quake at finally, after so long, hearing those words from him.

We had met as master and slave. Now we would try for a better life as equals.

Some minutes passed. We needed them. *He* needed them. Somepony to trust and hold onto during his grief and pain. I always had others for it; Glimmer, Unity, Coral, and even Brimstone behind that quiet mountain of a presence. This might have been the first time he'd ever experienced having somepony to just hold, and be grateful for their presence.

Eventually, with as calm a breath as he could, Protégé sat back up and attempted a smile. It was stilted, forced. The thought was what counted though. I offered my best in return.

"I thank you, Murky; you did not have to come for me. I don't know what I can say. Everything that's happened, things I've done that I... I wish I'd done differently."

I just shook my head. "I might be the only one to understand. The others are waiting, but I can fit you through the shafts. We'll get out without them knowing."

Protégé glanced around and through the window. Below us, we could see the first group of slaves leaving under guard from the Mall for goodness knew what purpose. I saw the disgust on his face.

"He wants to hurt them. As he brought me here in chains, he told me that there are things to do. Things he wants both of us for, Unity too. I fear he will be trying things. Indulging sick curiosity into that place's technology where no eyes can see. I have witnessed too many ponies disappear into that hole without emerging again."

"S-Sunny said the same. We need to get in there. The foals—"

"I know, Murky." Protégé rapped the windowsill with a hoof, quietly angered as much as saddened. "It burns me that I cannot save more, but I am just one small pony. If anything, I've been made to feel even more tiny today. What can just one good soul do against the forces at play here now?"

Gulping, I moved behind him, slightly to one side. Through the window, the dominating presence of the Enclave in the sky was all too clear. Weapons were tracking one another across a kilometre of sky, probably even in range. Just nopony wanted to be the first to truly pull the trigger on it yet. Fillydelphia felt ready to explode in a heartbeat.

"You aren't alone. Not now. You always told me what ponies could do when they worked together, Protégé! That's what you dreamed of, and I don't think that was all Red Eye talking."

His head lowered, a still bruised eye closing. "I dreamed of ponies coming together out of will, Murky. Out of love and willingness to try for something better. They never did. Red Eye convinced me this had to be done, I always wished that we didn't have to. Now it terrifies me to hope for that future, because I do not know where Red Eye's teachings end and where my own thoughts begin."

Something felt off, before I clicked to what it was. I pushed up beside him, looking him dead in the eye.

"I think I know who's thinking now. You didn't say a very important word."

He went silent, thinking through all he'd said. I could see the moment that the cap dropped in his mind.

No Master.

In the way so many had done for me, I rested my hooves on his shoulders gently.

"Protégé, you wanted ponies to come together, well we have! Just maybe not how you dreamed of but... it's something. We're just trying for each other and the ones we *can* help, like you. We're not struggling to restore Equestria. We're not trying to change the world."

I moved away, looking over his desk and lifting the photograph of the library.

"We rose up and fought hard because we wanted to be *free*. Look how much has happened, how close we're getting! We had something to fight for, something that we could passionately believe in. It's the very first thing I ever truly *thought* for myself. If it could work for me, it can work for others trapped in here! Yourself included."

My saddlebag was pulled open as I paused to pull something out and reverently hoof over to Protégé. A weapon that I'd stolen from the armoury in my raid. A magnificently crafted revolver, a new build from Fillydelphia's factories. It was made of solid forged metal and brass, embossed with the flag of Equestria on its side within a polished wood grip. One of Blunderbuck's side projects.

"Equestria isn't green fields and blue skies any more. But equally, Equestria isn't factories and weapons, it's not printing books and forcing foals to learn. To us, Equestria is *freedom*. That's something we'll fight together for. That's what made us lift up from the cells. Equestria is what's behind that wall, or what lies in reaching tomorrow alive. It's the friend by your side, and it's the brief smile they can give you throughout all the hardship."

My eyes narrowed as I softened my voice.

"Equestria is whatever we want, when we have nothing else to hope for."

Catching it with surprise, Protégé's eyes glanced over it with astonishment, a hoof tracing the grip's design. The same as his own cutie mark before slavery had taken its meaning from him.

"Equestria... is hope. It's what ponies want in these bleak times we live in."

Hearing me, his hooves cradled the weapon, and his eyes carried a sudden clarity. He began to speak, starting uncertain, but growing in strength.

"They wouldn't follow us for what we told them they should have, but they would follow for what they *want*."

Suddenly, his hooves clenched onto it, checking for ammunition with a sudden and startling determination. For the first time in my life around him, I saw Protégé as a free pony, coming to a decision of his own. A fire lit in his eyes, tempered by a shivering, nervous excitement.

"The foals are in danger. Slaves are being taken, ponies are being hurt for no reason. I will not follow him any longer, the dream I had is broken. A childish wish cast onto the winds. Yet even with this I find myself afraid. Murky, I don't see a road ahead of me."

"Because you're the one to choose now." I stepped forward. "Every time I saw you fighting for what you wanted I saw the pony you could be. You're not weak inside, Protégé! M-maybe just in some ways, but we're all like that, nopony's perfect. You care, you're so passionate about what you feel is *right*. Use that. Choose a path."

Protégé mulled over each of my words. Eventually I heard him mutter one.

“Choose...”

The revolver turned in his hooves again as he looked back out the window.

“Then I choose... that I will not slink away alone. You came to find me, to ask me to come with you, but I know the foals are on your mind, as they are on mine. There is more to do. Yet we cannot do it alone, for I do not have the answer you might seek. There is no easy way into that den, with its single way in. With help, however, we *can*. With the support of others. Murky, if we wish to find them, we shall have to raise the stakes!”

He seemed gripped by a sudden drive, words gaining strength as he spoke them and brought everything into clarity for himself as much as anyone. Then, to my surprise, he began to trot forward, grabbing one of his spare sets of armour from the corner and throwing it on even as he headed to the door. The revolver lifted in his magic.

“They seek to end the next generation. I will not permit a legacy I shared in as an accomplice of evil to regress into a darker past once again. There are those needing saved and kept away from Fillydelphia’s grasp. If we need help to get the foals, then they are who we shall seek out.”

His head turned briefly as he shook off the ponytail clasp and tore the symbol of Red Eye from his armour.

“One pony *can* make a difference. I intend to. If Red Eye was right about one thing through all that he taught me, he was right about that. Murky, after all this, I cannot say in words how much you allowing me to come with you and your friends means. How long I’ve wanted to ask you. Yet think, there are other ponies waiting for somepony to give them that chance that you gave me. We shall seek their help!”

“Wait, wait! Protégé!” I ran after him. This had accelerated far beyond me. All the pain was boiled up in him, a slave ready to push *back*. Protégé was back in control of himself, only this time completely.

“What do you mean find others? What are you going to do?”

The door was thrown open from his telekinesis, hard enough that it knocked the guard clean out as he strode into the corridor. Out limped Protégé, gritting his teeth against the pain of moving again and walking on still shaky hooves. He stopped briefly, looking back at me. His eyes betrayed a sense of *need*, a calling as he briefly looked to his own cutie mark.

“I’m going to light a fire of hope in the darkness.”

The cage door into the slave pens was hurled open. Stepping boldly forward, Protégé emerged with the revolver floating meaningfully beside him, and advanced directly toward the middle of the massive shop area. Dozens of slaves turned at the slamming metal and the dressed figure of a pony they’d seen scream before them return. Ten or so slavers, all of Shackles’ group, began to look around too, jerking up from corralling the slaves into their pens. They began to trot forward at the sight, immediately closing in to assert power.

“You!”

Wormtail turned and began to run forward. His hooves stumbled and shook as he pointed one leg with a grimace and a shriek, trying to intercept Protégé.

“You, slave! I remind you that you follow me! Now get back to your office and keep—”

Protégé shot him in the head without breaking stride or even glancing to the side.

The ferocious report of the new revolver echoed around the chamber multiple times, as he reached the centre and looked around him at the slavers, raising the revolver to the closest one. A dozen slavers surrounded him, yet he held it firm.

“Oi! He slotted the Master’s guy!”

“The fuck!?”

Protégé took a deep breath, meeting the eyes of the slaves first as he slowly turned, addressing them loudly and clearly. The slaves seemed confused. They’d seen him in agony not too long ago, yet now he stood here strong and passionate.

“To any and all slavers here, leave *now*. I will give you this one chance.”

They laughed, many of them pointing their weapons at him. “Give us one reason! Just cos you found a weapon, little shrieker!”

“You aren’t a big boy now! Throw it down before we rip you in half!”

Protégé merely smirked, turning his head upward and to the side. His eyes caught mine, as he nodded.

“I had thought you might not. Perhaps some persuasion?”

From my hiding place on the upper floor, I breathed in and stuck a hoof in my mouth. Forcing my sore throat through it, I blew piercing whistle.

On each level, from areas the slavers were not, came my friends. Glimmerlight and Sunny on the upper levels, their weapons trained on the slavers with a little smirk on both their faces. Coral Eve, her horn blazing, appeared behind three of them, Unity with her. Brimstone Blitz wandered his way out from our old cell, towering over the five quite suddenly terrified slavers who’d stood outside it.

I dropped right down to the other side of the mall, the wire humming loudly as I switched triggers to flip out *Rarity’s Grace* at a slaver. He reacted in shock at me dangling suddenly beside him, dropping his weapon. I waved hello.

The slavers were surrounded, caught off guard. A few of them spun weapons to face Brim, to face me or Glimmer. They looked horrified. Two kept them pointed at Protégé, trying to advance closer and assert power over him. They were the big ones, the old slaver veterans.

“I’ll ask you again. Leave.” Protégé’s voice was clipped and short, “You are a skeleton crew while the others are away. You couldn’t take all of us, and I know there’s few left in the building!”

“This... this is just a fucking standoff! We could kill some of you too! You ain’t got shit, we outgun ya!”

There was a slow rumbling from our old cell, before the bars were bent aside to make room for the last member of our party to roll in. The slavers slowly let their jaws drop at the mechanical sight that trundled in with a proud display of old world weapon tech. Mister Peace saluted to them and put on a winking face to his monitor.

“I would *heartily* disagree, my good fellows.”

As one, the slavers dropped their weapons. One even squeaked.

The mood was growing. I could *feel* the excitement in the air surrounding events beginning to flow and surge through my veins.

The slavers were gathered on the bottom floor. Their weapons were taken and piled in a cell as Protégé approached them as a group. Around us, the slaves were perplexed. Some

were scared, but many of them came out their cells, approaching the familiar faces of us. Most just looked in disbelief at what they were seeing. Mister Peace had been sent to round up any guards in the nearby security room who were now marched out to join their fellows.

Protégé looked up at their tall, gangly leader. "Fetch your comrades on the way out and *get out*. The mistreatment in this place has finished."

"Fuck you!" The slaver snarled.

Protégé just made a tired sigh. "Truly, you have the most eloquent of arguments."

Some of the slaves behind us snickered, but most just seemed afraid of the sudden change in the air here. Protégé turned to them.

"They will control you no longer. You are not their slaves, you are not *my* slaves. You have seen me cry in pain; you saw that I am no different from any of you. My pride was broken before you, and now I bring humility to make amends. I am not anypony with authority, but one acting on his own will to do what is needed to bring this suffering to an end."

That got their attention. Skeletal, sick, and injured ponies began to cluster. The balconies were full and the walkways swayed under the weight of curious stallions and mares. Bigger ponies approached, one mare already looked ready to lay into the slavers now that they were unarmed. Heads poked out, limbs wearily limped to see what was happening. We were at the centre of over fifty ponies staring.

"What in the everloving *ohooiet*' is going on down here! Where is slaves for transport? I demand answer!"

Mister Mosin came storming through the cage door, Blunderbuck in tow. He shoved past the slavers, before stopping sharply as he saw us in front of the slaves.

"*Chyort vožmi!*" His eyes went wide. "This will bring you kill! You will die! Traitor!"

Protégé advanced forward, pressing his forehead nearly against Mosin's. "I believe I just gave my last warning. This is no longer slaver-controlled territory in here."

The old pony clattered backward on his wooden hoof. "You will regret it! You hold us to guns and demand we leave? Stern will flay you! I will tell her. I will tell *Shackles!* He will come for you and he will make you *beg* for him to show mercy! *Assistant?*"

Blunderbuck looked from us to his master, stumbling over before having a full bag of tools hurled into his face. He yelped, catching them in his hooves, but the weight slapped into his jawline and made him stagger back to his knees.

"*Come!* We go to inform them of rebellion at gunpoint! Come on! Hurry, incompetent idiot! Fool! Get up!"

He clipped Blunderbuck over the head with his wooden hoof. The young, sprightly pony yelped, falling backwards with a bruise already formed. On the floor, he started trying to pick up his ordered load, his eyes looking up.

They slowly found us, and moved over until he was looking at Protégé. His old leader only offered a calm demeanour.

"Come on!" Mosin snapped. "Hurry assistant! Stupid youngster, get over here this instant!"

Blunderbuck turned and *threw* the tools right back at Mosin.

"Oh shut up! You dishonest, old, tree-legged, unappreciative *arsehole!*"

The old armoury pony was knocked back, his face far past anger into sheer surprise.

Glimmer's grin could have lit up the night as Blunderbuck turned and marched over to *our side*, leaving behind the bewildered slaver. He briefly stopped as though to ask Protégé if it was okay, before his old master simply shook his hoof thankfully. I felt proud of

Blunderbuck, that had been a long time coming.

"I think that's a way of saying... get the fuck out. Cos there's a lot more of us than there are of you." Brimstone grinned down at them and started to move forward. I saw a lot of ponies started to follow. Marching forward. I grinned, joining them, the smallest pony doing so. A large group of slaves closing down on their old masters, some bearing makeshift clubs and bars of metal in their mouths.

The slavers fled. The sight was satisfying beyond measure. Slavers were running scared from this building from the *slaves*. The chains had been broken in the Mall. Today, I stood in the presence of something very special happening in Fillydelphia.

Left behind from those who chased them right out, we turned back to the slaves. Once the slavers had gone, there was an expectant tension. I could see it on their faces. 'What now?' We had a building to ourselves, or soon to be once Peace had finished his sweep. Here in this area, we were free ponies.

"Any who wish to leave, to not risk it, can go now." Protégé indicated the door. "I will force nopony to face what might come, for this is only going to get more dangerous. I offer you not an instruction, but a choice."

"Why should we stay? What are you even going to do?" A voice from the back cried out.

"I..."

Protégé took a breath, the stoic nature of his face the only thing to hold him in serious stead. Then he spoke, raising his voice, projecting it into every corner of the Mall's main arena as he clambered up onto the lip of the fountain. Visible to all above and below.

"...am going to attempt to free you, all of you, and anyone else who will come."

He spun, taking them all in as they grouped around, us as well. Protégé trotted lightly in a circle across the fountain wall, speaking sometimes to one, then another.

"Some of you may be afraid, some of you may have plans of your own, yet I only ask for you to choose now. Today, I was laid low. I was humiliated. I had my brow beaten before you and was stripped of everything I had. Or I thought I had. To admit this in public, is perhaps the final step. I was nothing but a slave to them, held in silk chains perhaps, but now I see the truth. I admit my wrongs. I do not ask for forgiveness from any of you, only a moment to be listened to. For I intend to free as many slaves from Fillydelphia as I can, under the cover of the war with the Enclave."

That got their attention. Ponies moved in closer. I saw them talking to one another. I shared excited looks with Glimmer and Brimstone. The slaves we had spent so many days around in here were getting worked up over this. Discussion was going out. Above us, Protégé continued.

"We will work together, as *one*! As ponies! I will not lead you, but I will provide for you. The skills we all have can be put to use. We have technicians, fighters, thieves, cooks, and organisers. We could soon get medical specialists. We have enough to defend us here, and then to make a coordinated breakout when the slavers are busy fighting for their own lives outside, but only if we all pool our resources. With any luck, we would be a low priority for Stern so long as we leave her forces mostly alone."

He stopped, looking at me.

"And with extra help, we can achieve things we could not do alone in tiny groups, such as reuniting many of you with your loved ones. With your sons and daughters that were stripped from you! I bring this woeful news to you, that this day Chainlink Shackles has taken your children for experimentation in the dark beneath Fillydelphia! You, there!"

He pointed through the crowd to a bewildered lime-green mare.

“Miss Huckle Belt! When your child was born, they took her before you could even name her! Even now, she resides with the rest of the foals in Shackles’ grip! You, Mister and Mrs Brick? You had twins when you were brought here, just toddlers? They are still alive too, they always asked about you! Coral Eve...”

Beside me, Coral nodded slowly, and Protégé smiled at her. The news of the foals had hit them hard. Some were furious. Already two fathers were crying, worried. They clenched their teeth through the tears.

“We can fight. We can win them back and take them home. Please, decide now if you wish to stay or not. We have much work to do and not much time, but look around you! We have a fortified building, we have an armoury, and we have supplies with some powerful assets, such as a war robot, and several combat veterans! We *can* do this!”

His hoof struck the marble rim of the fountain sharply. A couple of ponies shouted their willingness. The parents, mostly, but also their own friends who knew the hardships of those who had lost foals. Protégé didn’t let up, he spoke to them in particular, before aiming at the quieter ones.

“We shall take this moment. We shall not lie in squalor alone waiting for the end any more! We shall stand up for ourselves. I *was* one of you, and I forgot that. Now I will help you fight! For yourselves! For the lives denied to you by days, months, or years in this hell hole! For all those we have lost in this nightmare since it began! *For our children!*”

Some of the ponies actually lifted their hooves and *roared* their support. I found I was one of them. I shouted my throat hoarse, leaping onto Glimmer’s back to feel taller. Delight raced through me, the ponies that had laid silent and hopeless were being given a path they could take. A chance to fight and make their own destiny, not to simply wait for the inevitable day when they keel over in a factory!

“Then choose! Let us decide our fates by our own hooves!”

One last *epic* cheer.

And in the end, few left. Those who stayed were mostly made up of parents and those that had only needed a push to make a bid for freedom. Some were unsure, but preferring *anything* to lying down and dying of sickness or cruelty. They wanted to control their own fates, to whatever end. They came together and wanted to hear exactly what he had planned.

Protégé, owing to his education, was a natural coordinator. He sent out parties, always *asking*, to find and eject any remaining slavers from the building. Some volunteered to watch the perimeter. Others begged him for the critical supplies they had previously been denied. He got some of the other volunteers like Blunderbuck to get the food out from their storage areas. Right now, the task was to secure the Mall and find out exactly what we had.

Soon, he came to us. He looked somewhat embarrassed, even while shivering on a high of adrenaline by the initial buzz of what he had set in motion. He called out to three slaves if they could check the roof access. Two more were already bringing out their own secret stash to put onto the growing piles of supplies. Protégé finally reached my friends and I, as he smiled at me.

“An idea, Murky. It needs only to be ignited for it to grow itself slowly over time. Just like the one you set in my mind with your talk of freedom long ago. Yet now, to all of you, I need your help to... well, I apologise.” He winced. “My words assumed you would join me in this course of action. However, I can help you find your—”

“Kid, shut up. We’re in.”

Brimstone Blitz spoke for all of us. Protégé caught me grinning, I'd explained it to them when I went to get them for the ambush. The chance to get help in reclaiming the foals was enough to convince us. Everything we had planned worked just fine in this. There was nothing stopping us from still taking the portal out of here the moment we could. Getting Chirpy, Lilac, and Starshine back was the hard bit. What Protégé had started would help us beyond what we could ever have imagined. A large group of ponies we could make the effort with, and bring joy to the returning parents as we did so.

"I... I cannot possibly thank you enough." Protégé actually laughed. "Yet I must ask you for your assistance. To lead them, to organise them, and get everything set out to keep this building safe. We'll go over the plan later, but for now there are things that must be said aloud to more than just the Mall. Murky, Glimmer, I shall need your help to truly set this alright. Or rather, your PipBuck and technical expertise."

I looked down at my PipBuck, while my sister seemed curious. "What are you planning?" "There is something grand we must do, the last step of this. To bring it to the people of Fillydelphia. All of them."

He galloped off toward the cage door and the main stairwell. Looking at each other, we all followed. Up floor after floor, all the way to the roof. Past us ran ponies carrying weapons, food, and tools to block up doorways.

I felt a mounting excitement as we climbed nearer. What did he mean? Bringing the word to all of Fillydelphia? Was he really going to call out to the whole city as Red Eye had done? How? I couldn't put the question to him before bursting out onto the top of the Mall. The masses of pipes, vents, and cage fences that dotted its top led to a tall aerial near the front edge that overlooked the city.

"There is a wireless PA system across Fillydelphia. The Mall houses one of its transmitters. Glimmerlight, could you connect Murky's PipBuck and its microphone to it?"

"In my sleep. I thought this would be hard."

The two of them walked to the edge where the transmitter was located. I hopped up onto a ventilation duct, seeing the vista of a city prepared for war before me, and feeling the warm and slow wind drifting over my face and spread wings. The sky was lighting up in a brilliant orange behind the distant Enclave ships that were spreading out to surround the city. Above us, cloudships streaked overhead, leaving intense sound in their wake that shook the building below us. They were too fast for the guns of Fillydelphia to catch them as they banked around pillars of smoke and rocketed off again.

The red glow of Fillydelphia was stronger than ever, as the forges all lit for supplies. A vast population of slaves spreading out in all directions, the setting of what I thought would be the end of my life. Instead, it had become the start of my true one.

"Okay! PipBuck!" Glimmerlight reached behind herself, until I threw her the device. She grabbed and connected it with wires before handing it to Protégé.

"Can you keep them from overriding my signal? Does this stretch far enough? The Enclave must hear it."

"Just shut up and do yer talky talky thing." She winked at him. "Aaaaaand...three, two..."

She slapped him on the back. At least, from my viewpoint, I *hoped* it was his back.

Protégé took up the PipBuck in his magic and strode forward to the edge. He cast one look at me, mouthing a couple of words first.

Thank. You.

I smiled warmly back.

Then he turned, and took a breath. We all stood behind him as he sent his message to the masses, broadcasting loud and clear to every slave, slaver, and Enclave soldier near Fillydelphia. Already below us, I could see slavers shouting and pointing at the building. Not at us on top, but as the shock of what we'd done was spreading and settling in to every slaver and guard around the Mall.

Such local surprises were about to go a whole lot wider, as Protégé let loose his words upon the entire city at once.

"Fillydelphia. Look up from your tools and the burdens of servitude. Look up high and pull yourself from the toil. I speak to all who would listen. Some of you will know my voice, others will know me by my name. Protégé, previously of Red Eye's slavers. Some of you may trust me, others may not, but I am not the same pony that was known to you before. So hear my voice and judge for yourselves. To those that we see in the sky, the denizens of the clouds, I ask only that you maintain this signal."

"I speak not to slaves and slavers. I speak to ponies. I speak to anypony ever hurt by Fillydelphia, who is trapped here. You, are not, alone. The rigours of war approach us all. Fire will rain from the skies and we will lose many good ponies in the coming days. We are afraid. I am afraid. Yet there is a haven. A place where ponies can come to take shelter during this. The Harmony Mall will be a safe zone, where those of us unwilling to fight this war have come to be saved. We have food, we have medical supplies, and we can keep you safe! The more who come, the better chance we will have!"

I felt beside myself as I heard his voice become powerful and dripping with idealism. The scholar I had known, putting to work the study and presence he had learned, now powered by the force of his care and dreams for others.

Behind me, I heard Glimmer swear, before laughing as she unplugged and swapped some wires. "Nice try, amateurs. Can't put him off air that easily."

"And thus I ask any of you, alone or in groups. Come to us, help to protect others together! To seek shelter, and eventually, to be free in the aftermath. To those in the skies above, this signal location, the Mall, will not fire upon you! And to those who would oppose this choice of ponies to have safety and freedom, we will fight you if you come, but we will not attack you first. We shall be neutral, uninvolved if at all possible. This is not our war."

There was a pause, as I saw his face harden. He poured impact and a thundering tone into his words in what came next.

"As such, as of this exact moment, in the pursuit of freedom from chains and the protection of life itself, the Harmony Mall hereby declares its independence from Fillydelphia!"

That line echoed across the city. He paused, that one would have to sink in. I felt chills down my spine. I was in the presence of potential *history* here. Behind me, the others moved up, some ponies joined us too. All watched him.

Below us all, I could see ponies looking up. Slavers were confused, slaves meekly wondering if they could truly believe it. I saw at least one of the cloudships slow down near to us. The Enclave were listening.

"Slip your bonds, break your chains. The Wall held us in, but now there is a place to go. A building where you might find a chance to be free. It will be hard. They will no doubt strike back at us, but we will resist them if we only are willing to try! We truly

are better together, better united as ponies from all places in this stand against the eternal chain. This is your choice, ponies of Fillydelphia. The choice I give to you, the choice you have been denied all your lives within these walls."

He slowly turned to us. We stood together, supporting him, united at last ahead of the struggle to come. Brimstone having fought for redemption, Glimmer through her past, Coral to be reunited, Sunny to pull herself from the fires in here. Yet in my will for freedom, with the wonder that now was the time in my mind, I found myself holding Unity's hoof and she smiled sideways at me. Slavery, war, the Enclave, and fire and death about to strike home, we united whom we could.

Pain and loss had led us both to this moment, starting from our very first hopeless days as slaves. Now there were plans and means to assault the very chains that had held us here and sought to break us apart. This was the moment that it would all come down to.

The endgame. The Battle of Fillydelphia.

Before us, on the parapet, Protégé's chin was wavering. He took one last shallow breath.

"To those poor souls who would be listening, good luck in the days to come. Let us go forth together, so that we might all, at last... go home."

From Whence 'Till Now

Through the Mall, fires burned.

They burned without and within. For every barrel and tin bearing a roaring flame there strode a slave with passionate intent lighting up their eyes. Where wood cracked and splintered from heat, the ponies of the Mall hammered and crafted theirs into the means to see this through, drawing ever closer together in the process.

Standing on the main indoor balcony of the Mall, overlooking where once we had been held captive, where once had been the centre of a firefight, where once there was order and queues for slop and stale bread; I now watched as ponies below rushed to help three weary slaves. Those who could still trot carried two mares and an elderly stallion who had somehow made it to the Mall this early. I could see their wasted limbs, skeletal and drawn, dangling off the sides of the younger slaves who helped them over to a thin mattress. Imagining how they felt was needless, being like that was not unknown to me.

I watched them for longer, leaning forward over the edge to see the ageing stallion's look of disbelief after having been carried here and told he was safe; that he could rest now. His face lit up with perhaps the first tired smile he had offered in months as his hooves clasped around one of the mares' cheeks and cried his thanks from glazed eyes.

"The face of one who's been told to have a little hope again, Murky. It's a rare sight in this city."

I heard trotting, before turning to find Protégé shuffling up beside me. He wore a thick black cloak that covered most of his body, having been standing at the windswept entrance to the Mall to welcome any slaves in, and ready to engage anypony who tried to stop them. One pony who had galloped in twenty minutes back, our first one, had been fleeing his masters. Protégé had led a small team with Sunny to go across the street and put some rounds toward the slavers, giving the pony a space to sprint over and reach us. Every time I'd heard a gunshot since then I'd had to fight the worry that somepony had tried and failed.

There was no doubt a few for whom that was true.

"Protégé, do you know what we're going to do next? We're telling them they're safer but... well, what..." I had to stop, as I felt my face contort and lean back from a wide and silent yawn that forced its way through aching muscles. Groaning, I slumped a little, feeling a pat on my shoulder.

"Don't worry about that, Murky. It's clear we've got a brief period to ourselves while what just happened filters through. Stern has bigger problems than one rebellious den. We'll talk about what's next soon enough once we've got this place secure. Any plan won't matter if we can't defend ourselves here, if they decide to come after us," he grinned, watching me rub my eyes, "and we can't defend ourselves at all if we're dead on our hooves. How long has it been since you've slept?"

I blinked a couple of times. That was a very good question. There was that time I was unconscious for half a minute in the Alpha-Omega Hotel and I'd been in a memory orb with Glimmer, did that count? Had I slept before or after that?

It occurred to me the last real sleep I'd had was in a frozen cave on a mountain. That was

days ago, something more than stints of forced unconsciousness or brief rests against a slimy sewer wall to make up for it since. Even under the adrenaline rush of the Mall becoming something beautiful, I could feel it creeping on me like an ever growing wave. About an hour ago, my head had started feeling a bit cloudy after the the rush of taking this place over wore off. Now, my shoulders felt slumped. I fought to stop myself from swaying.

"I... don't know?" I tried to smile it off. "I... maybe I just need something to do, take my mind off it. I could helps board up the windows? Oor I could help stitch up the blankets?"

Protégé chuckled. It was a welcome relief from the stony concentration that had permeated him for the last few hours. "Find somewhere to put your head down, Murky. You've earned it. I couldn't have done a lot of this without you pulling me out of the hole I'd fallen into and caring for my pains, so please listen to me now. Take the chance while you have it."

"But—"

"Murky."

His voice cut me off with a smile. Gradually, he dropped the weather cloak off and hoofed it over to me, hanging it over my back.

"Find something soft away from windows, lie down, cover up with that and get yourself sharp again."

"That's an order?"

"Do you want me to get Coral so she can make it one?"

That made me laugh, but my eyes caught what he'd revealed by taking it off. I could see his scholar's shirt now, not quite hiding the stained bandages I'd helped put on his back that covered all the way to the hips. He was still moving stiffly.

"Are you doing all right?" I pointed to them with a wingtip. (It felt like less effort with my rapidly degenerating energy reserves) "You were pretty bad off."

Down below, there was a pained squeal. Both of us looked over sharply to see Unity and Sunny with a mare lying on the ground. Cleaner bindings for wounds were laid out, as Sunny had taken an infected and sticky mess of dirty fabric off a wound caked with dry blood. Unity held the mare's head in her lap, stroking the poor thing's forehead as Sunny carried out the harsh but necessary survival treatment to keep the infection from worsening.

Briefly, Unity looked up and saw me. I could see the sadness in her eyes at the condition of some of the slaves. A memory of seeing her ribs cracked by Shackles so long ago and leaving her in such a state herself felt very fresh. I didn't know what she'd endured in our time apart to heal that, just as I'd never tell her some of the things that had happened to me.

Wildcard's laughter still rung in my ears sometimes, distant and echoing. His wasn't the only scars I'd bear for the rest of my life.

"We have all suffered, Murky. We have all, at some point, been the pony on the ground; undignified and needing the mercy of others. Fillydelphia is not a place for pride." Protégé took his eyes from the poor mare back to mine. "It's why I was relieved that you were the one to find me when I was that pony who needed aid and comfort."

His smile held little mirth now, only a brief sense of thankfulness. One of his front hooves raised up and, for a moment, I thought he was about to put it around my shoulders before it faltered and stood down again.

"I shall endure. I have to be seen. If you really want to work, then that old home store over there needs its back staff windows boarded up, but don't push yourself just to make a point. You've nothing to prove to any of us. Myself least of all."

He nodded across the upper level of the Mall's shop floor to a shop front of wooden furniture. Outside it was a waiting pile of boards scavenged from a floor somewhere along with a hammer and nails.

"I'll try."

"Thank you. I'll be in the area if you need me."

Protégé nodded politely, before turning to trot away. I stood still for a moment, before taking a sharp breath.

"Yes, I do!"

Protégé stopped and turned at my high pitched shout. Damn my tendency to squeak when I tried to speak up!

"Already? I haven't gone ten feet, Murky." Protégé smirked. "I know the cloak will cover two ponies but you don't *have* to share like on the mountain this time, you know?"

Rolling my eyes at the quip, I stepped forward. "Not that, I mean I do have something to prove."

"And what would that be?"

I held my head high.

"That I'm going to escape Fillydelphia. I'm going to escape slavery. So many ponies told me it can't be done, even you, once. I'm going to, at last, get out of slavery."

For a moment, Protégé said nothing. Amongst the clamour of ponies rushing to meet another new arrival, he simply stared at me, then smiled.

"If it is indeed possible, then I cannot think of a pony with more determination to want it than the one in front of me. If only I'd seen it sooner..."

He looked away, almost regretful, before turning.

"Good night, Murky."

"Good... night?" I muttered as he left. Was it night? It was impossible to tell.

For a moment I watched him go, seeing that limping gait as his back flared and hurt every time he moved it. I even heard the pained grunts as he made his way downstairs, out of my sight. I would have thought more, pitied more, maybe even ran behind to insist I change his bandages, one born slave to the next, but the brutal truth was that I felt too tired. My hooves were lead and building up the motion to turn and trot toward the furniture store and pick up those wooden boards felt like running all the way back to the distant FunFarm.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I really did need to get my head down before it fell down. Already, the voices in the distance were muffled and nothing but background noise. My ears were flopped, feeling like they were full of wool and I was losing the will to really do any work with each movement I made. I doubted I could even swing the hammer or even lift the wood into the store.

Gripping it in my hooves, I lifted it easily. Like I had the strength of two... ponies?

The second pair of cream coloured hooves on the other side of the wood made me realise I'd missed the sound of somepony trotting right up beside me.

"Let me give you a hoof with that," said Unity.

It quickly became clear to me how Protégé had gotten his fancy oak desk and chair along with those lush bookshelves that covered his office in the Mall. They must have all come

from here. Surrounding us in the dark furniture shop was the dusty remnants of *art* in post-tree form. (As opposed to post-modern art, which to me meant anything made yesterday.)

Tiny desks, huge tables, padded chairs, cabinets and cupboards with broken glass fronts were crammed into every corner. Some were piled atop one another in a real lack of respect for the work that had gone into them, their stacking chipping and fraying the smooth wooden legs and surfaces. Outside, a group of ponies clattered past shouting for somepony who knew how to reset a leg. Another cried that he was wondering where to find Blunderbuck. The noises drifted away into the enormous building. We were at the centre of furious activity and yet once that heavy door was closed, there was quiet.

Thankfully, there was still one furniture display that was mostly untouched behind some canvas screens, where we now huddled; a mock up of somepony's house, complete with musty carpet, a fireplace and shelves on the wall in front of a couple of enormous chairs. They had thick pillows and enough stuffing that I felt my rump sink a good quarter of a foot into when I flopped on it with a deep and satisfied sigh. The chair dwarfed my size, with me not even coming halfway up its back rest.

Unity sat on the shaggy rug before the fireplace, her magic lifting a small rock flint she'd produced from somewhere and struck it against the fire prodger thing, making brief white sparks shower into the fireplace. The paper and torn stuffing we'd tossed in wasn't really working.

Her magic worked sharply, lighting spark after spark. A sharp metallic sound and the fizzle of the light was all I could focus on in the low light.

"They said that there's a big group of crater workers want to come if they find space. That fast galloper brought the news in. There's so many in here who've been wanting this. I met a mare who had gotten into the second year of Stable work. She even asked if she could come buy a book from me afterwards, when I've gotten home." Unity chuckled, before picking up her flint again, "Hey, Murky?"

"Yeah?"

Unity sighed and turned, as though to say something, before she saw me sitting up on the chair, hind legs dangling and screwed up her face slightly.

"How can you even sit like that? Doesn't your back hurt?"

"It's comfy..." I defended rather meekly, pulling my hooves in and curling up on the seat.

"Maybe to slippery little bendy escape artists like you." She briefly stuck her tongue out at me, and I returned the gesture, leading to a childish giggle between us as I settled down more normally. I could quite neatly fit into the entire thing like a bed. (It was too big, that was why. Nothing to do with my size. Nope.)

Unity just shook her head with a small smile. "Hey, listen, what I wanted to ask you... it's been kinda bugging me but I didn't want to say to the others. Only, kinda... you?"

She rubbed one front leg with her opposite hoof, looking away to the side.

"How, um, how long have we been in here? I don't really..."

Her voice fell away.

"...remember. What with all the memory things and... and just losing track and... and I found myself wondering what my parents would have for Hearthswarming dinner later this year and just... just realised."

"You got to celebrate Hearthswarming?" I immediately regretted that being my first question, but the concept was alien to me. I never had. To me, Hearthswarming only meant the worst season for an outdoors slave while hearing a master in their rock farm cottage

enjoying a brahmin steak.

"Yeah, we always did. We'd always spend a little and get some fresher fruit from Tenpony Tower with the store's proceeds, and my father would cook them into a warm stew. Then we'd wrap up with lots of blankets around us, all in out of the cold. I always loved those times so... well, it made me realise that I don't know how many Hearthswarmings I've missed, or even if there's been any."

She toyed with the flint idly, looking down and away. I recognised that she was uncomfortable.

"So... um..." she paused, looking around again with an almost embarrassed look, "do you remember how long we've been in here?"

That question struck deep as, for the first time since I'd arrived in Fillydelphia, I really began to think about it.

And think.

...and think.

We stayed silent, and I heard her striking her flint again, like a timed rhythm. Again and again.

"Oh, come on..." Unity muttered, switching sides on the flint, "Murky?"

"I... sorry!" My mind was running so slowly. Even Unity at the fireplace was sort of a... a muddle, just a fused blend of warm colours. Her mane looked a bit like a fire like this actually.

"Murky? Hey, Murky?"

My eyes started open with a sobering clarity to see her turn to look at me, lifting her roughed up mane from her eyes.

"You all right?"

"I... yeah, just, you know... slavery?" I waved a hoof dismissively, before it flopped back down like a wet noodle.

"You mean I was putting you to sleep." She smirked.

"No! No no I was just... tired."

"That means the same thing." Her magic whipped out, lightly batting one of my hooves dangling over the edge of the huge seat.

"Well, um..." I hesitated, I blushed and tried to look awake. The truth was that how long anything had been was such a blur to me that tracking the time passing was next to impossible in here.

"I don't really know, has it been... ah... three months? It's been a *really* long time."

Unity sat with her back to the fireplace. "Murky... it's longer than that, for sure. I remember it was just coming out of winter when I arrived and from what you told me I don't think we were far apart. Six months?"

"But summer is still finishing and we didn't have snow this year so—"

We both sat in silence, the reality filtering in slowly. If we'd last winter came before we were here, and it was now time for the next winter...

My heart stung. A year? Had I really been in here a *year*? That threw off all concepts of scale. If there hadn't been snow, then it had to be, but, no... that couldn't be right. I remembered snow in here, albeit vaguely.

It *had* to have been late snow from last winter. I couldn't have *survived* that long. It couldn't have been two years, it couldn't be.

Could it?

"The... the snow came down, right? We've seen snow in Fillydelphia before all this..."

Unity thought, then looked momentarily shocked before nodding. "No... no it can't have been longer than that if we were here at the start of winter. M-maybe it was just a freak weather? Random snow? I... I just... it's only seemed like a short time—"

"But the next winter's soon and it's felt like—"

"Murky, we lost time too, when we wiped our memories, how do we know how long we removed? How long have we *really* been in Fillydelphia?"

We were both silent. The answer was clear.

We didn't know.

We could have been wasting away a huge portion of our young lives in this hell city and we just didn't know...

After a long pause, Unity sighed, putting her hooves to her temples and sat still for a full ten seconds. Without a word, she went back to trying to light a fire.

My mind drifted, the sound of her flint rhythmically sparking wafting into my head like an all too relaxing beat.

It couldn't have been...

My eyes closed, I was too tired to think over this, just too tired. It was exhausting to contemplate. Everything felt like huge anvils dragging my head down to even allow the thought.

"I miss the hearth, Murky... we'd all curl up around it to get by the winter..."

Unity's words felt distant, very distant. I wanted to nod but the effort felt impossible. My head simply rested, feeling itself sink into the soft arm of the chair.

"I always missed the fire... it..."

After that, there was nothing but a dull mumbling, a million miles away.

At the same time every day, we woke up.

The grey was absolute. As my eyes opened, they were reluctant to complete the motion. They always were. No matter how many years it had been, you never lost the will to want to lie back down and... and...

...and no slave would ever think that far ahead.

But the grey, there was always the grey. Granite, faded rugs and fog wafting through dull iron bars in a bare-walled cell.

My body was shivering, yet I couldn't feel the cold, only a pervasive numbness down to the bone. It sunk to the core, leaving me feeling heavy and slow. My eyes were open, ensuring that if the masters looked in they would know I hadn't slept in. I started trying to work life back into my body. The same routine, every morning. The legs were easy, they only had to wiggle and bend... but moving the big muscles in the torso was soul-destroying.

That's because moving your core was the last signal to your mind that your rest had ended and it was all starting again.

You never ever got used to that feeling either.

I took a breath, and the chilly air surged down my clammy throat. The cutting iciness of it brought a sharp pain into my lungs, as I felt my organs spasm and clench. Immobilised on the wire mesh of the cot, I spasmed and choked, each desperate inhale burning my windpipe on winter's hardest edge. My eyes watered, held open in fear. They couldn't see me

with eyes closed, they'd think I was trying to sleep in! I held them open, feeling the dampness freeze onto my cheeks.

After ten harsh minutes, it finally began to subside, as I discovered another colour than the grey beside my head.

Red.

Whimpering, I willed my body to move. Limb by limb, it responded, before that single, gruelling and reluctant push to roll over and stand up. Like a magnet, the cot seemed to attract me, yet I had to stride away from it and instead fall against the metal bars of the cell door as though I had weights around my hooves.

Around me, everypony else was doing the same through the thin grey mist within the Ministry. Hooves pushed through cage doors or lightly batted at wooden ones that covered their cells entirely. A chorus of moaning picked up down the hallway. For a blanket... for food... for water... for the death cart to make a pick up...

I hung my front legs through the bars, resting on the thick middle one. The cold metal felt like it was burning my pale skin, but it kept me on my hooves. Yes... skin... I... I could see skin surrounding the radsors on my front leg. The one on my muzzle felt tight and hardened, the relief of the cold keeping them like toughened skin rather than burnt flesh, yet still twisting and seething beneath the surface.

Winter... Goddesses' damned winter...

I looked up, following the dark and foggy interior of the Ministry of Arcane Science as my eyes tracked up from the stage outside our cells, past floor after floor until the skylight at the top was visible. A brilliant pattern of brass and obsidian in the shape of a star, long bereft of any glass. Through it, came the snow and was the source of the stabbing wind. Blown off those tall mountains I had seen outside the Wall, down into Fillydelphia. Now it fell slowly, drifting through the skylight into the cold halls of the Ministry. It dampened the colour, turning it into nothing but a pale shade of the snow itself.

Clutching my hooves together, I tried to will some feeling back into them... but there was none to be had. They felt like empty stumps, just as my head felt like a rock. Tiredness was overwhelming... I wanted to sleep. I wanted to let go...

Yet it was but another day. Another day to be sent out.

Moving my eyes, I saw the great arched windows above the stage of the Ministry's main hall. Through them I saw Fillydelphia's peaks. The entire city seemed... dead. Any shapes on the walkways between tall factories were still or moved sluggishly. Snow drifted lazily between them, resting on rooftops or softly sizzling on the chimneys. To be taken to those forges and mills... the warmth was only appealing until you passed in and out all day and occasionally all night too. The burning heat on numb skin was not a comfort... it was an outright torture. Not gentle, but harsh, searing and vengeful to all who sought its relief. Masked masters within them stared silently, quiet as the grave in winter, thinking only their own inscrutable thoughts within the uneasy silence of wintertime Fillydelphia.

Winter was the enemy of the slaves... it was the hated season, the time that life became devoid of anything but slow motion existence through a faded pastel painting.

Yet as I lay there, propped up by the bars holding me to my place in life, one small unfamiliarity began to spark little lights in my head.

There was nopony here but us slaves.

The masters weren't coming... they weren't here. But... they were always here. Every morning they came to us, wrapped in furskins and masks to drag our sorry selves out until

we re-learned to walk on legs that had scant millimetres between skin and bone.

Yet today... nothing. I gazed to the far side of the Ministry, to the door that would slam open. That would bring my first master of Fillydelphia in.

It was unmoving, frost coating its locks and heavy wood.

From above, a wind howled and blew a sheet of ice down upon us. I squealed and fell back from the bars, falling against the wall. Around me I heard the moans of the others grow louder. Work was movement and no matter how many times we were burned, the heat of the forge was at least a false dream rather than none at all... a mirage of relief.

They wanted out. They wanted to leave.

One dared call that he wanted to go home.

Home...

I clenched my eyes shut, holding my shivering body tightly, trying to keep the jerkin pressed down over my ruined and limp wings.

This *was* home...

Quietly, I did what I usually did. What a little broken slave had to in order to release emotion when he couldn't ever speak a word against being told not to.

I lay freezing in a corner of a chilly cell and cried.

The pleas from the other cells gradually drew quieter as the reality sank home. No pony would come for us today. We had been abandoned to the chill. They knew some wouldn't make it to tomorrow, but it meant nothing to them. One by one, the hooves pressed through the doors began to pull back. I wasn't alone in my sniffing, as various others let their grief known. Some quietly, so low only I could hear, while others were vocal and beyond sense in their cries for mercy and release. Their voices all echoed toward the frozen wasteland, heard by no pony that cared. We were a lifetime away from any who did.

Feeling my eyes freezing shut, I yanked them open and wiped a dirty hoof over my red and puffy eyelids.

Then I blinked.

Before me, I saw a warm colour. More than one, all mixed in together. Through the blurriness of teared up eyes, I cleared them and stared.

There was a mare in the cell across from me, lying quietly against the wall with her hooves wrapped around herself, just the same as I. Her coat was cream, her mane a deep red and orange mixture that would have been thick and wavy were it not limp, straight and thin from lack of care. Yet with a bright sparkle, she held something in her magic. A little shape of a pony... carving it with her telekinesis from a sliver of wood. Slim, but standing tall, bearing two wings. A pegasus!

Gently, I pressed my face to the bars and watched her. I watched her craft this wonder, this little splinter of interest in a voided world. Her cheeks were wet as she pulled sliver after sliver from it. I didn't know how much time passed as I watched her... but eventually, she looked across and saw my wide eyes peering across the hallway.

I jerked, ponies never looked at me without intent.

Yet she had soft eyes above little rounded cheeks, eyes that watched me curiously. For a whole minute, we sat and nervously stared at one another shivering in the cold. Did... did I know her? Had we seen one another before? I felt like I had. A brief memory of some pony in a factory made me wonder, but my first days had been a whirlwind of emotion and I remembered few who had helped or hounded me bar the Master.

After a few minutes... she sat down the figure near the door, before floating it over.

"I miss Hearthswarming..."

Her voice was tiny, like a small bell rung in an epic chamber. With a desperate smile I never had any time to respond to... she left my sight, shivering and pulling herself away from the wind.

Gently, fearfully, I reached out... snatching the figure in from the hallway. I stumbled and tripped further inside, moving on hooves I couldn't feel, before collapsing beside my cot. I could sense the pressure of my wings below my jerkin as I stroked a hoof over this figure's spread ones... the sight of her in my head refusing to leave. Her wiry body, gaunt and malnourished didn't appear so in my memory. I wondered what she must have looked like before becoming a slave.

I wondered what I'd have looked like if I'd not been born one...

Reigning my mind in, I realised there was something I had seen in her. A will to do something I hadn't done for a long time.

Something I'd been afraid of doing again.

Placing the figure down... I reached below my cot and pulled it out. Bound in string, made of varied colours of paper and covered in a thick leather... I pulled open my journal. Charcoal sticks fell out of their little leather holder, rolling against my hooves as I struggled to pick one up.

I hadn't done this in so long...

The charcoal paused, falling out of my chattering teeth to the floor and rolling away under the door. I took another, sucking in the cold air to steady myself.

What had I seen? What made me want to do this? What did I even want to do?

My eyes found the pegasus model.

She had *created* something...

That was what it was...

To create.

To think.

To imagine.

To dream...

Thus, I dared to put charcoal to paper... and I let my dreams take flight like a pegasus on the winds. The dreams I was afraid to ever tell. I could bring them to life on paper, have a real life only for me...

I was but a lonely slave... I couldn't think for myself properly. I was small, hurt and sick. Yet... what if... what if I found somepony who inspired me enough? Would that be enough to make me start?

The charcoal flew, carving out the shapes, the lines, the scraggly roughness that only my mind could see a meaning in. Something moving upwards, out of the dark! Something, a beacon of light...

I was weak so... so maybe I didn't do it the first time. Maybe I wanted to but just... couldn't? Would that stop me? I wouldn't have given up, in my mind I was determined, not like me now.

The shape turned, spreading into a bigger picture. Thick lines, a backdrop, something enormous blocking the way... a small thing before it... motionless... it had tried, but it was too big.

I needed help... yes. Others I could like, others I could trust. Were they like the mare? That mysterious mare? What would they be like? Maybe a big one who could protect me

and... and a fiery spirited one who wanted to make me better as a person and show me how to be confident?

The shapes split, they reformed, I rubbed and drew and curved and formed. A thick shield, a big form, standing beside the little one that was near a smooth edge shape... bright, it stood out. It was a confident shape... so very loud and... and passionate about life.

Maybe... what if this became an adventure? What if those ponies wanted something... wanted out? Could I go with them? I felt a rushing dread, was I even allowed to think like that? Where would it take me? How hard would it be? Who would I meet?

My charcoal flew, taking a new page. Little drawings, little shapes... a dark hallway, a dangerous enemy in the shadows of it, behind a looming figure of terror. A slave nightmare in pony form that set my heart beating faster with fright, but also light... a stern but sad figure, not so different from me who I couldn't quite figure out yet if I wanted as a friend or foe in my little story...

Maybe it'd get really hard at times... maybe there'd be battles...

Lines like gunshots, knives like icicles... a table, with two ponies as captives around it, the sad figure from before... now not a foe. Somepony misunderstood, good at heart.

And maybe things would get worse...

A tall building... a collared figure atop it. It was near the edge... would it ever come to that? Then a world of dreams, there would be hurt along the way, as I might need my companions to save my life... the small shape surrounded by reassuring ones of beautiful shapes. Casting away that rough charcoal dirtiness I'd kept drawing on him the whole time to be smoother... brighter... better.

There would be the good...

They were celebrating... I drew a cake! Dancing! The other shapes glowed brighter, the big one casting off some darkness, the bright one becoming more at ease with itself. There was another one joined it, so very strong, but missing a piece and moving ever closer to it. None of us would be perfect, but we'd manage...

There would be bad...

One of the shapes was no longer there by this time... then another blinked out, one that had been close to that sad figure. A chain... a circle of chain, was growing bigger without my realising I was drawing it.

It was a journey. It went to all places...

I drew a huge upside down V, a mountain... but I also drew a thick black mass, filled with terror far below, unseen and filling me with dread...

All of Fillydelphia would try to stop us...

Ponies... so many ponies, of the ground, sky and below... the terrible figure within it, but a group amongst it, shaded lighter, a haven... a stance against the bloodiness around them. They stood up to the darkness, not afraid. They had a goal.

And I'd meet that mare again...

My charcoal struck the page hard, working with a mind of its own... a shape of great detail, a pony, a mare... that mare. She looked amazed, shocked... I felt so too and I didn't know why, she was reaching out... why... why... like she was in the sky and I could... maybe I'd learn how to... to...

The charcoal stopped... and I reached over to take up the figure she had made... placing it on the paper, hoof to hoof with her.

How to fly away...

A tear dripped onto the page... as the fantasy broke and I was left in my cold cell again, with my likely dying body quaking and hiccuping and coughing and crying and...

I clutched the journal close and lay down, shivering. Yet as I lay, the journal felt warm, as I held tightly to it. Warmth spread from it, a comfort of another life in its rough scrawling.

That would be my adventure... I... I'd do that if I could... but I never would. It was just a dream... just a dream I'd want if I could have anything...

I'd fly away with them all... and we'd never have to be cold and lonely again. We'd have a place to ourselves, all of us. It'd be cosy and warm with a fireplace and blankets far away from everypony who could hurt us. We could spend Hearthswarming by the fire and... and we'd all be together. She wouldn't have to miss it any more...

My heart ruptured with willing it to be true. Wishing any amount on the Goddesses and anypony listening that it could be. That I could be anything more than a lonely slave.

Just... a chance...

A chance...

The world was grey.

That warmth from my wishes only grew.

There was a crackling. A sound of splitting wood and hissing bark.

My body had feeling in it. I could feel my core, my limbs...

...my wings.

My eyes, heavy and slow, opened to see the glare of a fire.

Before me it leapt and sparked, burning brightly and casting a haze of joyful warmth across everything in front of it. My skin felt prickly; it felt good. I felt alive, sore and exhausted but somehow stronger. I wasn't a numb prisoner. I was comfortable. Relaxed. My muscles felt limp, a world of stress all gone.

There was no noise but the fire, and a soft breathing. Just enough to wake me, to set my ears twitching. I felt so buried in relief, made breathless by the atmosphere of gentle renewal. A great burden was gone from my mind, yet I couldn't quite remember what until I dared to close my eyes again. Drifting in the world between consciousness, I opened them again and let them focus.

Cosy wooden furniture surrounded me, as I felt the softness of a thick blanket around my body. I could feel my heartbeat. A dull thudding, excited and unbelieving of this soothing scene. This dream. Was it a dream?

No, I had woken, this was real. This was reality, I had just fallen asleep. My adventure, it was my life. My life ever since I'd taken one to live for myself.

What I had wished for, so far back, I had walked into having, without even knowing.

That surge, that trembling wonder at how long this journey had been, threatened to overwhelm me. From whence till now. Yet my mind gradually put together other feelings to draw my focus away. Around my torso, I began to feel a tight but soft pressure. Limbs wrapped around me. A warmth pressed on my back as I was lying down. A muzzle on my shoulder, with gentle breath wafting over my ear.

Then, in a moment of quiet realisation, I felt a second heartbeat. The unmistakable feeling of another pony huddled close beneath the warm and thick blanket, snuggling so close into my back that I could feel their chest moving from their smooth breathing. A lock

of orange and red hair fell across my face and I didn't dare move to touch it.

The most I dared do was extend a wing to softly wrap around her, as I regained enough thought to realise where I was. To know who it was, and to thank every part of my world for this.

For now, the world was soft and tranquil.

For now, for both of us, it was safe.

It wouldn't last, I knew. It was going to get worse. It was going to be hard; this last struggle. Yet for her, and for all my friends, I would press on. I knew they would be doing the same for me. There was no one of us alone to carry the others.

I had said it to him. We weren't going to change the world, we just did what we could for each other. Yet right now was the time to rest, and I let myself slide back to the softness of a better sleep, wrapped in comforting, gentle warmth.

The last chance to truly rest together, before the journey started to end. Before we would be tasked to walk those last few arduous miles.

As I felt her grip tighten at the feeling of my wing around her body, I knew. I just knew. However long our journey had really been, however dark it had gotten and however it ended now...

...it would have been worth it.

The Battle of Fillydelphia – Part One



“What was it like to witness the war first hand?”

Long ago, I said I’d seen war. When I left the Pit with Brimstone, I had stopped and thought to myself that the slave riot was ‘war.’

I was completely wrong. My naïve mind saw the chaos of a few hundred ponies running wild in crowds, and thought that it even compared to outright conflict between two superpowers of the wastes. Now I was about to be shown how wrong I was. The Enclave were here and they were going to launch their assault any hour. We’d declared the Mall independent from Red Eye and Stern, but we couldn’t assume that would really work, not that we had any lack of trouble to handle ourselves.

It was going to be rough. We had no idea what was coming our way, but every sign pointed at this being a brutal fight. The foals were waiting and the Wall would need to be beaten, but before any of that we simply had to *hold firm*. With the Enclave above us, and the Mall surrounded by those who wanted to drag us back in chains, we were an island whose only hope was to hold out just long enough to make our escape.

“One little island amongst it all, huh? Isn’t that how you described having friends in slavery?”

Huh?

“Well, think about it. Ponies caring for one another is what you said helped slaves get through the day. Isn’t this just showing that the same thing can happen on a much bigger scale?”

I... never thought about it like that before. Protégé was saying that we all had to be together. That ponies were better united. Honestly, I think he saw the Mall as ‘Equestria’ away from Fillydelphia’s new age.

“Did it work? Did others come to join?”

Yes. They did. Oh they came, we took in individuals and groups, sometimes even more amazing things. Ponies were given a chance to stand up for themselves, they took it with all hooves. Or horns, or... yeah, you know what I mean? We had a chance. A small one, but we all had to keep believing in that. The moment we didn't was the moment everything would fall apart. Even this wasn't the end of it. Even if we survived, we still had the assault to save the foals, if we could find out where they were. We had to get the slaves to the Wall, fight our way past it... there was so much to do. I'll tell you about the defence of the Mall first. It alone was bad enough.

War. Absolute, total war. Weapons large enough to crush entire buildings were being used. The skies burned above us. Every street became a battle. Rooftops were death traps. Fire from skyships rained upon us, while those on the ground sought to run us over. Before the end, Fillydelphia would burn and crumble. From above *and* below. Everything from the clouds to the tunnels would see blood before the end. Thousands died in a war that felt it should have been kilometres wide in size but was all condensed into one little city's boundaries.

History would talk of Red Eye's remaining empire fighting the Grand Pegasus Enclave. One side and the other. Some talk of who won, who fought, who died from those sides.

No one ever thought about the innocents, the slaves. How many died simply because they were caught up in the middle? Our story was one of survival. Escape.

The story of one building that stood up in the middle of the fire and said 'no more.'

The Mall was a hive of activity. On every level I trotted through, ponies were galloping, dragging wagons behind them or bearing uncertain loads on their backs that I veered around. Rooms I passed had the sounds of hammers and saws as windows were boarded over; while the warm scent of heated food was starting to waft through the corridors, originating from the food court of the Mall. Protégé had ordered them to start making what they could. It might have been a dull smell amongst the foul sweat of tired ponies working for their freedom or the thick sawdust from building defences, but it was more than many of us had eaten in a long time. The smell was tempting, making me want to stop and start drifting toward it, but all those who could gallop had jobs to do. Jobs we had volunteered for.

Clusters of less fortunate slaves lay in corners or sheltered rooms. As I cantered past the storage depot, I saw many under blankets or upon filthy mattresses as they reunited with old friends or lost family in the vast area. The Mall was beginning to fill up fast, and everypony not directly involved in helping fortify it was trying to find some space for themselves or clamouring for every shred of food or medicine we had. There was a genuine worry about running dry of supplies.

Running around the upper levels, swerving to avoid a blanketed and sick mare on my way, I headed for the centre of the building. My route passed by groups of ex-caravaneers or hired guns, slaves that now remembered their old skill. Rearmed, they headed out to defence points at all corners of the building. Their bodies were wasted and thin, but put a gun in their hooves and you could see the practised motions as they loaded them.

My head turned to an open set of balconies that now looked into the old slave area above the fountain, where I'd once been imprisoned with my friends, only to see the crowds below

being herded in from the main entrance. Stallions, mares, a few donkeys even, and at least one goat were all swarming through to where I could see a couple of the Mall's old workers trying to direct them to places we still had space.

Three refinery workers were mixing together some components from the kitchens into an hissing liquid of some sort, maybe flammable? I had to skid to a halt as one of them shouted at me to get back from the scalding soup pot they were carrying between them. I rounded onto the stairs and started my descent toward Protégé's office, the alchemical stench from their passing dizzying me and making my rad-sores sting. I'd been upstairs trying to organise our own escape supplies in a safe spot, well off the ground floor. Somepony had been shouting for me, a messenger sent by Protégé. He wanted me to head to his office.

Apparently, it was time to hear how this was all going to work.

A crowd of ponies barred my way on the floor I wanted as they clustered to collect clothing and blankets, so I kept going down to the ground floor, near to the main entrance of the Mall itself to head up a separate stairway to Protégé's office. The entrance hallway was busy, but at least here I could weave me way through.

Waving my hooves and shouting frantically stopped anypony trampling over me, letting me squeeze around them into the main corridor near the doors, where I stopped to catch my breath for a second as the outside air wafted in, as thick and polluted as it was.

I was running out of breath faster than usual. I really hoped this wasn't a sign of something.

"Ah! Miss Fluttershy! You have come to join me in this most uneventful of duties?"

"Uneventful? We're—eep!"

Squeaking, I felt my fleece being yanked upwards. I was lifted a metal claw to be placed on the shoulder of Mister Peace. Up ahead, I could see the various groups coming in ones and twos through the door. Grabbing on for balance, I looked down at his viewscreen and shook my head.

"Protégé wants me to go to the briefing, I was just getting my breath—"

"A war gathering? Much that I would desire to attend! Alas, I will not shirk in the duty you gave me to protect these refugees of the war returning home, for Mister Peace is nothing if not loyal to his Ministry Mare!"

His screen just below me flickered from an excited general to a despondent private, speaking more quietly.

"Even... even if there isn't a single insurgent strike or infiltration raid to pass the day... missiles six and eight in particular are especially disappointed."

He let me down, before returning to keeping a watchful eye on the way in. It was right that he was here. Mister Peace was by far our most powerful trump card in all this. Or... ace card... or a full house? Card games had never been my thing. I was terrible at them. The last time I'd tried back on the rock farm the other ponies had accused me of cheating just because I'd found that fifth ace in the other slave's pocket and played it. Weren't you supposed to collect cards and use them in your own deck?

"Um... excuse me? Excuse me? Can we escape too?"

"Y-yeah! We want out!"

My ears perked up, keeping me from running on. Turning my head, I saw a couple of small slaves tentatively stepping into the Mall. They looked exhausted, covered in dirt and muck from no doubt hiding in ditches. The sight wasn't entirely uncommon from those who had slipped their cages or workplaces and made their way to Protégé's promised mall of

freedom. They had come in small groups or just alone in a steady trickle ever since the broadcast, before this recent surge as word spread. Occasionally, we'd even had to fire some shots to ward off slavers chasing them toward the Mall's open ground surrounding us, but since Protégé's excursions to clear the surrounding street the slavers had mostly stayed at a distance. We weren't their biggest priority at the moment, and Mister Peace was already carving out a name for himself by guarding the incoming refugees. Most were exhausted, desperate, and terrified after their run from their pens.

Those arriving looked horrifyingly alike most of the time: skeletal like myself, devoid of expression. It was difficult to tell mare from stallion from how worn and abused they were. Stiff blood and mud caked their sides, and many had most of their manes or coats falling out. These last few days I'd felt so separate from them again, out on adventures and missions... it shocked me to look at them and see a reflection of my own body, with all its sores, exposed ribs, and sickness inside.

It occurred to me how much I stood out simply due to my small stature and wings. More than a couple glanced at me as they passed. Some envy, some hatred.

One of them looked up suspiciously at the ponies we had manning the entrance. A couple of ex-slavers, actually. That had been a surprise, as some of *Red Eye's* workers had come seeking a way out of this too. Given how I knew some slavers treated each other, I wondered if they were at the bottom of the social ladder or if they were just scared of the war.

"You can come in, sure. Follow the path to the main hall, we'll get you settled from there and find what you can help us with."

"S-sure thing!" One of them piped up and hesitantly pushed past. "Come on, Pike!"

"Coming! Wait up! Cosh, wait!"

The pair stumbled down the corridor, seeming relieved to be inside at last, momentarily locking eyes with me as they trotted. We didn't say anything, instead stared at one another until they turned into the side halls. Those two had tried to cause me major problems in the past, and I'd given them a few in return. Right now, however, none of that seemed important anymore. They were just a couple of poor ponies wanting out of Fillydelphia as much as I did.

"Yo! Robot! You might wanna come watch this one!" One of the guards was shouting.

Immediately after he spoke, we heard shots.

Panic set in to those coming through the doorway, as they fled deeper into the Mall. The sounds were from outside our sight range in all the smog of the city. Echoing, inconsistent, the noises whipped through the darkness and sprung off the road leading up to us.

The ponies up front called back and before I could even turn to him, Peace had rolled past me toward the entrance. Cautiously, I crept forward at the edge of the tunnel to peek over the barricade.

Through the smog, under the searing red glare of Fillydelphia, I could see a group of ponies approaching. At least a dozen. They were moving slowly, advancing toward the Mall's main entrance, wreathed in a passing cloud of smoke that kept me from seeing them fully.

"Oh shit..." The ex-slaver beside me grabbed the radio, "Heads up, we got a large group! Maybe slavers, we should—"

"Wait!" I shouted to him, tapping him repeatedly with a hoof to get his attention. My eyes squinted as I watched the silhouettes getting closer. Some normal shaped, but others more... angular, surrounded by others. There was something off about them. They weren't

all trotting. Some were... wait, were those wagons? No... tables?

"What is that?"

"Battlefield analysis complete, non-combatants identified!" Peace boomed beside us, his missile doors slamming shut with the most disappointed sounding *'whirr'* I'd ever heard in my life, **"Ministry of Peace combat medical groups are allied forces."**

We all looked at him.

"Ministry of Peace? Combat medical? What?"

Hooves clattered. Out of the smog, somepony sped up and galloped out to meet us. Clearing the smoke, I felt my face light up with joy. The billowing medical coat covered a stallion dressed like somepony from two hundred years ago. That drawn, wrinkled and ghoulis face glaring at us with harsh intent. The raspy voice shouting at us from across the Mall entrance pathway wasn't harbouring much patience.

"Well? What are you waiting for, you lazy fucknuts? The hospital guards are right behind us and there's slavers moving in from the side streets! Can't you see I've got eight ICs and another ten injured coming with us from the hospital? Or did you think they were about to perform a Luna-damned interpretive friggin' dance performance of the great Canterlot alicorn orgy? Get out there and help them in before they catch up to us!"

The slaver beside me gaped. Doctor Weathervane pulled himself up onto the barricade.

"Ministry of Peace parameters are of great pleasure to you, Miss Fluttershy! I will assist!"

Mister Peace immediately surged off out the doorway, veering around the very shocked-looking hospital staff and patients. They were all limping, pulling and cantering their broken or exhausted bodies this way. Some were nursing very fresh looking wounds, no doubt from the incoming fire that still slashed at them from unseen places in the fog.

Weathervane's eyes followed the machine, speaking to the slaver before seeing me.

"And you can... Murk?"

His voice betrayed some surprise or perhaps even relief. His eyes widened for a second, staring right at me. I could see, even on the face of a ghoul, that his eyes were dark and his face heavy. A wild anger bubbled in him, quenched only briefly as I offered him a smile and a flap of my wings.

"You came! You really came to help us!"

"Hmph, guess I did."

"Why?"

That made him hesitate. "You think Red Arse was going to let those needing help live after they became useless? I'm tired of watching ponies I can save taken off for 'removal.' Fucking tired. Suppose some part of me likes to pretend I'm not an old sour bastard and remembered what young Caduceus used to talk about. Blame that little shit for me getting all thoughtful. Kid reminded me what it was to care proactively, to go into the storm to pull the poor wankers out like I used to."

That made me smile. It wasn't often I saw Weathervane admit anything, but the sight of him leading the ponies who couldn't help themselves was, in my mind, what would define him. Helping those who couldn't even perhaps walk to try and respond to Protégé's call.

"Never did let little Sundial know I ended up on some battlefields doing that..." Weathervane spoke quietly, almost—but not quite—looking at me as his eyes briefly glazed over.

I felt a small surge of guilt and worry. Mostly centred around what I wore on my hoof. I'd

almost come to feel like I missed the messages—none had activated recently. I hoped they hadn't stopped.

Out in the distance, I heard the sudden rattle of Peace's weaponry. Clearly, he'd found who had been chasing the staff. Weathervane kept his eyes on us, continuing to speak in a level voice that only served to remind me that he was a pony who had healed during a war before.

"Now, I've got twelve medically trained ponies, including three surgeons counting myself. We've got two small wagons of supplies. We can cater for sixty between us, there's eighteen ponies we got moving from their beds with us already, though. Three probably shouldn't have."

The ex-slaver gaped.

"You brought your patients? Holy shit, that must have been dangerous to move them all out..." The slaver muttered to himself, keeping his rifle held ready as he watched the smoke behind the nearing group. I could see limping ponies alongside nurses pushing occupied stretchers. They really had cleaned out the hospital.

Weathervane scowled and kicked the rifle's barrel away from that direction with a back hoof. "What the fuck did you think I was going to do? Now stop acting goggle-eyed at everything and go help them in."

"Me?"

"No, you cocknobbling arseviolin, I meant the fucking Sun Princess." Weathervane rolled his eyes, the slaver not catching up on his sarcasm quickly enough for his liking. "Get a move on!"

The stallion ran off, shouting to a few others to help him. I saw a couple of slaves rush out too, carrying blankets and water to meet the injured. I watched a severely malnourished pony pass by on a stretcher, her body seeming to lack any and all flesh over the bones. I recognised the type. Like me, they had been too small to fight for the food. I'd had to steal mine. If it hadn't been for the medical personnel working on her, I'd have sworn she was dead. Some were limping on wooden prosthetics, while two were blinded and had their scarred faces covered with a potion soaked bandage against infection. I looked up at Weathervane.

"We could really use you in what's coming. I... I'm happy to see you here..."

"Fucking charmed. I've got work to do; tell Protégé I'll be coming to him soon with a list of demands. We'll need an area scrubbed, sterilised and set up with boiling water, far from any windows to turn into an aid station. I don't want any opportunistic little shitstain lobbing a grenade into my ward. Any clean sheets get sent to me alone, and I want as much strong alcohol as exists, and... sod it, I'll talk to him myself when I get the chance."

I gulped. "Th-thanks for..."

Hiss hoof waved quickly, cutting me off.

"Not in it for the thanks. Ponies need it, might even get the chance to reach my friends in the metro... the ones you found? Won't let go till I save them, Murk. I will save their lives; the suffering they must be in can't be let to continue. They're the last remnants I have of who I was now. Won't let go..."

He stopped, blinking rapidly and groaning with a hoof held to his head. He looked in pain.

"Weathervane? What do you mean, 'won't let go'?"

The ghoul snarled, shaking his head. The motion was far more aggressive than I had

expected, so much so I recoiled. “Not for your young mind to worry... not your problem. Just tell the boy that I’ll be along in half an hour.”

With that, he turned and trotted away after his patients. Slowly, I began to trot and then canter toward Protégé’s office, keeping my eyes on Weathervane until he was gone.

Protégé, Brimstone, Blunderbuck, Glimmer, Sunny, and two ponies I didn’t know were standing around a table set up in the slaver’s old office. The two unknowns were a stallion and mare, the latter wearing armour bearing Red Eye’s symbol on it, only now crossed out with white paint. Protégé was speaking to him over a drawn map of the Mall in front of them all, held down by books on all corners. One of them I recognised as the Daring Do book I’d found for him.

The unknown stallion nodded to Protégé, some sort of supply runner. On lanky legs that promised him to be a ferocious galloper, he turned and left, giving me a spot to hop up and look over the table from. Glimmer acknowledged my presence with an excited grin, but Protégé was only looking to Brimstone.

“I can lead, organise, and arrange things,” Protégé spoke carefully, “but I am no general, Brimstone Blitz. I would highly appreciate your input to this, given your experience in warfare.”

Brimstone grunted, speaking dismissively, “Most of what I did was kicking the door in, not holding it shut.”

“Then you know what they might try? How would you resist yourself?” Protégé was laying out small coloured pieces from a board game on the map to represent things. Given their locations, I presumed they were what groups we had managed to arm thus far.

The big raider leaned over the map, furrowing his brow and grumbling lowly. “Biggest issue is the shock. Nine times out of ten we’d rush in, kick the figurative door off the figurative hinges and that’d be it, aye. You get inside, you win. A defending group of poor shits sees their line shattered quick, they’ll break. Every time. We hold them outside, or we don’t hold them at all. We’re not working with soldiers or raiders on our side, kid. They’re slaves. Scared, sick and tired wee slaves, some of whom haven’t held a gun in a long time.”

“You’re saying we can’t do it?” Protégé spoke very precisely.

“I’m saying that left to themselves they’ll snap. We’ve got some good fighters. The robot, Sunny, Coral’s got the magic factor, myself... a few turncoat fighters like Whitmane there,” he indicated the mare I didn’t know, “and we’ll have to spread ourselves out amongst all this. It’ll be individuals that keep them fighting, leading by example. Hmm...”

He smoothed the map with a hoof that covered almost a quarter of it.

“They know we aren’t a trained force.” Sunny spoke up, taking out a full blown cigar she’d unearthed from somewhere, “We might pull it in small areas, but the big picture? They have an army.”

Protégé shook his head. “Stern’s a tactically-minded individual. She excels at small, squad level actions, typical of Talon mercenaries. It’s a well known, yet rarely spoken fact within the slavers that she isn’t cut out for strategic scales the way Red Eye was. Even I can see her tactics for defending the city are clumsy and without forethought of resource management. Not that I could do better, but sending hundreds out to the empty plains to charge an airborne force? No, I don’t think we need worry about strategic-level big actions against us.

She'll want a small force to do it, quick and easy so she can concentrate on the big fight. Fight that off and she'll probably consider us not worth fighting until the bigger war's done. Worst-case scenario is Shackles uses his influence to bring more to bear... but let's just hope he can't rustle up too much before we get out of here."

"In that case," Brimstone cut in, his eye not having left the map, "get our best people and put them on the ground and top floors. Those are the most vulnerable spots. Get the lessers in between on elevated positions to fire down from safety away from the front line. The robot is quick, so... Murky? Tell him to move wherever is hardest hit, he's our reserve. Get those who can't fight furthest from any access ways and post some weaker ponies that can't hack the front as guards to catch anything that slips through."

I nodded, shaking slightly. The feeling of my fate and my life being taken out of my hooves left a tight fear in my gut. How could those who fought deal with this feeling every day? That you were only one small part of a greater picture, one that could collapse, fail, and kill you through no fault of your own if the wrong call was made elsewhere?

"W-Weathervane's here..." I offered, "he says he's going somewhere to set up. Maybe there works?"

Brimstone didn't really smile or nod, remaining impassive. "Works for me. The old rot was a war doctor, he knows where to go."

Protégé looked at the map, no doubt trying to predict where Weathervane might go. "I shall have to meet him. I had hoped to send you out to speak with him, Murky. That he's come on his own is incredible; we shall no doubt have need of his team's skills. Now, what about weapons?"

"We've got the armoury going full tilt!" Blunderbuck lit up, "Never seen my pretties get so much chance to all be used! Mostly single shot rifles, with some revolvers and semi pistols. Quite the sight, but we're dreadfully short on ammunition if we have to do more than exchange, maybe not even that. Small stuff, sure, but all the big rounds went to the army. We've got no more than a dozen carbines and automatic rifles left, and tragically few shotguns for a battle no doubt inside a building."

Protégé idly tapped the desk with a hoof. "Sunny, give Blunderbuck a hoof in distributing what there is. Try to identify better shots for anything special we might have left. If it even has one round available, we need to use it. I know we have at least a couple big antique hitters left in the armoury after all, they'll stop any mass pushes so get them higher up. If we have rounds or shells with nothing to fire them, then wire up some traps. Glimmer, can you do that?"

"Bet your ass I can. If you've got any leftover spark batteries I can use them, find any flour and I can whip up something nasty with that too." Glimmer stared at the confused faces, "Really? Never heard of a flour bomb? That stuff can flare like a backdraft with the right ignition. Old mining site stallion taught me that trick when I did some rock-breaking once."

Protégé waved her down from the story, "The store room is upstairs, filled with spark technology in the back quadrant. No flour, I'm afraid, the long lasting stuff is kept in the logistics warehouse, but we have plenty of batteries we used for the terminals."

"Kick. Ass." She winked, clapping her hooves together and leaning forward on the table. "Wanted to see if those socks were still up there before we leave..."

So much for serious... thanks, sis'.

To my surprise, Protégé actually chuckled, grinning openly and shaking his head. He had

been going full tilt for hours now, trying to get everything organised before the slavers got their heads together. His theory was it took some time to filter the news through to the higher authorities.

Despite the brief sign of laughter, Protégé still clearly limped from the flogging, and I could see he was dying to just lie down for a while. Part of me felt ashamed for not insisting more when Protégé had ordered *me* to rest.

“Speaking of getting out...” I spoke, before recoiling as multiple pairs of eyes turned to me expectantly, “um... oh my... I mean, how do we? How *do* we get out? We’ve got our thing with the metro and all but... y’know, it doesn’t work with so many. What’s your, y’know...”

My voice died out to a whisper.

“...plan?”

Protégé took a deep breath, nodding slowly. “Yes... that is mostly what I wanted you here to listen to. This is not a subtle plan, but it requires much to work. I do indeed have an idea.”

He turned, wandering toward the window, and stood with a rigidly straight neck to view the sights. Through it, I could see the colossal wall surrounding us, poking over the rooftops. My mind reeled through chow we’d tackle that. Assault the stairwells up to it? Cross over from a rooftop and a bridge? That’d take forever and there was no way down on the other side. Go under? Did a tunnel even exist? That only got me shot last time. It seemed titanic and unassailable.

“Red Eye’s wall was never intended for assault. It was to keep slaves in and keep raiders out.” Protégé spoke steadily, looking away from us. “It is strong, but it is not a comprehensive defence structure for a war. I intend to bring it *down*.”

A shiver flew through me, and I saw everypony else take a step back.

“The foundations don’t go down far, we never had the machines for such designs. It’s held up mostly on interior supporting girders. Detonating something at the base of it in the right place between the girders... I’m willing to bet that it might just bring a section of it toppling to the ground.”

He didn’t look back as he spoke. Instead, Protégé just stared directly out the window at that Wall like a hated enemy. “Blunderbuck, we would need a large explosive device. Could you manufacture such a thing?”

“I... sure can?” Blunderbuck spoke quietly, nodding to a couple of us. “It’ll take time though... not something you wanna rush, y’know? We’ve got no real ammo, si—Protégé, can we even last till I do? We’re talking most of a day. Hell, longer if I need to hunt for stuff.”

“We’ve got the time,” Glimmerlight cut in. “after all, we still have to rescue the foals once we have breathing room. We can’t do that while being assaulted.”

There was a grunt from Brimstone.

“They’re going to come at us with a lot, Glim. Shackles has it in for us, you can bet he’ll be leading it. He’ll bring all he can.” The big raider wandered around the table as he spoke. “Slavers. Soldiers. Griffons. Big guns, numbers... all we have to do now is *hold*. The kid’s right, if we make ourselves too much of a resource drain to deal with during the Enclave attack, they’ll leave us alone to concentrate on a bigger threat. That’s all we do now: we protect those we can, we fight for our freedom and we hold the fucking line.”

“Spoken like a real war hero, Brim.” Glimmer grinned up at him, receiving a dismissive

grunt in return. She looked at me and whispered, "Aww, he's embarrassed."

I had to fight not to giggle, even if this kind of talk was, frankly, terrifying me.

There was a commotion outside that caught my ears. Two ponies shouting. The soldier, Whitemane, went to investigate without a word to us.

"Then that settles it." Protégé finally turned. "Gather every resource you can. Every trick, every bullet, every trap. Find every pony that can shoot and arm them. Anypony with skills to care for wounds gets sent to Weathervane. Ask *everypony* for their skillsets. If they can do any spells, construction or anything that might be helpful, try and get them to put it to use. With this ammo and personnel shortage, we can but try. We hold this building, use the Enclave attack as cover and wait for our opportunity. We fight... we *survive*. This. Is. It. We stand or we fall right here together."

He looked around us all slowly. "You could say it is appropriate, that this place is known as the Harmony Mall. Good luck."

"Protégé! Protégé!"

Whitemane burst back in.

"You've *got* to see this..."

We clattered as a group downstairs toward the main entrance, only to stop in shock.

Before us, in almost perfect lines, marched a whole *shift's* worth of slaves. We had perhaps seventy in the Mall already, but here was trooping another sixty. Enough slaves to fill an entire factory. They trotted in groups, pulling iron-sided wagons laden with crates and metal boxes. I knew those boxes, I knew this *factory*.

The sides of the boxes were marked with calibres of rounds.

Protégé wandered out beside the procession as it headed inside the Mall, passing by stunned guards and a gleeful Mister Peace.

"What is this? What is this eleventh hour saving grace..." Protégé's lips barely moved as he muttered the words.

"It is my apology and my gift, for ignoring what is right for so long."

The voice was behind us. We all turned at once. A lithe stallion trotted up to us, a multi-ended candle on his flank. His eyes were fixed on Protégé, before the young unicorn moved forward rapidly and shook the older pony's hoof. The pony simply bowed to him.

"Twice before I have ignored your plights. Yet here I saw you stand up once more and take a risk to protect ponies, just as I once said to all my workers that I would be a better pony for them. It is about time I started acting like it, and stood up myself," said List Seeker.

With the new arrivals, a jolt of energy surged through the Mall. Individuals were bringing their unique skills to bear on every floor and in every room that I toured while acting as a messenger and runner for individual tools and parts. I saw ponies who had toiled for months on firearms clustering into Blunderbuck's armoury to start cleaning and assembling weapons. Unicorns from Red Eye's technology warehouses tinkered with radios and power tools. A dozen were summoned to bulk out Weathervane's team as aides. I had to leap aside

from two sweating ponies lugging a truly ancient tripod-mounted machine gun up to the second floor. Passing into the main thoroughfare, I saw the main mall floor transformed, with tables bearing organised lines of food, survival supplies and clothing being packaged or bagged. Ponies were preparing to leave, for the dangerous journey awaiting us outside the walls.

Those strong enough took picks and drills to walls and windows. List Seeker's workers in particular put an incredible effort into the restructuring with their engineering skills. Doors were blocked off to form chokepoints on the ground floor and new fire holes were cut into the exterior walls. Concrete ripped from inner walls and cell floors was carried by wagon downstairs to block up the main entrance and the roof had hundreds of pieces of sharpened rebar welded to any perches griffons might try to land on. Sunny Days at one point I heard shouting to not go back outside other than the main entrance. She and Glimmer had mined and trapped the old slave camp that surrounded the building to deter flankers.

More than once, we had scares. The alarm would go out with a series of blown whistles and the half organised ponies would need to rush to the windows and walls. We could see griffons hovering nearby, just out of accurate range, watching us through the sights of their weapons. Ponies would rush to the windows, before those spying on us pulled back. Over time, forces began to grow. First a flight of griffons began to linger. Then slavers were spotted out of range in the streets.

Soon after, the flow of refugees coming to us began to slow, then stopped altogether. Thicker rings of slavers were seen surrounding the Mall and the streets were observed to have been blocked by upturned wagons.

Both Coral Eve and I were standing at a second floor window to watch the activity and listen to the grating of metal and wood on concrete as the roads were blocked. First the main route, then each of the side roads. Through my binoculars, I saw five slaves under guard handling an old sky chariot to even clog an alleyway. Beneath us, two young slaves had just crawled to the main gate, narrowly evading a nastily hidden trap near the palisade wall around the Mall. They had gotten in just before the streets were closed by crawling through a waste ditch nearby. I knew how that felt...

"That's all, I suppose..." Coral Eve muttered lowly, her hoof around my shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"She means they aren't walling us in, Murky." Protégé trotted to the window, standing opposite us. "They're stopping any more coming to join us until they figure how to handle this. Those two will be the last..."

"How... how many did we get?" I kept my eyes on the new barricade up the street, where gas-masked guards now stood amongst a cloud of foul smog that half covered their position.

"Including ourselves, less than two hundred. Nought but a drop in the ocean..."

Protégé spoke bitterly, turned, and immediately moved away with a purpose, striding toward somewhere I could hear ponies trying to set up a small ammunition dump.

Watching him go, I felt Coral's hoof tighten and pull me to her shoulder as outside, I heard the orders of soldiers taking up positions to contain anything we might do now...

In the sky above, the Enclave remained passive. In breaking away, we had joined the two great forces watching each other warily, their hooves resting on the buttons to devastate the

landscape and daring each other to make the first move. We were just the flies on the wall.

Eventually, we'd done all we really could. The windows were boarded. Ponies were in position, for the most part. Supplies were gathered. Nopony new was able to get to us. Things were settling. The noise began to drop off inside the Mall. Ponies were realising that the preparation was done.

Now we simply had to wait.

That was the worst part... the quiet. Nopony spoke much, they all expected the next minute to bring the ground-shaking earthquake that would signal the war. Briefly, I even wondered if this was how Sundial had felt waiting for the sirens to go off...

Desperate to be with company rather than alone in the grey corridors with my thoughts, I sought out my friends and found Brimstone Blitz in the Mall's old delivery dock. He was directing those ponies who had been placed well off to the sides to keep them out of the way of the true threat on the ground. They were like me, the lower end of slaves who didn't have the strength to do much but cower and survive, so their job was to watch for flankers and other attacks. These ones in here held rifles and sidearms that looked massive on their frail bodies, so Brimstone was a giant amongst them, his deep voice pointing them to where they needed to go. He turned and saw me as I wandered aimlessly into his area, picking at tools and watching the reinforced flooring they were using to create a makeshift gantry to reach the high windows.

"What you lookin' for, kid?"

Biting my lip, I sat down beside him and shrugged, "I dunno... I'm done with stuff, just... I dunno. Felt like seeing everypony."

Brimstone grunted and turned away. "They say the greatest of generals in Ancient Equestria always toured the lines before war, and got their troops laughing."

Blinking, I angled my head, trying to get on the side with his good eye to let him see me in return. I tried to smile, perking my wings up a little. "You're saying I'm a great general?"

"Naw, what kind of general in touch with his troops in all their rough and ready glory can't even say 'fuck'?"

I saw that smirk of his and sniffed hard, turning away. "C-can too."

"Prove it." His leg nudged my side, almost tipping me over.

"I just... don't f-funking want to."

The sound of the old warlord laughing was like rubbing two rocks together. "You're holding up better than some in here. You've got us to confide in, talk to. Many of these wee ponies don't. Found a few of them crying themselves silly with worry in the back, wondering if they'd done the right thing. There's no way out now that we're cut off. No way for them to decide to not get caught up in it. That's a harsh thing to realise, when you want to turn back, but can't any more."

The sudden shift in tone was typical of Brimstone, but it still always caught me off guard. I stood and looked at him directly, moving in front of him. "But you helped them, right? You're an old warrior, surely you know all the ways to... to, y'know... make us feel better? I'm scared myself..."

Brim looked uncomfortable for a moment. I saw his eye glance at the ponies nearby working on the firestep to reach the windows. One glanced back nervously at Brim before immediately turning away and shivering, as though afraid we'd seen him looking.

"They're scared of you..."

"Aye... they know who I am." Brimstone spoke quietly, solemnly, "Spent long enough

around you, Glim, and the others I actually started to forget that. They look at me and see the Dragon. They don't trust me, probably rightly so. Can't blame them."

"They'll come around, Brim..." I hopped up and placed one hoof on his leg. "Many of them don't like me because I've got wings. R-remember? You said that to me, you can't ignore who you are... b-but just don't let it eat you up. I still see them looking out the corner of my eye when I pass by sometimes. One of them didn't want me to bring his food earlier."

"Hmph. Maybe I did say that." He strode off, walking across the dock and watching other ponies pushing tool cabinets against the large metal corrugated door. "Doesn't help when I see faces in here I remember. I turn down a corridor and see them scurrying away, or hear them muttering behind me, pulling their siblings and friends away from me. Some even spit and curse as they pass, shouting me away from their kin. They think I'm trying to get out, they fear what that would bring..."

He rested a hoof on a door frame to bend his old joints down through them. I took a quick breath, and spoke up.

"Do you still want to stay?"

Brimstone stopped ahead of me.

We hadn't talked about that for a long, *long* time. I remembered clearly though. Brimstone, the great redemption-seeking raider, had once said he would stay in Fillydelphia to live out his penance in the eyes of the Goddesses.

"Do you want to stay here?"

Slowly, I saw him turn to me and took a few steps back. Friend or not, Brimstone Blitz was a terrifying pony of barely restrained rage and power behind a quiet cover of dry wit. The only thing worse than him thinking you were making fun of him was if he thought you were trying to delve too deep into who he was. He was one of those ponies you had to respect every second of the day. That one remaining eye gazed harshly at me, his mouth creaking into a frown. I tried not to shiver. He was Brim, he was my friend... you could talk to your friends, right? (Whoever had made that saying had clearly never had to imagine Brimstone Blitz standing above you at the time.)

He spoke slowly, purposefully forming each word in turn. "Ask me again if we survive this, and if the rest even want me to come. Most here do not."

"B-but, um, who will teach me to say bad words if you don't?" I tried to grin, before covering my ears as he burst into laughter that set at least a dozen ponies jumping out of their skin with fright. His hoof slapping me on the back sent me sprawling forward.

"We'll see if we get through this, kid. Now isn't the time, but it's good you came... I meant to talk to you. Listen, listen to me closely."

Brimstone helped me up and pulled me toward the back of the loading bay. He knelt down, an unusual move for him to bring himself to my level before sighing and looking at me sadly.

"This is war coming, Murk. War. Not the little skirmishes we've had. Absolute. Fucking. War. Ponies die for no reason in it, heroes might die to a random bit of shrapnel from a bomb. Cowards might miraculously catch leaders off guard and gun them down from the back. They don't warn you. You don't get chances to wait, think, and escape. They shoot first."

His voice was turning to a cold steel, pulling me forward by the back of my head.

"I was in the great raider wars that happened forty years ago on the frontiers. You are

going to see even larger. You will see things you'll wish you never had. You'll not be able to help or save everypony. Not everyone will die in a fair way. You have to know this going in... or it'll break you. The shock is what kills, so don't lose your mind. It only takes one mistake to end up in a bad spot and the meatgrinder will grab hold of you."

"Y-you're not helping much, Brim..." I was shaking, looking up at the windows. At this angle I could see the vague black shapes of Enclave skyships moving amongst the clouds.

"Better to feel that now than when it happens. Just keep your head down. Always keep your head down. Don't go first, don't come last and don't volunteer for anything."

Shivering, I nodded. "I understand."

"If we both come through this, we'll talk then about where I'm going. They look at me and see the same face that brought what you're about to go through to their homes. I am war to them. I am the Dragon. I'll be going from the front, because better me to take it than any of these youngsters those like me put in here. I'm sure Glim can teach you just as many words."

"They'll see what you are, Brim... they'll see you're better. I know you've got it in you. I... I know I'd say a bad word if it meant you promised you'd come with us..."

He smiled darkly and tapped my cheek before getting up and trotting away a little. I spent a few moments watching him, relaxing slightly. I listened to the advice he gave to those who were willing to speak with him. I heard his warnings on where attacks might come from out of the buildings at the front of the Mall. I even managed to nervously laugh as he shared a pitch black joke with an old pony with a huge revolver who didn't seem to give a damn who he was talking to.

Then my eyes caught something very, very wrong to the side. Something so wrong, that it drew me out of the stress for one beautifully furious moment. Something that attacked the very core of my being as I viewed what was being done just to my left at the custom built gantry to the high windows.

"There! All done!" A slave flipped the hammer in his hooves and sat down, looking proud for all the world. Beside him, bits of wood led in a ramshackle stairway to the windows, allowing a pony to fire down on anyone trying to sneak up to the door, a potential weakspot if the slavers knew about it. It was a fantastic idea, one Brim had thought up after telling of how Barb had once attacked such a critical point.

Except... something was wrong.

Something was very, very wrong.

"Done!?" I shouted, not even thinking, "DONE!?! Oh come on!"

The three ponies turned sharply to me. The tiny pegasus shouting up had caught them all by surprise. I marched over, wings flaring in anger.

"You... you... just give me that!"

All this stress, all this waiting and worry and fear had bubbled up inside long enough that this... this was the least of things I could do now. I would not let *this* chance pass me by, one chance to put things right before this all ended. I would not let this horror, this *cancer* continue. Trotting out, I grabbed their tools, some lumber and went right up their proud new gantry. Ponies were crowding behind me as I stamped back and forth on the firestep's new upper floor and whacked away with a hammer to drive in some wooden planks to its edge. They muttered, confused, as I got a length of metal wire and started to string it between the poles and wooden stakes I had nailed to the edge at chest height, raising it at the height to stop a pony at the edge.

"You call this done?" I turned and pointed at it with a hoof, waving it at what I had done.

"What about this? Doesn't *anypony* think about this sort of thing?"

"Aw, c'mon man, we don't need—"

I just flailed my hooves. That was it. All this *waiting* had wound me up enough to just burst. If this was all I could do to make a difference right now, then by all that was mighty in this world, I would! I glided down and landed before them all. I wasn't a fighter or a builder or a techy pony or a tacticitciain or whatever in Celestia's name Brim and Protégé were, but I *could do this!*

"SAFETY RAILINGS!"

I waved my hoof harder at the rough but working ones I'd just added on.

"It only took me a few minutes and I'm a little runt! What's to stop a pony falling off? Why does nopony *think* about this sort of stuff? Why does *no* building have them? This is important stuff and it's so easy to do so *why does nopony ever do it?* Is it really that *fucking hard!*?"

I breathed deeply, exhausted. Everypony stood and stared at me in confused or bewildered silence before I felt my cheeks begin to flush as the adrenaline died down. Soon after, I heard somepony snigger... then laugh, then the entire crowd of a dozen ponies began to roar.

Wait... what had I just... oh... I had...

A huge hoof patted my back and a deep voice chuckled beside me.

"Knew you had it in you somewhere, kid."

I retreated deeper inside the Mall. Truth be told, I was (after an emergency bout of celestial apologetic pleading) beginning to giggle a little myself. It had felt quite relieving, venting out all the worry like that. Part of me wished Glimmer had heard—

Actually, wait... perhaps it was better she hadn't, come to think of it.

I headed for the armoury. Being deeper inside would let me get away from the unsettling drone of Enclave ships in the skies above. Every time one loomed overhead, I worried it might drop something.

Weathervane's authoritative voice echoed down the corridor; he'd set up in the old staff canteen to make use of its hot water tank. The smell of antiseptic and the groans of ponies emerged from the door when I passed by. Coral Eve was helping him right now, repaying her debt for saving her life with his RadPurge long ago, but I couldn't bring myself to enter that place. Medical wards, improvised or not... they made me uncomfortable.

Instead, I cantered toward the crowds passing in and out of the armoury. Tables had been set up outside and lined with rows upon rows of bolt action rifles. Antiques, lined with heavy wood, were most of what had been left after Red Eye's army had confiscated most of the advanced weaponry for their own uses. Beside the rifle table lay a couple of old shopping baskets filled with various pistols, arranged into piles for each type of ammo. List Seeker was shouting for any hunters, caravaneers, or old mercenaries to step forward to get automatic weapons, submachine guns, and shotguns. Such weapons would be far more useful in the hands of those with experience or who would be involved in the ground floor's inevitable close quarters combat.

Grenades were being brought out in small boxes, a mix of old Equestrian designs and

improvised bombs taped together by those working inside the armoury. Metal poles were being cut from scaffolding and sharpened into quick weapons, while clubs and shock sticks were being herded together. An ex-slaver even kept his whip handy while three of Red Eye's army had deserted and brought their heavy combat rifles. I'd heard a rumour one of them, probably Whitemane, even had magic rounds that could bypass armour. To my surprise, other slaves than us had produced stolen goods from their cells. Mostly pistols or knives, but there were a couple of sawn off shotguns and one even produced an entire light machine gun she'd kept dismantled and hidden behind bricks. Goddesses only knew for what purpose.

It felt incredible, seeing everything pulling together from the big guns to scrap-build blackpowder weapons that would shatter after a single shot. It felt empowering, like we had everything, but the reality said differently. We were outnumbered, outgunned, and I'd seen how such a disadvantage had hurt us before. We were working together though, in harmony. That was something at least.

Well, mostly in harmony. I couldn't help but hear a murmur about how 'the turkey' got a battle-saddle and they didn't as I trotted past a small group.

"Look, I see your point and all, but you're wrong, wrong, WRONG!"

"You're trying to tell me that Equestria's brightest military minds are *all* idiots who don't know a thing?"

Immediately after entering, I came across a scene of argument. The caged interior was emptied of its weaponry. Those left within had been stripped down for repairs or rebuilding, while the rest of the space was given over to the bank of workers Glimmer had taught to turn spark batteries into makeshift energy explosives. Yet at the middle of it all, eyes were on the pair of mares engaged in heated debate while working on their respective kits. Blunderbuck sat between them, trying to work on a large table filled with components, wires and bags of what looked like soil. The look he gave me said it all. 'Help me.'

"Look," Glimmer stuck a hoof out, her magic sliding and twisting a barrel back into position below her, "Equestrian military rifles were designed to win a *war*. You think they just cheapoed that stuff?"

"If by designed to win you mean 'designed by the lowest bidder,' Ironshod stuff is just crap! Good to four hundred metres, but what about past that? Look at that plastic tacky nonsense around that barrel!" Sunny countered passionately, before holding up a long-barrelled hunting rifle intricately carved with stock designs. "This is a weapon for reaching out there and carrying that power the full way and—"

"And jamming the second it gets dirty!" Glimmer aggressively shoved the bolt back into place on her more modern-looking Ironshod longrifle. "That's a rifle meant to hunt a radgator. Its muzzle flare's gonna' light up your position up to anyone looking! Meanwhile, this'll keep firing after swimming through a mudbath. Four hundred is just fine, any combat past that is just—"

"An extra advantage, if you're any good! You saying I can't hit that far if I want to? Could shoot your ass off at that range, not that it would be difficult to *miss*," Sunny cut hard with her voice.

There was an audible 'Oooh!' from many of the surrounding ponies.

"At least I've *got* an ass, Miss Scrawnybones!"

And an answering 'Aww!' from the onlookers.

"Yeah and we all know you spend half your time waving it around, meanwhile I'm out

learning to shoot.”

“You saying you can shoot better than me, wastelander?”

“Sure am, *Ranger*. We don’t get fancy systems that do it for us, we learn old school.”

Glimmerlight sat up straight, eyes narrowed at Sunny and received just as deadly a look in return. I saw both of them take a deep breath, before Blunderbuck grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me around to the back of the armoury just before the frantic shouting resumed behind us.

“I’m pretty sure it’s just their way of handling the stress and letting it out... either that or my armoury will have a murder in it before long.”

The bright look on his face betrayed the same anxiety in any of us, but I saw him give that joking smile when I giggled. Blunderbuck settled down at Mosin’s old desk and started fiddling with wires.

“Protégé wants this bomb, Murk... he’ll get it. Personally I think he should just tell those two that the Wall insulted their guns. Unfortunately, I don’t make the calls. However I do get to blow it up instead, so I’m happy.”

He kicked his legs up onto the desk and leaned the chair back, stretching over behind him to grab an old egg timer and started pulling its casing off.

I sat down on an old stool near the desk, possibly his when Mosin was still around, “You’re, um... coping. How do you deal with it? The waiting?”

“Simple, I listen to them through there.” He laughed and almost fell from the chair, catching himself on the desk with a stray hoof. “Truth is, I’m terrified, but somepony’s got to be the one smiling, right?”

I honestly hadn’t given Blunderbuck enough credit. We hadn’t seen him much, but even under Mosin’s harsh authority he had always been a delightful presence, finding joy in his work to help the day pass easier.

“I’m just hoping we make it. I’m not a slave, Murk, but you could hardly tell the difference just being an assistant in this place. Came here to earn money, realised quick I didn’t much have a way out again. Sorry, I realise I’m complaining to the wrong pony about my circumstances...”

“S’ok...” I muttered, looking over his shoulder, widening my eyes at the amazing sight that still stood there: a gigantic set of Steel Ranger armour with a green apple motif and archaic-looking joints. It lacked the flashy carvings and designed metal of the knight-like armours I’d seen Rangers in before, but it had a certain rugged beauty to it. It had always caught my eye and for no real surprise why. “Meant to ask... what’s that armour? I saw it every time...”

“That,” Blunderbuck waved a hoof back, “is my pride and joy. Something we fished out the old Wartime Ministry, and Protégé won the auction to have brought here. The *Armour of Mac*, I’ve taken to calling it. Wasn’t the first prototype suit, that one’s in Canterlot I think, but damn near to it and definitely the first one that went on public display. I’ve got the photos somewhere of Applejack presenting it to the crowds in Filly.”

I wandered around its huge weighted hooves. Compared to the refined and more practical ones I’d seen in the Stable, this thing was unwieldy in extremes, not to mention far too big for a pony.

“It’s huge...”

“So was Mac. You ever hear about him?”

“Um... not really, kinda?” I shrugged. I didn’t much want to learn about wartime history,

it always ended up sad.

“Renowned soldier and a big farm hand. Strongest pony in Equestria some say. Lost his life saving the Princess and was heralded as a hero of the land for it. Also, Applejack’s brother.” He tapped the armour on its leg carefully. “The Ranger project got off the ground after that because she wanted to prevent ponies dying like he had, so she had the first unveiled model designed in his image, his size, his marks. Big propaganda thing of course, but she was genuine about it.”

“Does it work?”

“Tried the generator once, couldn’t understand a damn thing with all the wires. I’m a gunsmith, and occasionally an explosives wizard, but not an archeotech stallion. The papers to operate the armour didn’t survive the war. Red Eye’s lot tried a few times, never could figure it out. Far as I can tell, it *would* work though, if you could power it and knew what you were doing.”

I looked up at it from the front and saw its blank eyeslots looking out across the armoury. It was three times the height of me, standing strongly on all four legs, upright and noble even below the layers and layers of dust that coated its dull metal plates. The imagery of a real hero.

I collected my rounds from Blunderbuck, being the only pony actually using such small munitions, thanked him, and headed back toward the exit, passing the near brawling Sunny and Glimmer. They were each holding up different types of rounds and talking at the same time. I was fairly sure I saw two ponies betting money nearby.

No, this was all too loud... I needed quiet. Somepony to just sit in the quiet with and let my mind settle. Letting it all out might work for Glimmer or Sunny, but getting worked up only made me feel worse.

“Hey, Murky.”

Outside the armoury, I stopped in my tracks as I picked out the soft voice through the crowd, before somepony took my hoof from the side.

“Mind if we get some air to have a chat?” asked Unity.

The roof was, in theory, quite dangerous right now. The Enclave could see you and there were griffon snipers around, but even so there were a number of ponies on watch, mostly the better shots and those with keen eyes and binoculars. Tarps had been strung up against occasional spats of rain brought on by the passing of cloud-driven Enclave ships far above. The puddles created by them hissed from blowtorch sparks falling into them as others shored up the griffon defences or welded access doors shut.

Yet despite the danger, it was calm. Apart from the hiss of the welders and the background ambience of Fillydelphia, nopony was talking and that was just what we sought. The cool breeze up this high, it was a relief from the stuffy heat below in Fillydelphia, especially inside. I led Unity across the roof to a point I knew, one I had sat in before and looked out with pleading eyes, wishing for a moment like this.

I remembered how I had cried, admitting to Glimmer that I couldn’t even remember my mother properly... I remembered watching the stars and hearing the memories of Sundial and Skydancer. Now I had returned here after all this time with a very different feeling. I tried to remember how I’d felt, the pain, worry, and hollow sadness... before quashing it

immediately. That was then, not now.

Unity sat beside me, settling down quite close, and huddling a blanket around both of us, her face betraying that she'd seen the look on mine.

"You look sad."

Grateful for the blanket, I pulled my side around until we were both sheltered from the wind, but I couldn't meet her eyes.

"Just remembering. The last times I was up here weren't happy. I was remembering what I had forgot..."

"Me?"

It was a brave question and I saw the blush, but I shook my head... then wished I hadn't. That had come out wrong.

"My mother. I don't remember her, it's been so long. I was only a little kid. L-last time I was here I told Glimmer and realised I didn't even know what she looked like. To completely forget somepony so important to me is just... just..."

Oh... *oh*. There it was, there was the feeling. I felt my eyes threaten to well up, I felt the shame, the twisted guilt and panic that she might have forgotten me, too, for all Glimmer's promises.

I felt Unity's hoof wrap around me and pull my head against her shoulder, before I felt her cheek rest on my head. I didn't feel ashamed to be comforted. I knew she wouldn't judge me for it. We were there for one another.

"You know that I understand how it feels," she whispered. "You remembered me, so you'll remember her someday. Hey, you can come meet my parents at Friendship City if you want. They'd be happy to welcome you in. My mother would probably make cake if I returned. They likely think I'm dead. Heh... cake to prove her wrong. That'll be it."

"Never had cake," I mumbled, my smile slowly returning. "Well, cake that wasn't just formed oatmeal anyway."

Unity giggled, before letting out her breath in a slow sigh. Mentioning her own parents had to hurt. It hurt any slave to think of those who didn't know what their loved ones were going through.

"You miss them?" I knew it was a dumb question, but it was only fair to be concerned, and I felt she wouldn't broach it herself.

"Yeah... a lot. Sometimes I... I wake up crying, thinking they're just in the next room, until I realise where I am."

"I've had that dream, too." I breathed out the words carefully and put a hoof around her back, a little half hug. "We'll all get back though, right?"

"Right." Unity nodded. I didn't respond, we just took solace in the quiet proximity of another

Squeezing lightly, we let go of one another. Unity turned to me, seeming to stare for a second or two, before returning her gaze to the Wall.

"Just that thing to beat now... or the portal below. Better to have options I guess. There's a lot of old stories where they only had one chance and it was this big dramatic thing, we have two, so I guess we're lucky right? We've got lucky num—"

"No, nooooo!" I laughed and lightly batted her shoulder. "Not that joke again!"

She laughed, and stuck out her tongue. I was surprised, that had been quite forward of me. I'd felt confident, comfortable. Like I'd knew her for longer than I had to expect and understand her teasing. Of course, I *did*, but feeling it every so often was so weird.

I chuckled, wiping a hoof through my mane.

"With everything that's been forgotten I... I'm glad I remembered you."

The words tumbled from my stupid mouth before I even thought about them. Unity widened her eyes, before melting into a truly beautiful smile. Her face was covered in dirt, thin with lack of food, bore some bruises and a sickly yellow mark on her chin from some chemical somewhere... but to me, that smile shone through to the mare I liked to imagine she was when healthy and clean.

"Thank you, Murky... me too, if that doesn't sound, y'know, too simple." She laughed the cumbersome reply off, turning away, then back again. "Listen, I... uh..."

She fell silent, brushing her wavy and matted mane away with a hoof to fill the time for her to get her words together.

"I... well, do... you remember the orb, Glimmer's orb she found from us?"

I nodded. The one that had proven to Glimmer who Unity was, who I was to her. Before my eyes, the orb floated up in Unity's hazy red magic.

"I haven't watched it. At first I was afraid to, I didn't know what to expect so I... I asked Glimmerlight about what was in it. She told me that it was my choice, that it showed nothing but the truth, nothing worrying or... or bad.

She paused, and let the orb drop into her hooves.

Glimmerlight really a lovely mare, Murky. She even offered to let us both see it at once with her. Isn't her talent so amazing? Being able to share those incredible moments with everyone, it just makes such a beautiful thing, a sharing of one's past with those you had it with and... and..."

Unity blushed.

"Sorry... I'm rambling again, you know what I'm like."

"I know," I giggled. It was fine, I liked listening. It meant I didn't have to worry about what I was saying.

Unity coughed awkwardly, hiding one cheek with a hoof until the blush passed.

"But, I just kept feeling like it was wrong to watch it. Like I shouldn't see it. Wouldn't it only be seeing ponies we aren't?"

I tilted my head, confused. My mane blew across my face from a gust of wind, before an Enclave ship roared overhead, taunting Fillydelphia's guns and drawing both our attentions away. It was small, likely a scout. In the distance, some overzealous rooftop gunner unleashed a torrent at it, a rapid drumroll that shook my breast even at a distance, but the target climbed off into the cloudbase at a speed that looked unnatural for something so heavy. The sounds echoed around with voices in the distance, and alarm bells ringing. More posturing, more goading the other to attack first and commit themselves. After a few minutes, things quietened down.

"Sorry, sorry... what was it? Ponies... we aren't?" I looked back at her, turning my head from the view to see her slowly bringing her thoughts back to us from the powder keg that was the city.

"Murky, do you think we'll ever remember anything else without going to that Ministry and finding those orbs? We know that's impossible now. So why should we look at just this one orb then? It'd be like looking through a window at our twins, they look like us, and maybe act like us but... they aren't us."

Unity sat up, properly turning her body to me and indicating me up and down with a hoof.

"You aren't the same pony I met outside Slit's factory, let alone the one I met who came into Fillydelphia. You've matured, done amazing things... survived. I've seen you joke with friends, and with me. When I first met you, I couldn't even look in your journal without you breaking down into a stammering wreck. Since we really reunited on that mountain, can you really say we are who we were back then? I don't know if I am... well, different or..."

"You are!" I blurted quickly, my voice squeaking high enough I swore she almost burst into laughter. "I meant, like... um... you were really nice when I met you, and you'd talk in really beautiful ways about how things could be better. Which was really good so... um, but now you're carrying the legacy of Aurora with you because of it which means... means... ah! Cos it means that you're not just talking about it anymore. You're doing it. You did it alone, and now with us. It's like you've become as brave and driven make things better as Aurora was."

Unity chuckled, "Stammered your way through that one till it started making sense, hm?"

My face flushed and I looked away, trying to smile. "A bit."

Her hoof tapped my cheek, seemingly finding my babbling amusing. Only then did I realise the core of what I'd been trying to say. Before, she had been a sweet, gentle pony, but now I somepony who had stepped up to a task, and shown such modest courage about it. In her own way, she was inspiring.

But before I could clarify myself, she spoke again, and I lost my chance.

"What I'm saying is, we're different ponies now, Murky. This orb," she floated the sparking shape up, "is nothing but a fragment of two ponies we're not, that would try to tell us how to behave, or what we should be thinking... rather than what we do think."

Very quickly, I felt my ears grow a little hot and twinge back. I shifted uncomfortably; the area between my wings felt itchy. "I think you're a really good friend."

Unity blinked a couple times, looking down, then away. I felt her hoof move onto mine, holding it lightly. "You remember the things I said about 'my buck,' don't you?"

"Y-yeah..." My stomach felt tight.

"I... well I... this is so difficult, because of how all this hurt us, almost broke us away from one another."

"Mhm..."

Slowly, we turned. I couldn't ignore looking her right in the eyes now. She was trembling.

"Murky, you know we're kinda close and... and we both know what maybe happened before. I just wish times were less arduous, to let us really work through it and figure out how we feel about one another, but I don't think I can do that right now. It's too raw, too hurtful when surrounded by... all this."

Her hoof waved, taking in the whole of the city, its situation and the numerous slavers I could see in the streets below. Quite a lot of them, come to think of it, climbing toward their guns. Out in the distance, I heard a rumble, but ignored it to look at Unity instead, into those wide, golden hazel eyes. I gripped her hoof back. I couldn't deny that a part of me felt disappointed in a way I hadn't ever really felt before.

"I guess so." I spoke quietly, gulping in a dry throat. "It's all just... confusing and I dunno what to really, well... I just dunno and... well, I wish I knew words like you did and, y'know..."

Unity hesitated for some time, looking ready to say something. Then she leaned closer,

placing a hoof on my shoulder, shifting the blanket. "We're still close friends though, right? So... when we get out of here, once we have time to really think about it all when this is all over, would... would you want to spend some time together? See if... well... things, y'know..."

My lips felt bone dry. I gulped. "If things... yeah, yeah..."

"Is that a yes?" She nervously tried to laugh, but it fell short.

Every inch of my body was fighting in the freeze or flight mechanism, I could feel myself locking up. Confused. Worried. Second guessing every word she said. But I could feel my sister's spirit at my back, urging me to do what she'd always been trying to build my confidence to do.

To be decisive for once in my life.

So I smiled, leaned in and said, "It is."

Slowly, she moved forward, and I wrapped my hooves around her; feeling hers latch around my back. Our heads rested in each others shoulders, cheek to cheek... before I felt her body shift, and soft lips press against the side of my muzzle.

"Then let's get out together, and we'll see what happens."

I wished I could have just stayed there. Remain close to somepony, both warmed under a blanket in this brief moment of peace. Yet I couldn't help but hear the whistle. Distant, keening as it grew in pitch and power until it grew deeper and became a throbbing roar.

My head turned, looking over her shoulder to the city, before an eruption of light blinded me. The city shattered, the ground rumbled as I felt us both knocked back, as though a wall of noise had crashed into us. My ribcage vibrated as my vision spun and my ears seared with pain. I felt Unity's hooves grip me, felt mine hold her as we were hurtled back from the edge across the gravel of the roof. There was shouting around us, panic. Fillydelphia's balefire siren cranked up, a bass tone joining the rumbling with its low moan of death that spread and howled around the city in its raising and lowering klaxon sound. Disoriented, seeing only stars and vague shapes, I felt a chill of terror gripping me at that sound.

"Murky! Get up! Get up!" Unity's hooves were pulling at me. Her face was masked with fear and determination as she yanked at my hooves.

Dizzied, seeing everything blurring when I turned my head, I dragged myself up, quickly checked every limb and turned to look.

Fillydelphia was in chaos. Ponies were running everywhere. Griffons had taken off and began to surge into the sky in V-formations. Already, I could see anti-air mounts traversing to face various directions. Yet behind it all came a pillar of flame from the other side of the city, one that surged above the rooftops and was already belching a thick cloud of black smoke through the thinner red smog.

The FunBarn had been almost obliterated. Half its structure was torn off and it writhed in flame like any of Fillydelphia's furnaces with wood exploding and metal beginning to sag under the heat. The Enclave had attempted to decapitate Fillydelphia's leadership before the battle had even...

From the winds, I heard it again. Another whistling turning to a howl from the sky. Looking up, I saw a sudden streak in the sky, shooting across the clouds before veering and descending like a comet coming to strike Equestria.

Then another.

And another.

No... this wasn't before the battle.

Every pony on the rooftop staggered as the concussive wave of impacts rippled across Fillydelphia. I felt the Mall creak and sway beneath us. To our right, the Ministry of Wartime Technology exploded. Its thick granite blocks being tossed hundreds of metres into the air.

This *was* the battle.

Then the spires of the old Ironshod Foundry were cast into shadow by the detonation at their base. My heart thudded faster as I saw the two smoke stacks begin to collapse, bending and snapping in the air before crashing across the main thoroughfare of the city amongst scattering lines of slaves and wagons crashing into one another. I heard the ongoing rumble and collapse of a million bricks arrive seconds later. Somepony shrieked in fear as a massive object surged across the sky above us, close enough to throw up a wind and almost take a stallion off the edge of the rooftop with a shriek. Unity and I fell to the ground in its aftermath, feeling blistering heat and a throbbing crackle of magic in the air in its wake. It continued, hammering its way into the thickset reactor building of Red Eye's radiation engine like a bullet penetrating thin metal. The power station did not shatter, but instead coughed and died from a dozen secondary explosions that ejected from every window and doorway.

Soon after, all across the city, lights began to go out. The PA system fell dead in the middle of one of Red Eye's prepared speeches, and backup alarms began to ring their shrill tone from factories around us.

Only now did I spy the lines still in the sky. Dull orange, fading on the winds yet leading directly to each of the four impact sites. The trails coiled, glittering with magical energy before small rolls of wind surged and slapped to refill the dead and burnt air in their passing. They drew down from the clouds, their sources hidden away as the Enclave made their preliminary strikes, targeting Fillydelphia's command structure, its weapons manufacturing and its power grid.

Then, like enormous bloatflies, I saw them. Black ships breaking the cloud barrier and descending, seeming to pull the clouds along, coiling them around their hulls in ways that made it hard to really see their shapes. Two more of the earth shattering heavy strikes detonated on the surface, their bone quaking thumps rolling across the city. Then more began spreading out, as I saw the firestorm grow and everyone and everything in Fillydelphia was helpless to stop the devastation around us. The ships fell, turning and screaming their engines in the air as they released dozens of smaller craft and what looked like hundreds of individual pegasi into the air in a vertical drop toward the city, bypassing every single wall defence Stern had set up. They had offered no warning, striking suddenly and with merciless efficiency. Each ship let loose a roll of immense thunder on breaking from the clouds as they began to accelerate, wind, rain and lightning following in their wake at the effect they had on the clouds.

Energy weapons flared from the ships in lancing strikes, targeted toward the sources of the flak and tracers that began to thump and crackle up at them. I saw spears of blue, green, and purple meeting the raw orange and red of conventional weapons below. Multi-coloured blasts turned rooftops to glowing slag that splattered and dripped down the sides of entire buildings, as Enclave precision weaponry struck at individual cannons and batteries. A firework display of grey clouded flak and snapping white fragmentations lit up the sky. I saw one Enclave small ship, shaped like a beetle with armoured housings for pegasi to pull it, veer and spin in the air, trailing flame before hurtling at unthinkable speeds into a great

crane of Fillydelphia and tearing it down in its death throes to pull up a veil of dust and smoke. The noise became catastrophic, the whistling of energy weapons mixing with the roar of engines and the *thudthudthud* of quad-barrelled cannons on the ground. Alarms forming a backdrop to the screaming and electronic rasps of radios we had set up to listen in on the city's command frequencies. Screaming, snapping, thudding, sizzling, searing, howling, roaring, whistling, whirling, crackling, erupting... all around me, overwhelming me with the sensory input. It froze me in awe at the scale, the numbers, the raw suddenness, the noise and the spectacle stretching across the entire city.

The Enclave had made the first move.

It had begun.

Ponies were clattering down the stairs. This was no ordered movement, but a disorganised pile galloping for the safety of indoors. Unity and I sprinted across the rooftop as the air above us turned into a killing zone of fire and shrapnel. Flak had struck above the Mall and sprayed its lethal razor-edged bits of metal in a skittering arc across the ventilation ducts and pipes that were now covered in perforations and ripped asunder. Four ponies went down, screaming from torn limbs and studded torsos. All I could smell was a thick burning scent as smoke washed over us, drawn in by the close passes of Enclave sky-wagons and heavily armoured, tank-like flying vehicles that stayed low and hunted anti-aircraft batteries. They would surge overhead, blowing everyone's manes out and tossing the unsteady from their hooves.

"Everypony, get below! One line! *One line!* Come on!"

I heard Protégé's voice from the doorway. His powerful tone carried above the rush as he directed ponies aside and into both stairwells. The wounded went down first as he tried to organise them. His revolver was drawn, to what end I couldn't imagine, but he kept it pointed to the sky.

"Murky! Unity! Hurry up!"

His hoof waved at us and we pushed past him. I screamed as I heard another flak shell detonate over the side of the Mall after trying to hit a passing sky-wagon. The airburst of the round sent a thousand metal shards whistling and skittering off the metal and concrete. The ground shook as another of the massive artillery-like shots hammered down from the clouds only a few streets away. We ran through darkened back corridors, the lights all gone with the reactor offline. Ponies were pushing their way toward the centre of the building, trying to stay away from windows. I saw bodies in some rooms lying beside the shattered wood of once boarded-up fireholes. The shrapnel had come right through.

I felt Unity grab my hoof and pull me into a less crowded side passage, one that I knew led to the old administration office wing. Groups of ponies clustered at its walls, heads huddled. Some were crying, others just shivering in fear as the bombardment of the city shook dust from the ceiling. A group of (I supposed now ex) slavers nearly collided with us as they hustled in the other direction, carrying boxes of freshly sorted ammunition.

"Out of our way! Come on, you little winged rat, move!"

A hoof struck out at me, knocking me against the wall with a yelp.

"Hey!" I heard Unity turn and shout at them.

"What's your care?" One of the slavers turned and scoffed. "The runt's just one of them

anyway! Fuck all this! How're we meant to fight that!?"

They didn't give her a chance to answer, galloping onwards toward the front of the building.

"We have to get to... to the others." I gasped, holding my side. Their hoof had struck right where I was still healing up. "I... I don't know what we should do, they might..."

"Other than survive?" Unity tried to make it sound like a joke, but her face was pale and shaken.

I had more knowledge of the Mall than most. Taking a longer route avoided the massive crush of terrified slaves who now sought shelter from the blitz. We ran along the balconies that bordered the main slave hall and passed the armoury on our way to the front centre above the main gate. I saw Blunderbuck lying on the ground outside his armoury and almost panicked until one of his assistants, Slotshow I thought, leaned down to put a wet cloth on the young stallion's head. There were bloody marks on rubble nearby and a hole in the roof from where it had been shaken loose.

"Blunderbuck, you've got to rest, you're hurt." Slotshow was saying as we came near.

"Just help me up, get me back in there... we need this bomb." Blunderbuck gritted his teeth and staggered up, supported back inside. He flashed me a grin as we passed by, before wincing at the effort. "Sunny and Glimmer left, Murk, they're up front. Go on, get going, I'll be alright."

Nodding a thanks, we kept going. We passed the same four who had been cut down on the rooftop coming the other way toward Weathervane's makeshift aid station. Two had gone quiet. I could only hope for the best as we passed them, trying not to touch the stains on the floor from their passing. We were thrown from our hooves as the entire building rocked on its very foundations, and I felt Unity collapse onto my side. A rush of air powered down the approach to the front of the building, carrying dust and gravel that stuck in my throat and clogged my nose. It was followed by a second, sharper strike that shook a light from its fixtures in the primary staff reception to shatter on the floor. I saw Pike and Cosh cowering in a small huddle together behind the desk.

It was unending. The floor kept moving. My ears were *burning*, so painful I was beginning to actually tune it out from consistency until they just tingled and throbbed. We were covered in dust as we stumbled through the barricade to the second floor overlooking the entrance. Through the glassless windows I could see the war outside. Yes, *war*. This time, I was correct.

Dozens of parts of the city were on fire, warped by gigantic energy blasts. I couldn't see far enough to witness it all from this lower height, but the sky was quickly becoming a shrouded mess of lingering smoke and coloured blasts lighting it from behind, like a coloured thunderstorm just over our heads, lit with fiery red from below.

Glimmerlight turned from peeking out the window and waved us in, motioning to a heavy block of stone somepony had lugged up here for us to take cover behind. I didn't even hear her the first time she shouted at us, before ducking as a building two streets away from us was levelled. The flare set my eyes seeing bruise-coloured false shapes even after closing them and turning away. The sound of the building collapsing was completely lost amongst everything else. Above it, I could see a dozen Pinkie Balloons ripped from the sky, trailing fire as they fell, helpless against the advanced flying machines of the Enclave. Every single one of them had been taken down in minutes, being nothing but giant targets. One in particular I saw speared by a hot red laser, Pinkie's face twisting into a demonic and

blackened visage as the fire curled the balloon shape before it disappeared behind a rooftop. "Protégé's call seems to have worked!" Glimmerlight screamed again to be heard, "They're not targeting us directly!"

"Could've fooled me!" Unity cried out, biting her lip at the cacophony from outside as streaking energy blasts tore down a block over, aiming at a road.

"If they wanted this place gone, we'd be gone, hun!" Glimmer shrugged and turned to watch the street again. The whirling roar of an Enclave skyship went overhead, one of their fast ones. They would strike and shoot off before you even realised they were there. I'd seen them from the roof, moving in straighter lines before banking off outside the city limits and making a long turn to come back again.

The insinuation of how quickly our lives would have been over had the Enclave thought we were trying to trick them became a cold reality for a single moment.

"Blunderbuck said you wanted us!" I shouted, hoping I didn't sound too shrill in my terror.

"Want you where I can see you, lil'bro..." said Glimmerlight, her face momentarily darkening. She'd known we were on the rooftop; she'd seen the injured pass by here on their way down.

She was worried I'd die somewhere she couldn't help me. It was as simple and as gut-hollowing as that.

We crouched down. There was nothing we could do but take cover. Ponies around us stuck behind harder objects and only dared peek through the windows on occasion. The bombing was beginning to make joints and heads ache. The slave camp outside the Mall, surrounded by its wooden-fenced wall, became a pock-marked wasteland as a strafing run on a nearby building overshot. Mud actually arced up and through the windows from the impact, blinding us to everything for a few minutes.

I would occasionally look out and watch the air-war above us as griffons spun around the sky with black-armoured pegasi. Watching them move in the air almost made me forget for a time that I was trapped down here... I felt a momentary pride in my race. So graceful, so powerful, attacking the forces that kept me held here. A scream from the next room over was enough to draw me out of it. The Enclave weren't saviours. Behind me, Weathervane's assistants rushed by to find them. I recognised one of them. Blood... something? Bloodshot? I couldn't remember his name, but he'd once chided me when I was first sneaking into the hospital long ago.

I kept wondering when it would end. When it would taper off. Maybe an hour, I figured, who could keep fighting after an hour?

The hour came and went, as we did nothing but huddle in fear and feel relieved that it wasn't us every time something came down hard nearby. Double that time, as the second hour painfully approached, led me to sitting and praying silently.

Three hours later, with no end in sight, I began to simply feel ill. My stomach was lurching on the impacts. My teeth hurt from clenching too hard. My ears felt numb.

The war kept going. Unending. We heard reports on the radio of a colossal clash going on outside the city walls. Stern's voice came through a few times, ordering focused fire on certain ships. Fresh wings of pegasi came down as I saw ships travel back to the clouds for repair and rearming. It was as exhausting to simply watch it as it was darkly fascinating to imagine the logistics and communication involved to create something this... this senselessly brutal.

Then the fourth hour went by as we sat still and waited. We were waiting even as everypony else in the world fought for their lives. We could only wait for when it was our turn, granted that small respite that the slaves dying by their hundreds outside were not given. There was a brief moment of tension as the bombing started to come this way, a creeping barrage that moved street by street, levelling a whole block and driving slavers before it, before stopping sharply.

The fifth hour passed. Somepony had got a generator to work and the lights began to flicker on before dying again after a particularly heavy hit near to the building. I saw Glimmerlight holding her rifle tightly, peering out. Sunny sat opposite her, watching the opposite side of the street. For all their arguing, they knew what they were doing together.

My body hurt through the sixth hour. Ten minutes into it, Unity had stood up and declared that she was going to the aid station, that she couldn't handle doing nothing any longer. She passed out the door, checking only that the orb was still in her saddlebag as she went. That same group of slavers that had struck me passed by her on the way out, before heading downstairs to join the ground floor guards.

Then, right as the seventh hour began, I saw Sunny leap up. The lever-action was ready in her hooves as she pointed it over the windowsill and stared out. Her sudden movement caught everyone off guard, startling others into motion.

I looked over the edge of the window, quivering as I saw a refinery belching a sheet of flame a hundred feet into the sky from one of its pressurised tanks. Drawing my eyes down, through all the smoke, I saw shadowed figures. From three of the roads facing the Mall, they came. Other forms were clambering into the buildings facing the front of the Mall, the closest perhaps two hundred metres away. They were indistinct, vague in the thickness of cloud and moving slowly with heavy weaponry lashed to large saddles. There must have been at least a hundred of them, plus whatever was hidden in the smoke... or waiting in the air.

Protégé was beside me, I hadn't heard him come in. My ears were shot and useless, only a ringing coming through above the muddled sounds of everything else. Part of me wished this was it... an end to this unbearable waiting.

"They're spreading out," Protégé commented as they did indeed begin to move to surround us. Some went north or south to cordon the Mall. I saw observers we'd long spotted watching us directing them. The main force, however, advanced almost in formation, as though seeking to intimidate us.

At least to me, it worked. A feeling not too dissimilar to vertigo was whirling in my mind. We had around a hundred and fifty refugees, sure, but perhaps only eighty could fight. They had almost twice as many fighters as us, heavier weapons, and no doubt griffon support...

It was the same feeling I'd felt on the mountain at Aurora Star's cottage before we had been completely outclassed in open conflict.

"They're in range if you want it," said Sunny, speaking from the corner of her mouth.

Protégé didn't reply. He just stared at them. I saw his revolver held ready, the flag of Equestria bold and clear on its grip. Turning back to the outside, I saw a flag. A break in the smoke showed it to hold the symbol of Red Eye himself. There was no mistaking it... they were coming for us. Behind them, much further out, I could have sworn I saw a larger figure with them, and heard a deep rumbling voice bellowing orders. I tightened up at the sound of *that* voice.

His voice.

Around me, ponies raised their weapons in nervous hooves. The sudden *click-clack* of the two tripod-mounted machine guns Blunderbuck's assistants had repaired getting ready made me jump. Below us I could hear Brimstone shouting to those with him on the ground floor while Mister Peace's whoops filtered through the Mall. In the distance, the war burned on in other regions of Fillydelphia, as though it respected this smaller and more intimate showdown to be left to itself.

Protégé opened his mouth, slowly. He was clearly hesitant, almost wishing he didn't have to say it.

"Fire."

I would always remember the moment of brief silence after that one word.

He hadn't told any one pony to be the first one to pull the trigger, and it was as though the entire building was awaiting somepony else to do it. Dozens of barrels protruded from the front three floors of the Mall and yet none of them lit with anger. Even as the world burned around us, there was silence here.

"Oh for fuck's sake," muttered Sunny, spitting out her cigarette and unleashing the first shot that would mark the Siege of the Mall.

A heavy calibre hunting round barked from the brass-tipped barrel of her rifle, lighting up the smoke with the muzzle flare. Three hundred metres back, I saw the banner of Red Eye pitch and fall. Its icon slammed to the ground before being drawn up again, dripping mud and foul water as those around the fallen bearer scattered and rushed forward. Voices cried out from the half-observed force, sending them toward cover or demanding them to return fire. One shot from Sunny had sent them all scurrying.

Then, finally, the remainder of the Mall spoke. There was no consistency of sound, we didn't have the same mass manufactured weapons with standardised ammunition that Red Eye's army did. Deep-throated revolvers roared near to tinny cracks from game rifles, the clattering thumps of heavy calibre platforms almost drowned out the dirty coughs of improvised firearms. The front of the Mall opened in fire, the forty ponies we had on the front floors raining shots down upon the advancing force in the main street. Heavy black figures were pitched from where they stood, others sent tumbling as they ran for the buildings on either side. Some crawled, others got back up and limped. The stitching trail of our largest tripod mounted machine gun chased and harried those who dared move, carving a line in the tarmac. Sunny's rifle opened up a second time towards a target I couldn't see. The deluge was far too great to keep track of, yet I could see perhaps eight bodies left in the street.

Something pinged behind me—a shard of the wooden doorframe blew out as rounds began to snap back at us. I felt hooves grabbing me, pulling me behind a thick block of stone as return fire began to pick up. First sporadically and then growing in weight, the slavers and soldiers outside had gotten into cover and were starting to bring their own firepower to bear.

"Hold them at the buildings! Don't waste your ammunition! Fire at targets if they push! *Fire at targets! Don't waste!*" Protégé screamed to the entire floor from behind me, his hooves having been the ones to get me out of the line of fire.

The shout went down the line. Glimmer repeated it before I heard two other slaves further away bellow out loud. Our ragtag group of slaves were clustering at the windows, ducking out to shoot and pulling back as shots whined and whistled through the gaps into the walls behind us with thick slaps or vicious ricochets. Somewhere behind me, I heard a scream of pain and a voice crying out for a doctor. Distantly, I could hear Brimstone's thick voice echoing up from the lower floors shouting much the same thing.

Protégé got up and crawled his way to the windows. Without having much to understand, I followed him and took a place beside my sister. She was tracking targets almost mechanically, poking out and following for three seconds before firing and hiding again. Her rifle clacked and rung as the bolt moved and clattered new rounds in from her magic. Outside, I had lost sight of most of the attackers, but compared to the inconsistent sounds of our scavenged weaponry, their response was distinctive with crisp retorts. Bright flashes came from the sewage ditch surrounding the Mall, or from the lower floors of nearby apartments.

"They've stopped advancing and gone to ground!" Glimmerlight shouted over to Protégé as he was just seeing for himself, "I don't think they expected this kind of firepower!"

"Thank Seeker for the ammo to do that," Protégé cried back. "Watch out for anypony trying to flan—"

Sunny stopped and stared, peering intently toward the slavers, toward the opposite roof two hundred meters away at the edge of the Mall's wagon park, just over the street from the palisade wall Shackles had built. I could see something too, three soldiers pulling something up and—

"*Shit!* Heavy! HEAVY GUN!" Sunny threw us down, tackling into Glimmer and I.

Protégé turned to the line of ponies across this floor. "*EVERYPONY GET DO—*"

It drowned everything. I'd seen them before in the factories, those long-barrelled and thickly-built 'land hammers', as they'd called them. They fired the same rounds that the Talons' anti-machine rifles did... only at a rate greater than ten of those mercenaries could manage together. Every shot was like the step of some legendary giant beast, booming and almost irregular, like the heavy machine gun wanted to fire as fast as it could and refused to stick to a pattern. It unleashed its fury upon the Mall.

The walls and windows exploded inwards as hoof-sized chunks were torn from wood, metal, and stone. I heard screams of terror as ponies hid their heads below hooves or galloped for the rear rooms. I felt pebbles and splinters wash over me at the heavy machine gun's rampage upon the architecture. I saw its line of fire travel down the length of our floor, crushing through the wall like it wasn't there and pulping three slaves that it travelled across. They didn't even get to cry out and my stomach turned as I saw the effects of those rounds on a pony's body. The stench of gunpowder and rock dust filled my nostrils. I could see some ponies getting up, valiantly trying to send some fire in the gun's direction, including Glimmer. They were sent diving for concealment as their muzzle flares drew its attention. The heavy desk I had once hid behind during the bombardment was torn into a thousand pieces and sent rolling back down the hallway.

We didn't stop it. The land hammer *decided* to leave us alone and focus on a lower floor as its crew swept it across the building, trying to discourage all outgoing fire. Gasping for air, I got a mouthful of dust and broke into a fit of coughing. Shaking, feeling my rough throat lance in pain, I pulled myself to a window for just a second. My nose was bleeding, I didn't even know why. Pulling myself on instinct to a window for air, I caught sight of deep red

tracer rounds whipping through the smog to lacerate the other side of the building, thirty feet away from us.

We had held their intimidation, but now their battle began in earnest. Below the cover of their massive weapon, I saw dark shapes move from the houses that faced the Mall and begin to gallop forward with belted commands. One group of twelve even tried to go further into the exterior slave camp, until one of the tripod guns sent them diving backward again into a sewage ditch.

I could see a group of them moving to the right in an odd direction, before I remembered that place I'd seen Brimstone, the delivery bay! The words caught in my throat amongst a coughing fit as I struggled to shout a warning, that they were using this lapse in our fire to rush across the road in the open while everypony was still recovering or hiding from their huge cannon.

I saw the flash of the rocket just too late to get Protégé to radio a warning anywhere.

It streaked out from where they'd moved to and whistled its way into the right of the Mall. The eruption blew out the upper floors and sent entire chunks of masonry collapsing down. We'd had ponies in that area... a good dozen to defend the approach to the delivery doorway where wagons had once gone in. I couldn't see them from here, but I could see the smoke belching from around the corner. Seconds later, the sound hit us and thudded through my bones.

My lungs hacked and wheezed, before I finally gave up and resorted to just hitting Protégé with my hooves and pointing frantically. He glanced and saw smoke pouring from inside, took a second to think and then spat to clear the thick dusty mush from his mouth.

"Glimmerlight! Sunny! The delivery warehouse is hit, they're moving on it, take a few with you!"

The two mares didn't argue, for the soldiers were already beginning their attack. Sunny pointed to a few ponies at the back and whistled to them to follow while Glimmer lifted a pair of saddlebags from the end of the room I knew contained ammunition. One of them floated to my back.

"Come on, lil'bro! Stick with me and stay back from the worst!"

We took off as I heard Protégé's group at the front fire again. We ran down the front of the Mall, leaping the debris the heavy gun had left and diving to take cover as it rattled over the front of the building again. My mind was whirling... the gun, the assault on the front, the flank attack, the bombing... all so much. *All so much.* I passed ponies lying motionless at their posts, trying not to look at the massive sucking wounds. I sprinted and jumped over a fallen floor panel as the huge rounds stitched in behind us and tore the old noticeboards on the rear wall in half. My vision tunnelled, pulling me along that corridor amongst whizzing rounds and keeping my head as low as I could. I didn't know how I was still alive. I didn't know why my limbs were still moving to keep me trying. Everything was focused on that feeling of 'movement means life.'

Those we passed were involving in snap shooting with our foes at the palisade a hundred metres away, or with those still in the buildings beyond that. Whoops of success followed those moments when I saw a slaver or soldier tumble in the mud and cease to move or snap backwards from a windowsill. One old stallion we passed seemed to be making a kill with every slow shot, holding a single load rifle in his magic like an old gamekeeper. Two young bucks beside him followed his every motion, taking his lead, holding five soldiers behind an abandoned wagon in the road, stopping them from rushing the bottom floor of the Mall. It

had too many empty glass shop windows on the ground for us to let them get anywhere near us, and Red Eye's army *knew it*.

We emerged into the delivery station, that same tall room with a thick corrugated door deemed too heavy to ever lift again. I remembered the large wooden platform above the doorway, where ponies had been posted to keep watch from. Only now...

The missile had torn a hole through it all. Eight feet of the upper wall and doorway had been blown inwards, dropping fragments of the outer structure all across the long wagons below. The platform had been snapped in two, leaving a five foot gap where the impact had been. Like a buck to the gut, I saw ten ponies lying strewn away from the location they'd been defending the door from, unmoving and some torn to literal shreds that painted the floor behind the door. Trying my best to look away, I saw another three were hunkered down in cover, screaming as unending fire tore and fizzed past them. No pony was defending anymore, the missile had broken them.

Sunny turned and rattled up the half wrecked platform's stairs to what remained the upper level and shoved the nearest pony up there out of the way to fire her weapon around the hole. She wasn't taking any prisoners today.

"Get up! Get up and fight or they'll just run over us!"

Her back hoof lightly kicked at the ones who had been pinned down.

"Come on!"

Glimmer slid into cover on the opposite side of the door to Sunny, nodded, and they both leapt up. I took a chance to peer out and realised why the others had been so scared.

They were only fifty metres away and closing. A dozen slavers and soldiers, firing as they came, with the lead ones charging right for us. Behind them, two gas masked soldiers were preparing another missile. The rest kept their fire up, and I heard the others (and myself) squealing as we all had to duck again. Rays of red light were puncturing through the wrecked door in little pinholes, but most came roaring through the enormous hole above it.

I tried to help out, to bring *Rarity's Grace* to bear, if only to make us seem more powerful, but Glimmer shoved me back down with a determined hoof and shook her head.

"You stay safe... not this time, just hand out the ammo."

The other three ponies had gotten themselves organised. One of them took my place as I went to the back and did the literal five second job of putting ammo on the ground for them before just having to sit under cover... safe while the others fought.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"Wh-where... I... *ough!*"

My ears pricked up. The scream had come from nearby, looking up I saw a badly wounded buck lying on his side with a thickly bleeding shrapnel wound on his left hind leg. I'd thought he was a corpse, but under a heavy saddlebag load, he was stirring again, waking up and finding himself in great pain amongst the corpses left on the floor from the missile.

He was also still lying in clear view of the slavers through the giant hole, screaming as he tried to move away from the incoming fire... yet the enormous weight of his saddlebags kept him pinned on his bad leg. Glimmer and Sunny saw him, but they were trying to hold off soldiers not twenty metres away.

He should have played dead, laid still... but he was delirious in the agony of waking up to raking shrapnel wounds and turning himself into a target.

I'd been that pony left to suffer far too often to leave somepony else like that now. Charging forward, hearing Glimmer shout nearby, I leapt the rubble in front of the breach.

Whether any shots came near me, I didn't know, but I heard enough of them as I passed in clear line of sight to everypony outside and rolled to the other side of the pony. Grabbing his clothes in hoof and mouth, muttering an apology for the harsh movement on his injuries, I skidded my hooves and did my best to pull him back into cover on the opposite side, my wings thrashing as though trying to provide extra power to pull. He was heavy and I was weak bodied, but he seemed to get the idea and his good limbs thrashed to crawl even as he hollered and gasped in pain. Two shots skiffed off the floor, driving dust into my eyes and making them water.

I was doing it! I was saving—

The third shot streaked across the skin into the pony I was saving, opening a gash before the round pinged into the back of the storage area.

Their cry hurt me. The helpless, horrified wail they made drove right to my core. The tears on his face spreading across dirty cheeks clear as he pawed and begged for me to help him.

Sunny leaned out to cover us, before she cried out and swore enough to inspire Weathervane. A smattering of buckshot had reflected off a bit of rebar and tore into her shoulder, tossing her back. Rolling back into cover, I saw her hiss and press a hoof over the bloody mess it had left, tearing off her top's sleeve with her mouth to try and tie it down.

I tried to do the same for the pony I was with, pulling the heavy load off his back the moment we were in cover and tearing a part of his clothing to hold over the rushing blood. Seeing us out of the line of fire, Sunny got back up, blood still leaking from below the makeshift bandage but running on enough adrenaline to keep going. Then there was a rush of noises, ponies shouting and screaming as hooves clattered outside.

"Here they come again! Come on everypony, defend!" Sunny cried to them.

"Keep that launcher's head down!" Glimmer shouted after her.

A desperate action ensued. Yet Sunny and Glimmer left me in awe as I witnessed them hold the breach and inspire those around them to pick up the fire again. The slaver advance stalled and the launcher's head was indeed kept down from the accurate fire the two mares put out, their high powered rifles barking in turn as the other reloaded. It was a moment of everything balancing on a knife edge. Any moment I expected the missile to hit. Any moment I expected them to get close enough for grenades. Any moment I expected the five ponies defending against what seemed to be twenty to take more hits.

Yet somehow... *somehow*, they held.

"They're pulling back!"

Glimmer's shout was a relief to the soul. I dared to look up from the moaning buck and saw the fighting retreat still going on. The warehouse flank had pushed them back and we'd saved at least a couple lives.

Well... Sunny and Glimmer had saved, I'd only really done one thing...

"Launcher! *Launcher's back!*"

My heart skipped a beat as I turned, looking through the hole. One soldier broke cover and aimed a heavy saddle with a long tube on it directly for us. Both Glimmer and Sunny fired at once. The shot was long and Glimmer's bullet went wide to spank off an old signpost.

Sunny's slammed into the slaver's chest, sending the rocket mare careening forward onto her chin before lying quite still. The missile screamed as it fired and soared into the sky, arcing backwards and away from the Mall and passing near to a fast-moving Enclave ship.

In a flash of light, it was vapourised mid-flight; intercepted by some sort of Enclave laser defence system. Its fragments peppered back down on the ruined approach to the delivery door... where the soldiers had now departed from.

"Told you, IronShit can't do range..." Sunny tiredly muttered with a slight grin at Glimmer's curse of annoyance. They both relaxed and gazed outside, thankful to be alive at all.

The slavers had been waiting. Two leapt up, automatic rifles training on us. I felt myself freeze up. They'd been hiding in the dead, waiting for our guards to be down!

Sunny swore and fought with her rifle, trying to get the heavy action to chamber the next round, but I heard an unhealthy crunch of metal and hasty swearing amounting to 'fucking dust.'

Glimmer's bolt flew back and forth like a smoothly oiled and machine driven piston in her magic as she turned the barrel, nailed the first one in the shoulder; reloaded with a clean motion, and then shot the second one across the chin. The slaver fell just as Sunny got her rifle back on target.

"Told you, civvie rifles can't do war." Glimmer winked back at the rather infuriated-looking hunter, before sitting down with her back to the wall, rifle laid across her hind legs, and seemed to finally take a breath.

Later, five more ponies arrived after we sent one more back to fetch more help. The warehouse was better defended now, but it seemed we'd be staying here to ensure it. Two nurses came down to treat at the scene, including the one I'd once had catch me trying to take RadPurge. She was injured herself, but ignored the burn on her cheek to help others, her cleaner hooves standing out from the rest of her soot-covered body as she worked on Sunny's shoulder.

The ones hit by the rocket hadn't made it. The only survivor had been the one I pulled away, who now was holding my hoof and professing a lifetime of thanks after the Med-X (Med-Yes!) had put his mood above the pain of his torn body, yet he seemed eager... trying painfully to move until the nurse had to hold him down.

"What were you even carrying in that load?" Glimmer asked him, "What's the hurry?"

"Ammo! I have to go! The roof lost theirs to the bombs, they—*argh!* They need it now, they said griffons were coming to attack! I—*urrrgh...*"

He clearly wasn't going anywhere. His back leg was shredded and his torso had a horrid hole in it. Without the medicine, he'd still be screaming. His war was, for now, over. Only a trip to the aid station remained. His fate was in others' hooves.

"We can't spare anyone, this place is too thin as it is," Sunny remarked, motioning to the few ponies watching around the breach. I could still hear the fighting going on at the front of the building. The heavy machine gun kept firing and the ferocious battle to hold or take ground on every side of the Mall seemed unending.

The radio squawked in Glimmer's magic. "*Griffons! Griffons on the roof! They're circling in to attack! They—*"

There was the boom of anti-machine rifles and the screaming of ponies returning a smattering of fire. I heard the echoes from above as well as on the radio... the roof was the next place they were trying, no doubt for the vulnerable skylight with the very elite of Red

Eye's forces.

"See? See?" the wounded pony protested.

I started to lift the bags, "I'll take it."

"No." Glimmer shot the word in with all the authority a big sister could. "I'll call up Protégé and—"

"*Glimmer!*" I moved closer to her, pulling the radio down from her mouth and looking seriously at her. "I'm not a fighter. L-let me do it, I want to help! I can do things too!"

I took up the heavy saddlebags and pulled them on, seeing her sad face shaking at me. Her hoof caught mine, as though afraid I'd run. Behind her, Sunny cried out as soldiers were seen coming this way again.

"I can't protect you up there if you go off alone in all this. I won't be there to keep you safe..."

It was clear, Glimmer wasn't afraid I couldn't do things myself. She was scared that something might happen to me without her being there to stop it.

I tried to smile for my sis, gripping her hoof before reaching up to ruffle her mane.

"I can do it, big sis'."

"Just come back, lil'bro. You were with me through my journey to... to face up to the past. Just like I helped you face yours. We're so close to the end. I don't want to lose you now... not like—"

Glimmer stopped short. I didn't know which name she was going to say, but she didn't need to. My sister had lost or likely lost a lot of ponies she had cared deeply for before meeting me...

Letting go, I trotted further back, hearing the panicked shrills on the radio and the intensity on the roof pick up. Glimmer was being called to the windows, just as the buck was shouting at me to get going, but we held for just this one short moment.

"This isn't Creaky Hollow, sis," I whispered, gulping hard, "I... I promise we'll make it to the end. Both of us."

Slowly, our hooves parted, lingering until the very edge.

Then I was gone, and the war raged on.

The halls were in anarchy. Ponies were charging or fleeing all over the place. Every time the bone-shaking *thump* of something detonating overhead reverberated through the Mall, huddled groups of the sick and injured began screaming. I scurried around stamping hooves and steered clear of hallways that led to the outer walls. Gunfire occasionally came raking down them through the exterior windows along with the rushing wind driven up by the battle. In an effort to not get trampled, I took a route through the main shop outlets, rushing around the fountain.

A sudden whine of engines made me look up. A smoking Enclave ship went spiralling out of control in a flat spin above the Mall, trailing fire that was visible through the empty skylight and dropping shards of black armour like hailstones. Ten seconds later, I heard it careening into the ground from the direction of the crater with a crunch of folding metal.

That skylight entrance that had once saved us all from Barb was perhaps our weakest point. Protégé had set List Seeker to its defence, trusting the dedicated overseer to do it right. Many of his workers looked to Seeker for leadership and now stuck with him even in

the most dangerous zone up top; trusting his authority now that he had broken from Stern. Indeed, many of them treated him with enormous love and respect.

Climbing the stairs, I felt my lungs begin to sag and wheeze after numerous levels up from the ground floor. I limped and staggered my distinctly unheroic way to the roof access to find it blast scored and charred black. The door was completely gone. Lacking anypony to meet, I took what little breath I could and pressed on outside to make the delivery.

The smog of Fillydelphia rushed in to meet me before I even got there, choking and black, clinging to my throat. The air outside smelled burnt, filled with lingering energy from the enormous magical weapons the Enclave was using. Not a few feet outside, I found myself stunned into staring at the warfare around us. Enclave flight groups in their dozens were tussling with griffons in the air amongst mad three-dimensional combats or were diving to raid the rooftops in dangerously close passes. Geysers of flame erupted into the sky from entire factories crumbling on the skyline, their roars lost under the rumble of weapons fire, so much that it combined into an eerie and unending howl. In the distance, off the back end of the Mall, I could see inside the crater where the Enclave ship had gone down, carving a great wound into the earth. Small flashes of light stabbed outwards from it; the survivors skirmishing in the radioactive hole against those looking to plunder it.

From the highest clouds to the lowest craters, Fillydelphia and the Enclave were mauling each other to pieces.

Looking to my left, away from the edge and onto the roof proper, I finally located those defending the skylight. There were about fifteen left, with three of them clearly out of the fight and nursing heavy wounds behind the huge rooftop pipes. I felt a pang of hurt as I saw the prone bodies of at least five more on the ground, stripped of equipment to keep the others going. Most of the survivors had automatic weaponry or shotguns, weapons that could hit close aerial targets more easily. They fired up at the dancing score of Talons that were trying to punch their way into the skylight. Others could only hide from the griffons, lacking any ammo to respond with. Even as I watched, another pony cried out that he had just fired his last shell.

If the Talons got in, we would be completely outflanked inside our own fortress. The pony below had been right; they desperately needed these supplies.

Griffons swooped and the defending party of ponies ducked. Huge anti-machine rounds from those signature rifles tore into their cover, missing only by dint of the targets staying hidden than anything to do with the stopping power of the roof's features. They were being harried, flanked, circled, and led around a frantic dance of the roof to find cover from griffons on all sides. It had disintegrated into a hurried fight for angles where many had simply gotten unlucky. Skill had little to do with it up here, just luck on which way you were facing at the time they approached.

I saw Seeker track one and let his huge shotgun blast a small cloud of shot into the air, missing with the first and slapping the second barrel's load into the hind legs of a griffon. It didn't fall, but shrieked in pain and glided away over the lip of the roof. Seconds later, Seeker was flat on the ground as three griffons stopped, turned and rattled fire after him and his companions that sent sparks off the metalwork and tore bricks from the corners of power blocks.

Behind him, two griffons surged out from behind the radio antenna and aimed at him and his companions from behind.

Racing from the access tunnel's cover, I bit the trigger for my saddle, angling upwards and

trying to lead them like Glimmer had taught me. Clenching multiple times, *Rarity's Grace* snapped by my side. Its tinny noise was lost in the chaotic fighting, but the flare was visible enough that the griffon pulled off. Stolen of any heroic recognition, I felt myself being pulled hard. Seeker was up and dragging me to a new piece of cover even as I arrived. My neck craned, trying to keep an eye around me. The griffons were circling the roof, stopping and firing when they weren't being looked at. Sticking too high and too fast to target easily, it made for an uncoordinated and incredibly scrappy fight, one that I felt utterly lost in the moment I was yanked into the cluster of vents and pipes below a weathervane.

"Murk? What in the bloody hell are you doing up here?" Seeker fumed, exhausted and angry. "Watch! Watch the back of the Mall!"

Evidently, he hadn't noticed me trying to ward off a griffon behind him as I saw him doing his utmost to make sense of the terrible position he and his workers had been caught in.

"A-AMMO!" I stammered, trying to fight with the saddlebags, "I have—"

"MOVE!" A slave screamed at us, before the weathervane was snapped in half from a heavy round tearing through it, the passing shockwave slapping me in the face like a hoof.

Desperate, I dropped and crawled, moving underneath the ventilation ducts that were held up on thin metal legs. Shots slapped into the ground near me, some sharp eyed mercenary having spotted me going under. Frantically I crawled and whined as I went as shots tore through the vent above me. Seeker and his slaves rushed to the front end of the Mall at a sprint as they leapt and climbed the obstacles under fire, trying to get away from the chattering shots chasing and worrying them across the surface before turning and returning the favour. My route was slower, staying hidden in the shadows of the vents as I sneaked across the gravelly rooftop and pushed off the saddlebags to the ponies before the griffons returned, trying to ignore the enormous blasts of flak cannons and energy blasts arcing worryingly close to the Mall.

Then I had to take a moment to wipe my eyes with terribly shaking hooves, before shrieking as lightning struck a rod on a taller building across the street, the clouds reacting in strange ways to the sheer number of skyships pushing their bulk through them with enormous barrels pointed downward. Everything felt so vulnerable up here.

"Truly you are a divine intervention, little Murk." Seeker said it without a laugh as he started tossing the magazines, clips and shell packets to his workers. "We were on our last rounds here... lost three just keeping them away with a charge..."

Something about the way he said that, a *charge*... I wondered what heroism I'd missed happening up here to keep the griffons from breaking through the massive gap in the roof of the Mall. Although right now I didn't want any part of it, I was quite keen to just turn around and get back downstairs.

"Will this do?" I asked meekly.

"For now. We've seen a big wagon full of slavers circling in the air out there, waiting for an opening to land on the roof. Too dangerous if we're here; the griffons are trying to clear us out for a full force to land."

The griffons weren't in sight, but there were enough places they could hide below the level of the roof. Or they could head into the low cloud or behind the belching smoke from the passing of damaged Enclave ships...

I was shaking terribly. I'd never felt adrenaline like this up here. There were literal miles of blasts, shots, and fighting going on, and I was in the centre of the it, on a rooftop, dodging a

dozen or more griffons. I couldn't taste metal in my mouth and I felt slick with sweat. Oddly, I felt an insane pang of hunger in the middle of it, as my body fought to understand the million different things its senses were telling it.

The slaves got rearmed and repositioned to cover all sides, trying the best they could to guard each other's backs. Yet before anything occurred, we heard a griffon shriek in agony.

Behind us, up on top of the Mall's long dead and rusting generator housing, a quietly gliding griffon had come down hard on one of the fiendish spiked edges that had set out to catch them. Slaves who had no care for fighting fair or cleanly. Now the Talon was stuck, crying in pain as his back legs had been impaled on the barbs. His pain didn't last long before three slaves put him out of his misery.

The sight took a lot of the 'good' feelings out of a small victory, as the body slumped and hung upside down from the hooks. That was no way to die. The other eleven griffons seemed to agree, as they soared up from either side to avenge their brother. Filled with a need for revenge at the hanging sight of their kind, they swooped, aiming for a close in battle with talon and hoof. I could see the fury in their eyes and heard Seeker screaming for everypony to turn this way and reorient to face the charge.

The griffons never made it. Scourging green energy lanced across the roof and struck four from the air before they could even pull away to dodge. I felt the heat of passing magic above us before six black armoured pegasi raced above our heads with a clap of passing air and tore off to chase the griffons, the lead flyer breaking through the hanging ash in the air from where one griffon had completely disintegrated. Behind me, ponies cheered and waved their hooves to the sky as the flight of Enclave troopers chased after their prey or wheeled gracefully away from the massive rounds fired at them in return.

A looming shadow was a brief warning, before I felt myself hurtled into the dirt by a passing roar of disturbed air. Something heavy passed mere feet above us, sending a blast of heavy wind across the rooftop that pulled at my wings and ears like a gale. Rolling in the gravel, I looked up to see a skyship that was trailing the flight of pegasi; its own massive beam cannons lancing out at the griffons and forcing them into utter retreat around the spires of the city. Each shot didn't even leave a corpse, but just vaporised its targets. Its angular hull was partially obscured by dark stormy cloud that shifted and danced around it as the house-sized ship banked hard on its side, forming thick vapour clouds at the sharp turn, to sweep past the fleeing Talons and form up with its allies.

"They're helping us!", screamed one of Seeker's workers, a stallion with a thick green mane, as he whooped and punched the air with a hoof. "The Enclave's on our side!"

"We've held", shouted another, relief in her voice. "We've held! Look! Here they come!"

Taking a deep breath to stay my quivering body, I crawled out of my hidey hole to peer over in the direction of the pony's pointed hoof. The skyship was returning toward us, having chased off the griffons, and was now flanked by the six Enclave soldiers we had seen. I could see their strong wings furiously snapping at the air and the glint of their quad weapons on stunningly beautiful battlesaddles.

Pegasi had the best saddles. Oh yes.

They were approaching fast, arcing down toward us. I felt excitement begin to flutter in my heart, my wings instinctively shifting and attracting the attention of a few ponies beside me. M-maybe they'd seen what I was and come to help one of their own? Or just lucky? Seeker got up, moving forward as though sensing somepony had to communicate when they landed.

The stallion who had first shouted ran forward to the far edge of the building as they descended, waving in delight.

“Hey! Hey! Down here!”

His body turned to scattered dust as they opened fire.

In Fillydelphia, I had been surrounded by an arms industry. I had seen large guns test fired near to me. The infamous heavy machine guns that dwarfed most things in the wastes, the same as the one that even now tore into the Mall, were among them.

The Enclave skyship's two primary beams were on another level entirely. Firing at us; from so close; at their maximum rate, was like the death scream of a sun.

The roof of the Mall was thick; strong even. It had weathered the storms. It had survived a firefight from a riot and even hours of bombing. It had stood protecting the upper levels for two hundred years now, possibly more. It had been a constant of this building that had defined my life in here. A place I had come for various reasons even until this day.

Under the skyship's strafing run, it folded like wet paper.

Entire sections, rooms wide, erupted into the air or were simply crushed down to the next level as enormous plumes of dust and rock blasted up in two parallel lines that traversed the rooftop from end to end. Each impact seared and surged with green lightning that arced off every piece of building it catastrophically annihilated before it. Foundations buckled and I felt everything beneath us drop away, our screams completely lost in the static-laced *howling* of the cannons above. We tried to move, we tried to run. Some managed to get their hooves moving, I presumed mine moved too, as I felt a frantic panic in my muscles. I remembered nothing but seeing the skylight and willing my muscles to move.

My ability to tell up from down disappeared as the ground tumbled and twisted. My skin burned. Pain washed over me and I felt my very bones rattling. Everything went white, then black as the floor left us and then I was falling. The shaking grew to a height and passed over us as a rush of wind in the ship's wake caught my wings and sent me spiralling, plucking me from the air. I felt myself hit the ground once... then inexplicably I hit the ground a second time as I rolled down a slope of the collapsed roof. My mouth bit something out of instinct as I kept tumbling over and over, expecting any second for a huge slab of masonry to crush me, before a tug from around my torso pulled me sharply to the side. Curling up, not knowing if I was falling or being buried, I heard the sound of the building collapsing around me.

The skyship went end to end, its firepower eclipsing everything used thus far on the Mall with its decision to attack us. By the time I later woke, half buried and stunned below a sheet of thin metal and crumbled stone, possibly only a few seconds later and alive by some miracle of the Goddesses, the skyship was gone.

And so was the entire roof of the Mall.

She reached out for my hoof because I had fallen. The panic and determination mixed in her eyes. Thick and clouded, I saw the fires around us and the beacon lights atop a vast wall behind.

We were trying to escape together.

Now, I knew her name.

Now, I knew what we had been trying for, that had taken its long journey through darkness to finally be together to finish it.

"Unity!"

The world was grey. It had once been red, yet now it was grey. My hooves didn't leave the uneven ground that formed the mountains of rubble sitting atop this great building as they shuffled and carried my pained body through the silence. It occurred to me that it wasn't actually silent, my ears had just given up. I didn't even hear a ringing, just a dull sound of the void. Something was dripping from my ear, hot liquid that ran over the side of my head to meet with the thick coating of blood from my nostrils. Maybe it was more blood. Maybe my eardrums had burst entirely.

I didn't feel *anything*. For a few strangely peaceful moments, I wondered if this was it. That I was simply awaiting to be lifted up. Just like how I had told Brimstone before his pit fights, reminding myself as much as he about death. It was a peaceful moment, followed by one of the Goddesses coming to find you and take you to the next place... a place to find and reunite with others, and to tell the Sun and Moon of your life...

No... no, my mother—who had told me all this—had said the pain would fade, not grow.

The pain did grow, until I stumbled and fell, feeling my very core filled with lancing agony, as though I had been lifted and shaken until torn up inside by a giant. Each motion dragged the extended rope of my grapple hook along behind me. I still couldn't see anything up here but grey and rocks followed by the spikes of metal rebar and the feeling of hot winds.

The enormous quantities of thick dusted clouds lying across the top of the Mall began to fade and my sight returned to the ruin of our holdout. I was atop it still, having fallen to the top floor when the roof cracked and sundered below us all. That fall, that motion toward the skylight and choosing to fall instead of be struck by the weapon, was all that had saved my life. My grapple had caught me, pulling me to the side to evade the avalanche of wreckage that now filled the area below the skylight. As the heavy dust cleared, I saw that the entire top was now a dishevelled mess with some areas of the roof still at its normal height, but most now crashed down onto what used to be the top floor's, well... floor. Like a massive ruin atop an intact structure with no rhyme or reason, I found myself in a vertical maze of shattered stone.

Dull coloured ponies staggered and limped amongst the still standing walls. They were all the same, coloured like the rock surrounding us. I sat among them and felt myself silently retch as my body tried to flush the adrenaline spike of coming within a whisker of death. The shock lay in so thick that I barely even paid attention to the sounds returning around me until I felt the hoof on my shoulder.

"Little Murk, you must move! They are coming!" Seeker's rapidly failing throat rasped at me as he shook me up. He was watching across the new landscape of the roof.

Dull thuds became sharp noises again. My ears *ached* as they were forced to do their job again and began to pick up the whizzbang of energy weapons above me and the raging barks of the Mall's assault through the floors beneath us. Haunting voices drifted from the

distance, both of fear and hatred.

"En... clave?" I found my throat bone dry with dust, dry heaving after daring to try and use it.

"No! The slavers! Come on!"

He turned away, waving his hoof at the others. I could see more clearly now, amongst the ruins of the roof, beneath the sky, there were sky wagons descending. The slavers had seen the Enclave do their work for them and now they were assaulting the area that had been blasted open. Griffon-pulled transport chariots led them. There must have been a good twenty slavers, and I only saw maybe a few ponies left here, including me, and only two held their weapons. Seeker dragged me to my hooves, before shaking or even slapping other disoriented ponies to get them up too.

The first shots lanced down at us before anypony could think about what to do. Heavy rounds got lost among the chaos of the rubble, but their sounds were more than enough warning. The first wagon was veering around to land at the far side before slavers leapt off and started to prowl the unstable upper levels for a way down, moving this way.

"We can't fight that... shit, we're lost," Seeker growled and raised his weapon to unleash two booming volleys of buckshot between now smashed supporting pillars. "Move! *Move!*"

More shots whined in. Seeker didn't budge, instead waving a hoof frantically at those trying to escape. The radio on his saddle blared and screamed. I heard Protégé's voice through it.

"Seeker! If you're still alive we've got ponies moving up to try and give you something to fall back to, but we cannot push up to you if there's an assault! Get the hell out of there!"

The workers were doing their best. Of the five remaining around Seeker and I, three could still gallop and headed past us to start the undignified climb down to some part of the top floor that still stood and could be reached. The access tunnel had ceased to exist. The skylight was gone, now just a colossal *hole* at the centre of the area. Ponies ran to its sides and tried to lower themselves to the balconies below that were now much closer from the levelling wrath of the skyship taking perhaps ten feet of building off the top. The workers were limping, one firing behind themselves with a magically held sub-machine gun to join Seeker's covering fire. Behind us, somepony shouted that they had a way down and I heard the scramble of hooves. I rushed to join them.

"No..."

Seeker's hushed voice caught my ears. I turned to see him standing slack jawed and staring forward. Following his gaze, across the rubble, I could see a purple haired mare crawling ahead of the slavers that were approaching behind her behind a tumbled wall. The terror on her face was clear as she heard them hunt and track their way past the bodies we had left behind.

"Chief, come on!" A stallion behind us, unaware of the situation, screamed at Seeker. He was helping the last buck down before finding himself being thrown the large shotgun that Seeker carried. "Chief!?"

Seeker turned and galloped into the ruins. He weaved between the fallen slabs, as the incoming fire switched to him almost immediately. My jaw felt slack as I saw the lanky slaver run toward those he had turned against to rescue just one of his workers.

"Come on, little guy, fire! Help him!"

The booming retort of the shotgun scared me into action with *Rarity's Grace*. Between the two of us, we scared some of the lead elements of the slavers into cover. Seeker skidded

around a pillar and leapt at a shredded vent hanging down from a still surviving column. A shot tore his saddlebag off as he came near the mare and threw him to the ground beside her.

Yet the number of slavers was adding up. We couldn't hold them all down with only two shots in his weapon per time and my frantic failings at reloading. Combat rifles chattered and snub-nosed shotguns roared to tear up the concrete around Seeker and the mare. I heard her wail as he lifted her broken body onto his back, standing up amongst a whirlwind of fire. I found myself staring, captured by the sight of a now ex-slaver doing this for one he'd been an overseer for.

"Chief! Hurry!" The stallion beside me fired two shots that both connected, its buckshot punching three slavers away from an upturned chunk of flooring.

Seeker ran. The slavers were not ten metres away as he began to rush back to us. Behind me another two ponies had climbed back up and brought pistols to bear. Together, the four of us covered for him as he staggered back to us, weaving and ducking. I could see the grim look on his face, driven by need, not by sense or logic.

Ten metres away... five metres...

At two metres the first shot slammed directly into his torso.

A heartbeat later, the same shooter put a second shot across the side of his neck.

As he fell, with the screams of his workers collecting in the air, he grimaced and threw the mare to us as he limped, staggered and fell. Two more shots whined off the ground, one of them skiffing off his hoof on the rebound and making him twitch.

"Chief! *Chief!* You motherfuckers! *You motherfuckers!* Graph, help me!"

The shotgun fired twice more, before two of the workers rushed out and dragged Seeker back into cover under growing fire, leaving a wide red trail behind him. His eyes were glazed over, staring purely at the mare the others were carrying down off the rooftop.

Fleeing ahead of slavers and now soldiers landing, the survivors of the roof made their painful way back down to the lower floors. A group was waiting for us, led by Protégé. They pulled us through their hastily erected defensive barricades. I could hear the non-fighters being driven from the open areas in the slave pens into harder cover in the old offices, now that the roof had fallen, their crying and panic an awful sound amongst the rattle of gunfire coming closer. Seeker was placed on one of the stretchers the hospital team had brought with them.

"Somepony, get him to Weathervane, now!" Protégé screamed at them, but I was already moving to take it.

"I... I can't fight anyway!"

"Then go! Go and... watch out! Firing positions!"

Behind me, from the way we'd came, a group of slavers had wandered into their sights. Even as fighting broke out, I took the stretcher's reins and cantered off as fast I could. I had to avoid areas where I heard combat, as gunfire could whip past the ends of shop outlets, punching through the old glass from outside or down the wide corridors that led to outer walls and windows.

The slaver noticed me coming right out of the stairs. I didn't know why he was there, but he was confused and wandering, likely having found another way off the roof and got separated in the madness. The look of shock on his face at seeing anypony turned to sudden realisation.

"Hey, you're the fucking pegasus! Oh, *he wants* you, c'mere!"

Shackles had told them to look for me. I screamed, fleeing with the stretcher and the unmoving Seeker in the only direction I really knew, the aid station. I hoped somepony there still had a gun or... or something! I rounded corner after corner, taking a mad route to try and lose him, but slowed down by my short legs, my body being at its limits and the stretcher, he was gaining ground on me, not firing his pistol. I could see he held something else in his magic instead though.

Chains.

“Weathervane! *Weathervane! Help!*”

Crying out, I rounded the last corner, feeling him trying to grab the stretcher with magic to stop me. With one last mad dash, I powered into the aid station and hit its smell like a wall. Strong antiseptic was lathered over an undercurrent of rot and blood. Sweat and fear permeated the entire canteen. Steam from pots over gas fires filled one corner at the end of a row of mattresses on collected tables. A few stronger ones were being used as operating tops in the middle, covered in what used to be clean sheets.

Near the entrance, his horn glowing over an unmoving and heavily bleeding stallion, Weathervane was working. I figured he was there to direct anything that came in, as his fierce eyes rose and saw me.

“On the right.” He spoke firmly, then went back to his work.

“HELP! Be... behind...” I wheezed, before the slaver rushed in behind me.

“Gotcha, ya little... what?” He stopped, looking around, before realising where he was. I took the opportunity to slowly move away as I saw him grin and move forward, walking straight for Weathervane, apparently forgetting me. His pistol was drawing up just as I realised the same thing he did. No one here had weapons.

“Oh... I see. You took your medical guards to hold us off up there. How incredibly fucking stupid of you all.” The slaver cackled over his shoulder at me. Numerous nurses and patients spotted him, and began to move back rapidly. I saw Unity among them, her front hooves coated red.

“Well, I guess you’re the one keeping them in the fight, eh? Traitor?”

The pistol rose, and pointed at Weathervane. I fought to get off the reins of the stretcher, trying to at least get my pistol reloaded, I could help, I could—

The old ghoul finally looked up from the stallion he was desperately trying to save.

“Can I help you?”

The slaver paused, blinking. Those weren’t the words he expected.

“What?”

“Can I fucking *help* you?” Weathervane snarled.

“No... no. I... no, I don’t,” the slaver looked at his floating pistol, as though hoping it would explain his point by waving it around. “I’m... going to kill you!”

“Oh.” Weathervane’s milky eyes twitched to it for a second, as though having never seen it before. His voice was hard, scolding like he would a trainee nurse. “Does it have to be now?”

The slaver hesitated, mouth moving but no sounds coming out; taken completely aback.

“Come back later, I’m very busy.” Weathervane ordered, immediately looked back down at the patient, ignoring the slaver entirely. His hooves held a stained bandage in place, his horn casting spells to try and staunch the flow of a gutshot, trying to encourage his stunned assistant to work with him.

Left alone, the slaver didn’t seem to even know what to think. He just stood in place,

looking around at others staring at him. He even looked at me as though for help. I just shrugged, feeling lost as anypony.

Shaking his mane out, he advanced closer, marching around the table.

“Look, I’m trying to fucking kill you here so if you’d—”

Weathervane’s eyes shot up. I saw rage in them.

“Oh *shut the everloving fuck up*. Don’t even *try* to say ‘fuck’ again, you curse like shit anyway. You’re the kind who hurts the word’s impact! Now are you going to bitch all day and get in my way, or are you going to leave me in peace? In fact, you know what? Come here. Get rid of that thing!”

His magic took the pistol from the slaver’s grip without a fight and placed it on the side bench beside his tools. The young slaver blanched under the verbal assault, being pulled in beside the ghoul.

“I... I... I’m supposed to ki—”

“Oh, be quiet. If you’re going to screw around you might as well do something useful. Put your hoof here! Pressure on the wound! Least you can do if you’re going to stand around staring like an adolescent in a mare’s gymnastics class! No, not fucking there, *there!* Put your weight into it! Nurse! Two packs of blood! That’s it, lad, now let me at it...”

“I... o-okay...”

That, it seemed, was that.

“Well, uh... I guess we all make new friends in different ways, right?” said Unity from beside me, having trotted over in the commotion and was now watching the new nurse being directed in his duties. “Come on, let the doctors handle Seeker, let’s get you cleaned up.”

The aid station shook terribly, making the long lights above sway and buckle in their fixtures. The deep throaty rumble of bombing was followed by a wave of groans and fear passed through those lying prone on beds, sitting on stools or crowded on the floor. I sat at the edge of a table, drawing a few funny looks in the manner in which I settled down. Either that or from my wings splayed out. I felt like I had run a marathon and woken up the next day. My very core ached deeply, and even small motions made me feel sick to my stomach. The metallic tang of blood in my throat and the rough wheezing in my lungs wasn’t helping much either. All this dust in the air was drawing up the radiation that permeated Fillydelphia.

Unity returned, trotting around bandaged and stained ponies lying on mattresses or reaching out for help, before handing a quarter full packet of RadAway to me and placing down a small bowl of hot water.

“Since when were you a medical pony?”

“Since about forty minutes ago?” Unity smiled back, wiping my nose with a damp cloth to clean out the dried blood. “Don’t gulp it, Weathervane says you can’t take too much or you’ll just bring it back up with all the adrenaline.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I tried to smirk, but just winced at her light bat on my shoulder. “I... I don’t think it’s going well...”

Unity put a hoof to my lips, motioning with her eyes toward the terrified ponies nearby, the ones relying on others to protect them from a massacre. The hot water she was dabbing

on my muzzle felt searing and yet cleansing as the blood was wiped away, “Just keep breathing, that goes for everyone in here, okay? Are... are the others?”

“All still there. Sunny got hit but... but she seems fine. What about—”

We both looked up to where Weathervane and his most trusted surgeons were working frantically to save Seeker's life. Blood dripped from the table. He was lying very still.

“They'll do what they can. Just you focus on staying alive. It's a miracle you weren't hurt worse, we all felt it in here. I thought the whole building was coming down... everything was shaking so much.”

“I—argh!”

“Sorry! Sorry!” Her hoof retracted from what was clearly a bad bruise, not a stain, “Okay... maybe a little worse. You can rest for a while though. Whitestone was in there when I was getting your RadAway. She said they're managing to hold once Mister Peace went to stop the ones coming from above. The front of the Mall's still deadlocked though... and they tried twice at fire exits in the back. Glimmer's mines made them run away for now.”

I took a sip of water, sloshed it around my mouth and spat it into a bucket to clear the dust. Mouth clean, I finally brought the straw for the RadAway to my mouth. Not long after, the swelling in my chest began to quell, as I could finally suck in the hot air again. I hadn't even noticed how bad it had gotten. This battle would kill me without a shot being fired if I wasn't careful.

Shaking my head, I refocused on the now. I tried not to think on the whirlwind I'd just been through. Hours of tension ended in a burst of terror. Just keep breathing, Unity was right. Just keep breathing and try not to be sick. It wasn't over yet.

“Hey! Hey! Help! We need help!”

We both looked up as the voice started shouting into the aid station. A mare galloped through the doors. Behind her there was a sudden rushing of hooves and a distant echo of fresh screaming over the background of gunfire from above and below.

“They got a grenade in! They put a grenade through a window! Right at the front! They're bleeding out!”

Bloodbank responded first, letting Weathervane keep his focus on the prone Seeker.

“Just get them here as fast as possible! You, you and you, take the stretchers!” His hoof pointed to the three slavers that Unity and I had run into while fleeing the bombardment earlier on. “Who's got dressings?”

Unity looked at me, before grabbing a small pack from the next table. Sucking down the rest of the RadAway (sucking wasn't gulping, right?) I moved after her.

“Murky, you—”

“I... I'm used to being all beat up, it's just pulling stretchers.”

Clearly, Unity saw I wasn't brokering much argument, as her magic just lifted a stretcher's harness onto me while she gathered bandages up from Bloodbank and looked at the other slavers carting the other mobile beds.

“You two midgets ready? It's on the front, that place is a fucking nightmare right now.”

“Just go!” Unity cantered out the station, with the three slavers quickly following her. Groaning, I followed behind all four of them, trying to not look like I was limping too much. In truth, I just didn't like the idea of sitting idle in a medical lounge any longer, and I couldn't bear not knowing what was happening out there.

Stepping outside into the Mall's high corridors again brought the sounds so much closer.

I could hear the heavy cannon at the front pumping short bursts into the structure of the building again and again, surrounded by inconsistent but endless spats of smaller gun fire. Smoke drifted near the ceiling, blown in from outside or picking up from the fires that had been started in the strafing run. Entire areas looked buckled and ready to collapse as we ran beneath the arches and pushed our way through a team carting buckets to a room in flames. Right above us, I could hear Mister Peace laughing in delight as he held the rooftop breach.

"This way!" One of the slavers veered to the right.

"But that's away from the front!" Unity hesitated, before the next one passed by her.

"If you want to run down a straight corridor facing the windows with that damn land hammer, be my guest you stupid bint! I'd rather not get turned inside out!"

"Hey!" I felt offended at *anypony* insulting her, but both of us did indeed follow. The route took us across the middle of the Mall, into the line of shops that faced the fountain courtyard in the middle. The roof had crushed and sheared some of the balcony lips entirely off the pillars that they'd been mounted on and torn down the walkways that had once carried across the width. Below, I could see the ground filled with wreckage and yet somehow, the fountain remained mostly intact, avoiding being buried.

Ahead, there was a huge canyon of a hole, wide enough to cover almost the full width of the shopping route. One of the Enclave ship's blasts had torn right through the Mall, leaving melted concrete and rebar in its wake. The mosaic flooring was twisted into a grotesque mockery of its once beautiful design.

One of the slavers, a rough and hairy brown stallion, paused and peered down it, whistling in awe, "Shit... that goes right to the ground floor, I can see the main entrance area down there."

I heard the others slowing behind Unity and I. The mare, a tall unicorn with a mane that nearly reached her knees, began tugging her stretcher off. "Damn thing pulls at my shoulders..."

"Mine too, but... shouldn't we keep going?" I gulped.

The first stallion looked back up, then around. Then he nodded.

My mouth barely had time to open before I felt a pair of hooves grab me from behind. My scream was muffled by hairy hooves and I felt myself lifted clean from the ground, my hind legs kicking uselessly.

"What are you doing?" Unity stared in horror, before the stallion beside her pounced. Her hooves flailed, kicked and struck, but the vastly stronger slaver had her pinned beneath him within seconds. The mare rushed forward, tugging at something.

Unity's saddlebag. Why would that—

I realised. *Aurora's orb*! They were insiders! They were still working for Shackles! I struggled, trying to get my mouth free, but my captor stifled my mouth. I tried to bite, but found only a hard hoof had been used to stop me screaming.

"Get it! Get it!" The stallion was shouting at them, "If they see us we're fucking dead!"

"I've got it!"

The orb briefly appeared before me, just as the snap of the saddlebag's strap broke through the air and the mare fell away with it. Checking the glistening orb, she stuffed it back in. "Okay! Let's get the fuck upstairs to the sky-wagon and get out of here! Get those two tied up!"

Oh Goddesses, they wanted us too, they wanted to deliver us back to him! How many ponies had he told to look for me? Even now, Shackles wasn't letting me go! I was always in

his sights, his plans.

My blood ran cold as I remembered what he wanted me for, and imagery of Aurora Star's memory research turned to evil was all too fresh in my mind to not fight and writhe, trying to cry for help.

"Stop struggling you little runt, before I knock you out!"

No threat could have made me stop. Nothing was as bad as going back to him. I lashed out in every way I could, wriggling and twisting till I got one hoof free and flicked it out. With a mechanical snap, the mouthpiece of my saddle whipped out and I hit the trigger with a hoof. The grapple fired directly upwards, embedding in the roof, before it pulled both the slaver and myself vertically. His head impacted on the arched ceiling with a sound like a sledgehammer on a cinder block, before we both dropped back down amongst a pile of falling tiles and plaster.

"Just shoot him in the fucking leg or something!" The stallion holding Unity screamed at the mare, who got up, a sub-machine gun held in her magic. I was still trying to untangle myself from the unconscious stallion. I threw up my hooves in a feeble protective gesture.

A glowing red stretcher slammed into the mare from the side, driving her through a still unbroken glass pane in the shop beside us. I could see Unity's horn glow red as she jabbed upwards with it, trying to hit the stallion in the face.

Pushing the heavy leg off me, coughing and groaning, I found my nose dripping blood all over again. Through the shop window, the mare was slowly getting up, bleeding somewhat worse than I was from a dozen cuts.

Twisting the mouthpiece into my teeth, I pointed *Rarity's Grace* at the stallion holding Unity, pulling the trigger before he could start using her as a shield. The polite crack of the weapon felt lost among the warfare going on just through the walls, but I saw the stallion jerk back and scream, falling off Unity to roll away.

"The orb!" Unity shouted, turning as though to rush after the mare, her horn grabbing the saddlebag in her magic and engaging in a magical tug-of-war.

We both saw the sub-machine gun pointing right at us. In a moment of horrible clarity, I saw her deliberately aim low. Aiming to maim and wound to keep alive. Beside us, the stallion was pulling a shock stick out from his bandoleers, moaning in pain at the sting of my own weapon.

"C'mere, you two!"

The stick swung. Yet before it hit, all I felt was a sudden pulling at my body. Unity had barrelled into me, pulling me with her as she flung us into the hole the Enclave blast had made. In that precious single second as my world turned upside down, I saw her magic tug hard on the saddlebag, while also attaching my already extended grapplehook onto the edge of the hole.

The saddlebag came open at the seams. Her magic pulled the canvas and most of its contents with us... but in a sickly yellow that lit the mare's face, the orb remained where it was. The slaver had let go, concentrating all her magic on just the one item to keep it where it was.

I wanted to scream about it, but already we were dropping down the hole to escape harm. As we went, I saw the item we'd struggled through cold, blood and loss to acquire being taken.

The key to our freedom down below...

Then we were gone, as I felt gravity take hold. We fell, vertically dropping down through

two floors of the Mall. I tried to get my wings out, but screamed as one of them slapped off the edge of the crowded hole. We clung to one another, as I tried again and again to slow our descent, my horrid attempts at flapping failing dismally as my muscles seized and weakly worked. I grabbed the mouthpiece, biting hard at it and catching the edge of my tongue in the mechanism. The whirr of the grapple-guns mechanisms were the only warning before our descent came to a sudden stop.

The stop was sudden enough that I choked and let go of the mouthpiece, causing us to fall again with a mutual scream. I saw the ground rushing up before Unity leaned over and bit the mouthpiece herself, arresting our fall mere feet from the cratered stone floor.

There we hung for a few seconds, upside down. Apparently, the slavers had simply fled when we fell, rather than staying to grab the hook. Behind us, I could see the barricade piled up on the main doors to the Mall not ten feet away from us, with ponies looking back in surprise at the pair of little slaves having just falling from above, clutching one another and hanging from a rope.

With a roar of incoming fire, their attentions were taken right back. I could smell smoke coming from adjoining rooms and hear the fury of battle. We'd fallen right into the frontline. Orders were being shouted and I could hear Brimstone nearby. There were screams about them getting close trying to be heard over the horrendous barks from heavy weaponry outside.

Unity locked the mouthpiece in place and let go of it, letting us down as she started frantically searching the ground, even as bullets pinged off the ceiling and raked down the entranceway to embed in the floor or benches.

"The orb... Murky, the orb!"

Pulling the grapple down from above with some degree of shaking it around, I looked down at her. I hated to say the words, but I had seen it with my own eyes.

"They have it..."

My body hurt, but seeing that look on her face hurt me more than anything yet today. Seeing her surrounded by the contents of her torn saddlebag and denied the key to our escape.

"No... *no!* That was Aurora's! That was mine! O-our freedom! Get... get the word out! We can catch them before they get out!" Unity was grabbing everything she could get, trying to hold her torn bag together before pulling herself up, tears in her eyes.

"We—"

I shrieked. A heavy round tore through the barricade and took a hoof-sized chunk out of the floor near us. Pulling both of us toward one of the arches leading to old shop fronts either side of the main entrance, I got a sight of the ground level. Whoever had designed the Mall had made it thick, not full of tall glass windows but consisting of thick concrete pillars and strong stone bases that came up to the neck of a pony. In old times, it might have made practical sense for such a thick base to support the building, but now it was providing slaves with good cover to try and hold off any rushes the soldiers made. I could see blasted holes from rockets and grenades that created little breaches in the defence all down it, some still stained in blood.

A desperate and bloody fight of the barely equipped against the well armed. I looked for anypony with a radio; there was no way either of us could catch them. Outside I could see soldiers trying to advance across the slave camp, rushing from ditch to crater, from fence to low wall as they gradually made their way forward. Griffons were sniping relentlessly at the

upper floors, while the occasional keening whine of a rocket preempted a shuddering explosion that further tore at the defences.

We were holding. Barely.

“What the hell are you two doing here!?”

Brimstone’s guttural voice boomed and I felt the floor shake as he galloped out of one of the rear archways into the shopping mall. He didn’t stop moving, rushing up beside us to act as living cover from the shots pinging over the barricades or punching right through the stone itself.

“We fell! Brim, they got the orb! Slavers on the inside were working for Shackles! They’re trying to escape from the roof!”

“Where!?”

I pointed upwards, “T-two floors!”

Brim looked up and saw the hole, before barking for a radio so loudly that I saw several ponies around us flinch or recoil from him. Whitmane, the ‘turncoat’ soldier, crawled up, staying low.

“Tell the boy to stop anypony getting to the roof, and I mean *anypony*. Get that, aye? We’ve got rats in the building.”

Whitmane nodded, rolling away behind a counter that had been shredded at the level it was still visible and started trying to reach Protégé. A small surge of pride went through me at how seriously they were taking me without even questioning.

The old warlord looked back at us, pulling us both (quite effortlessly) inside the shop, “This can’t go on much longer. As soon as we have them pinned down again, you two are getting the hell out of here, you shouldn’t be down here. If they get close, you’ll get caught up in it all and you two aren’t built for a melee.”

“We know...” Unity sounded despondent, a feeling I could quite relate to right now. She kept looking back, as though wishing she could run after the orb. Its safety was in Protégé’s hooves now.

“Mmm... just stay here. Falling into this...” Brimstone muttered to himself, clearly angry that we’d ended up on the absolute frontline. I knew it wasn’t at us, just the situation, but it didn’t make him any less intimidating. “Keep your head down. That fucking heavy passes across here every so often and—”

‘The heavy,’ the huge machine gun from earlier, decided it didn’t want to have its presence simply told. With a crunch, a chunk of the protective stone wall disintegrated about twenty feet to our left and a red firey projectile shot through to embed in the rear wall. Then another, and another before the first thudding sound of the weapon firing finally reached us.

“Keep back!” Brimstone picked us both up, before half hustling and half throwing us toward where Whitmane was fighting with the radio, repeatedly shouting Protégé’s name.

Distantly, I heard a whistling, barely audible over the carnage and the war above. A descending sound, whirring and high pitched. I’d heard that before... was it on the mountain? Wait, wait!

“Brim! BRIM!” I screamed, hopping up on the counter, “I hear mor—”

The first shell hit ten feet in front of the Mall. Somepony grabbed me from behind and I was pulled down right as the mud and shrapnel plastered the front of the shop’s broken windows. Earth and metal splattered or pinged around inside. Somepony screamed in horror, a wail that could only have come from pain. Another whistle, then another picked up. Two more impacts just outside the windows launched chunks of stone that crushed and

pulverised anything they landed upon, whipping through the manes of ponies lying flat on the floor to keep away from it all.

"Fire between hits! Fire between them or they'll move up under the cover!" Brimstone bellowed to those around us, pulling at everypony who was lying down. Some fearfully blind fired above the lip or around window frames, others just screamed at his touch, pulling away shouting incomprehensible things at 'the raider.'

The heavy machine gun tore a new opening with a concentrated burst that brought down two more slaves in squealing heaps. A blizzard of shrapnel, bullets and concussive waves roared across the Mall. The ponies at the barricade to the main entrance of the Mall could do nothing but hide and hope, as the entranceway became a firestorm that blocked any movement.

Three whistles, three more shells... yet I didn't hear the explosions. I felt my ears had gone deaf again, hearing only three dull *whumps* instead of the barking detonations. Only when my eyes saw what had happened instead did I realise.

"Smoke! SMOKE! Get up, everypony! Get up now, or you're dead!" Whitmane rushed out from behind us, hurriedly attaching a bayonet to the end of her bulky combat rifle.

Where once I could see the slave camp outside and the far buildings beyond, I now only saw a filthy grey veil like a polluted version of the snowstorms on the mountain. It clawed and wound its way inside, heavy and hanging in the air. Already, I began to choke as its thick fumes hit my throat, hearing dozens of others doing the same. The slavers and soldiers that had been advancing through the slave camp, held back by our haphazard efforts, now disappeared behind it, invisible to our eyes. I was no battlefield expert, but the realisation of how bad this was began to creep up on me. We couldn't see them to shoot them, so we couldn't hold them back.

You get inside, you win.

Brim's assertion on how assaults went was too clear in my mind. I wanted to flee, but the barrage of fire was still piling down the entranceway, even through the smoke. My breathing sped up, growing shallow. They were coming.

Brimstone turned to everypony, half hidden in the smoke. "IF YOU CAN'T FIGHT CLOSE UP, GET BACK! *GET BACK NOW! GET—*"

Through the smoke, I saw a black shape. Then another... and another... then three more. The shapes of bulky and armoured ponies charging through the mist.

In the distance, I heard an order shouted, before they as one let out a raspy battlecry that warped through their gas masks into a horrifying belch of musty ferocity. As one line, Shackles' forces poured through the windows and into our threadbare defence.

Whitmane speared forward, thrusting her bayonet through the window and crashing into an approaching black figure, hurling him back with brute strength, before firing on two others to bring them crashing to the ground. Around me, some slaves got their weapons up and dropped half a dozen soldiers into rolling heaps as they came through, but there were always others behind. Fully automatic weapons roared, ten times inside here, while glinting bayonets gleamed and stabbed forward to send slaves fleeing from the front. For every one that stood, another two fled at the sight. At the gallop, they leapt through the windows and landed atop ponies.

Unity and I tried to avoid it, but stinging eyes and flares of weapons on all sides killed any sense of direction stone dead. We got around the counter, hoof in hoof, trying to find somewhere to hide or get away to. Soldiers rushed past us, so close that one knocked me

clean over in the confusion. A soldier and slave rolled on the ground, leading us to jump over them and trip on their weapon slings. Behind me, I saw a group of slavers charging forward, about ready to trample us. They emerged from the smoke like demons, glowing torches on their helmets casting hazy beams through the coiling smoke.

Brimstone crashed into them like a red fury. His own warcry drowned their own as he piled into the soldiers and crushed three of them against an outer wall pillar so hard that it cracked under the impact. Swinging his body around, his hooves lashed out in a savage buck that crushed helmet and skull alike.

“GET BACK!” He was screaming at us, “GET! BACK!”

Beside him, two slavers charged into the shop through the windows and executed a wounded slave on the ground with a brutal shot to the back of the head, before one of them was pitched upwards and over by a shotgun blast. Two slaves rushed in and beat the remaining one to death with empty ammo boxes. Brimstone bucked a soldier across the room to land atop a brawling mass of slavers and slaves. A shock stick stabbed him from the side, its wielder already dead from another soldier shooting his ally by accident by the time Brim turned.

This was chaos. Condensed, lethal, chaos. Terror gripped my heart so tightly that I was afraid I hurt Unity when I pulled both of us harshly to flee through it. My eyes stung so much I had to pull down my goggles just to keep them open. Behind me, Unity was squinting hard, eyes watering just as much as mine. A soldier appeared in front of us and we both tackled his knees before he could do anything. A hoof lashed out and caught me on the side before we scrambled up and over the foe to keep running. There was no pain. My body was simply too wired with fear and adrenaline to feel it.

But where were we even going? We could have been going in circles as we passed around an old clothing rack and almost skidded across a thick puddle of blood below us. I couldn't see anything right. More than once, we found ourselves at the windows, having to duck below the merciless short range fire. Wounded ponies from both sides lay on the floor in piles, screaming for help or for mercy from those still standing who killed and killed.

“MURK!”

Brimstone's voice cut through the melee. Turning, I saw him in the midst of it, valiantly trying to hold an entire window front alone. He was wounded, possessing several cuts and burns across his thick limbs and shoulders; but those huge hooves crushed and rended anything that came within reaching distance of him.

“RUN FOR THE ENTRANCEWAY! GET OUT!”

I couldn't see it! *I couldn't see it!* All around us, slaves and turncoat slavers were fleeing before a second wave of soldiers became clear through the slowly fading smoke.

“The front of the Mall is falling! Flee! *Flee!*” Somepony shouted, before running for the staff rooms at the back of the shop. Others all crowded in another direction, carrying us along with them. We passed Brimstone, who bodily hurled an entire counter across the shop at a group of soldiers with a strangled cry, before recoiling as rifle fire slammed into his side from outside. Staggering, he snarled and lashed out at the invaders so hard that I saw a soldier's gas mask visor shatter from the impact. Even before they could realise he was coming at them, he landed among the group and broke limbs, skulls and ribs with thunderous attacks. He spun, throwing one slaver into another, before falling upon them both and slamming their heads into the concrete again and again and again until a sickening crack was heard.

“MURK! GO!”

Soldiers swarmed in behind us as the ponies who had once defended the front fled into the entrance tunnel. The heavy machine gun opened up, and I felt ponies crowded either side of me cut down. Unity and I grabbed one between us, a mare minus one leg, and pulled her toward the back, trying to ignore her pleas to find it.

“Protégé! *Protégé!*” Whitemane was screaming into the radio, “The front’s falling! *I repeat, the front is falling!*”

There was no reply. I could hear the victorious cry from behind us as Brimstone skidded out of the shop and retreated after us, grimacing as he saw the cluster of beaten defenders all fighting to get through the same door. I felt crushed on every side and instead tried to pull Unity and the wounded mare behind an old roadblock; we’d never get out this way!

Brimstone dropped down beside me, along with a small group who started putting shots back down the entranceway. On the far barricade, I could see its staunch defenders lying motionless as soldiers began to clamber over it and approach us from a whole new direction. A short range firefight broke out, as us few tried to hold them off long enough for the majority to retreat inside. Unity took a pistol from the mare and fired blindly above the roadblock, as I got off my shots with *Rarity’s Grace*. Whitemane tossed a combat rifle to Brimstone, who caught it and put fire down as well. Most of his shots hit the roof... as they always did with him, but it was everything we could do. Unicorns leading the soldiers lit magical shields to try and let them push down the corridor without any cover. Our shots sparked off them without any effect.

“Murk... when I tell you, both you and Unity run for it.” Brimstone spoke quietly as he clumsily reloaded the rifle.

The radio was silent. Protégé wasn’t responding. We didn’t even know if help was coming. “Protégé! We need—”

Whitemane was cut short. Her body was whipped back, and the back of her head exploded. Her namesake turned red.

I screamed as she fell, leaving Brimstone, Unity, myself and a couple other slaves who were now pinned down after the mass had fled inside. I stared at her lifeless body with wide eyes and just shook. She was a soldier. A trained soldier, experienced and sharp and then just... pop, a stain of matter on the floor.

In her place, within my mind, I couldn’t help but project any number of more familiar faces than a mare I didn’t really know. We were so stuck... what if it were somepony closer to me? Please, somepony lift us from this hell! I didn’t want to be in this city any more! None of us! It was just too much!

“Murk, when I tell you, run,” Brimstone spoke lowly. “Don’t look back... just keep running.”

A very hollow feeling began to fill my gut as I saw him drop the rifle and limber up, ready to charge out from behind the roadblock toward the advancing ranks of soldiers. Formed up behind their close quarters shields and magic, they advanced while pouring fire toward out disintegrating cover.

“Brim—”

“Don’t say it. Just—”

He stopped talking, as we both felt it. Like the building was tightening up. A build of pressure in the atmosphere. I felt my ears want to pop as it grew and grew. Soldiers began to look around nervously. The air itself quivered... before I heard a female voice scream in

utmost rage and determination.

The wall to the right of the entranceway exploded into the corridor as though a wagon-full of TNT had gone off behind it, a concussive blast of magic ripped through it, hurling a ten foot length of wall into the attacking force and burying it beneath the magical devastation. Through the flying fragments, I saw Coral Eve, horn blazing mightily... surrounded by Protégé, Glimmer, Sunny, and a force of slaves charging behind her, leaping over the remaining wall with weapons pointed and blazing hard.

Brimstone shoved Unity and I back behind the roadblock, before leaping up and galloping toward the soldiers, cursing them and screaming as he dove into them. Gunfire from the others rippled through the stunned force, puncturing armour and shattering magical shields from the close range. Heavy rifles pointed right into torsos before unleashing large rounds right through them. A slave with an automatic pistol sprayed into a pile of fallen soldiers on the floor, mercilessly bawling all his pent up hatred out. All the rest unloaded, dumping everything they had into Shackles' forces.

Their momentum stolen, caught in the open, those still able began to fall back before being cut down. They fled to the barricade, climbing it or running back into the shop to try and get out via the windows.

"Lil'bro! Get to me!"

Unity and I galloped toward Glimmer, who was reloading behind one of the few still standing parts of the wall. We all ducked as Coral Eve aided the soldiers in escaping *over* the barricade and blew the smell of gunpowder and smoke across the interior of the Mall, as I felt my sister grab hold of me tightly, before reaching back and actually slapping me across the face.

"You... you stupid little idiot! What were you doing down here!? You could've been..."

She just clutched tightly, her magic yanking Unity into the same embrace.

"I won't have another Creaky Hollow... I *won't* be the last one standing again, Murky. I've lost too many friends. I won't lose you. Any of you."

The three of us remained there, as behind us, the first attack on the Mall was ended. With Mister Peace and Protégé's group having fought off the attack on the roof, they had rallied to the ground floor as one whole. The soldiers, well trained, had attempted to counter attack, but with a defiant cry, Mister Peace had rolled past us to the front. His weaponry put a definite end to the assault. The outcome being a mess of ash piles, torn flesh and one very delighted robot.

Filled with renewed courage, those that had fled returned to their positions, flowing past us; rearmed and bolstered by the sight of fleeing soldiers. I heard Protégé crying out to hold fire, before Peace repeated it for him, only much louder and with a much greater sense of disappointment.

Slowly, we filtered after the others to view the remains.

The front shop was nought but a carnal house. Ponies were searching it, occasionally howling with loss as they discovered someone they knew or just standing in shock. Bodies lay thick on the floor, some buried beneath others from the brutal close quarters assault that had taken place in here. Protégé trotted amongst it, a grim look on his face as he witnessed the cost of repelling this assault.

Brimstone stood at the window, watching the remains of the soldiers heading out. There were departing shots, but hasty and without aiming as they sought to prevent any of us charging after them... clearly not realising how little chance we had to do that now.

"Force that size... they won't be back. Not unless Shackles can magic up another small army from Stern's forces, and I doubt that right now." He glanced upwards to the sky.

Hopping up beside Brim, I cast my eyes out, feeling shocked at the sight of the skies on fire. Burning ships crossed with enormous smoke plumes from below. Things had been so intimate down here... the thought that this same action was happening in a hundred places across and above the city as well felt inconceivable. I just couldn't imagine it all; my mind couldn't picture it.

"You know, kid?" Brimstone muttered to me as we stood there.

"H-huh?"

"They also say a great general leads from the front."

He wryly grinned at me, before giving me a slap on the back and trotting away, ponies making clear way for the big raider.

"Slaves... you can hear me, can't you?"

The sounds of grief, elation, and relief came to a halt.

Every pony in these walls knew the voice. I fell down behind the window, cowering away from it almost as instinct.

The voice came from outside, projected through speakers or through magical amplification. Deep, brimming with malice, and sounding like it was worming its way to my ears in particular. I... I knew the truth, I could just hear better... but it didn't feel any less wretched.

"You're probably feeling warm and safe about now... aren't you? Thinking you have won..."

Protégé crept to the window, glancing out. Other slaves followed. They didn't speak... they only listened. Cautiously, I peered out myself and found my eyes attracted to the glowing yellow of what seemed to be a shield spell atop the far building. My knees felt weak as I saw him standing amongst it, grinning with rotten teeth toward us, eyes glinting in the see-through magic keeping him safe from an opportunistic sniper.

"Some of you will know what I mean when I tell you... you are wrong. You have lost so much. So many friends... family... in your childish spat against the city that owns you. Against your masters. Yet you have lost more than that..."

His hoof raised up, as I saw what he held within it... the orb.

"...you have lost your hope."

My friends must have felt the same thing I did. That crushing emptiness inside as he possessed the thing we had given so much to attain. All that distance, all the blood, tears and sacrifice...

"You thought too highly, you trusted too easily and let my allies slip among you. It has ever been your folly, upstart; to be such a naïve little colt. So, upstart... are you going to let them live by coming out this time? All those slaves looking to you to save them, so very precious. Will you obey me now, to walk from your hole and return to your master to save all their lives?"

I looked at Protégé beside me. I could see that same look on his face. We had been here before... the responsibility weighed heavy. Last time it had cost Old Grizzly his life.

Shackles' grin widened, **"Ooh... you feel it, I know. You feel that same sense I do. Like they matter to you, their lives *belong* to you... you wanted choices? There's one right here."**

"It's a bluff," Sunny scoffed, keeping her weapon aimed. "We just kicked the ass of his

little army he raised. He's got nothing but a small bodyguard now."

"Never count Shackles out, Sunny..." Protégé whispered quietly, the strain showing in his eyes.

Across the slave camp, past the corpses and wreckage of war, Shackles remained on that building, before putting the orb away and laughing. He trotted to one side, along the building as though watching us. That shield moved with him... was it still that one he had found on the mountain? The talisman Aurora made?

"Heh. Loyalty... not coming out, eh? Well, you may think you've won, but really... you would have been better to let your masters take you back. Now, you've forced my decision. Now, upstart, slaves, Number Seven... you will suffer. You all know well enough by now that I don't make threats. You will beg for us to come and claim you again instead of *them*..."

He turned away, motioning to somepony else, before turning his gaze to m... to us.

"You think that you have won? You believe yourself through the nightmare? Then I leave you in their hooves, slaves. The disobedient are always punished in the end. This is your punishment."

From behind him, I heard the thick stomping of something heavy. I heard the sound of insane laughter. The machine noises of hydraulics and the scraping of metal blades upon stone.

From behind Shackles, as he departed, came the two figures. Multicoloured and shivering... horned and moving with robotic twitching... Wildcard and Big Brutus moved to the fore.

"Hi, hiiii, everypooooony!" Wildcard screeched to the gap between them and the Mall, "You beat the softies trying to be nice to you... you get *us*..."

Us!?

"Raiders of the wastes! Raiders of the Pit! Raiders of the crater! Of every corner of Fillydelphia who needed a new Clan! Come on out, all of you! This is a *surprise party!*" Wildcard yelled, spinning, waving a hoof in the air. Then I saw motion. Movement every side of us. From every rooftop, every hole and doorway, there came ponies.

Not just ponies. Raiders.

Not just raiders...

Bloodletters.

I had seen this before, in Glimmer's memories...

Tribal, barbaric... they were as different from one another as they were from us. Some enormous and muscular, others skeletal and sneering. Some bore painted hides and foamed at the mouth as they shivered on drug-induced madness, while others looked like hunters of the wild, leading pack dogs that snarled and snapped. Behind them, I heard the crump of launchers, before four stars shone in the sky, blood-red flares that cast an evil hue across the Mall.

"You wanted to live, yet now you have chosen death!" Brutus' voice echoed off buildings and made slaves whine and fall back from the windows. "You don't face soldiers. You face Brutus, the new Warlord of the Bloodletters, greatest Clan in all the wastes! The old one, the beaten warlord, he brought you here and he set you to fight for him again, a mockery of his own past. *Now face true fury!*"

The mechanical minotaur threw both his cybernetic arms to the sky, before yanking them down, pushing his chest out and throwing his head back, howling to the heavens above in a

deep bass roar, to all that fought in the sky. Enormous magical weaponry cracked like lightning around the rooftops, lighting him in all colours from all sides, as every raider swung their heads back and joined his chorus. The hounds howled, adding a high pitch to the sound that spread and surrounded the Mall.

Alone, crowded in the Mall, clutching the remnants of what we had... we looked upon them, like one small village had in the past.

And we despaired.

The Battle of Fillydelphia – Part Two

Another growing howl erupted from the Bloodletter Clan, reverberating off the slab-sided walls of the Mall and echoing again and again within Fillydelphia's high streets. Like a wave, the howl travelled around us, as those furious beasts whooped, cheered, and roared their bloodlust to the war-torn city around them.

In the face of that, I felt myself frozen in fear.

Fillydelphia had always been sharp and bright. A city of red hot metal. Yet the crimson hue that fell over the Mall was staining and thick, as though liquid light had seeped from the ground and coated everything. I had seen this before. Only this time, it wasn't in an orb. The Bloodletters were here for real.

I felt exposed and fragile. My stomach turned and I felt bile in my throat at the worry setting in. Sharp blades and rotten teeth clashed and snarled, promising a grim end. I wanted to cry. I'd faced raiders before, even ones from this clan, but this was something else. A new scale, a new ferocity. I watched them dance and stomp and psych themselves up. One began scraping at the ground like the burly canine beside him. Another two headbutted each other furiously until blood was drawn before directing their rage to the Enclave ships above. Coated in bones, tattoos, carved armour, and self-inflicted wounds to leak blood across their chests and faces, they stamped and cried like demons from the darkness of the wastes, ready to reap the ponies before them.

The slaves broke at the sight of what lay outside. They fled. Weapons were hurled to the ground as their previous owners galloped away from the windows, deeper into the building. Some screamed, others lost their voice in sheer terror and stood gaping.

"It's just intimidation! Don't run! That's what they want!" Brimstone roared above the din, trying to cut off those fleeing, "Flee and they'll overrun the Mall!"

He tried to grab a stallion by the shoulder, but the slave turned and spat at him.

“Fuck you, Dragon! We’re not your new clan! You put me in here and now you want me to fight your own battles for you? NO!”

The pony ran, taking three others with him. Glimmer was barged off her hooves by two other stallions who threw their rifles at Protégé and scampered through the passageway to the inner Mall.

Another collective howl rose up from the outside. Four more flares popped into being, turning the smoke-filled air inside the Mall thick with a red haze, like clouds drifting through the windows that choked and stung. More screams, more cries of panic. They fled *around* Brimstone, parting ways to not go near him as he reached out to them, bellowing to stop.

“If you run, then you have done what they want! This is the only place we can hold them!”

“Screw you, raider!”

A rock from somewhere hit him on the scarred side of his face, making the big earth pony flinch and look away.

“He’ll be another one of those inside jobs! Those slavers killed three when they escaped!”

I saw multiple weapons turn on him. Terrified ponies clutched at guns as I felt control being lost amongst the rout. Brimstone’s eye showed brief surge of anger, a frustration. His whole body tensed.

Within seconds, Glimmerlight was there, holding a hoof to his chest and staring up at him for a few worrying seconds... before Protégé swept the weapon muzzles of the slaves down.

“Stop this bickering! Brimstone is not with them! We have to hold here, we have to—”

“Too few.” Brimstone cut in, before we saw what he meant. There were perhaps fifteen ponies left in this part of the Mall around us.

Unity and I shared a look, before inching closer to one another. The raiders outside began to stamp their hooves in unison, creating a pounding drumming that thumped through my chest every two seconds, hearing them bray in between every thundering stomp. I could see them using the buildings to stay out of sight of the Enclave, as a squadron of pegasi flew down to investigate the flares before quickly returning to more pressing matters.

Protégé looked around us, before stamping in frustration, sweeping his hair out of his eyes with a hoof. His ponytail had come unclasped in the melee.

“Retreat further inside. We need to tighten the defences up with what we still have, then try to convince others. Brimstone, how long do we have?”

Brim eyed up the ponies, a bubbling rage still visible. He tore his gaze away and looked down at Protégé.

“We’d normally keep this up for five minutes, sometimes ten. Either way, we don’t have long before that lot come across and kick our arses. They aren’t going to be held off by volleys and tricks; when they come, the whole fuckin’ lot’s gonna crash into us. You understand, aye?”

“Somehow, I don’t think I do.” Protégé admitted, “Back inside, everypony! We need to block off every corridor we can and bottleneck them! We’ll use the entrance to the main slave block as the new way in, so get everypony who can’t or won’t fight to the upper levels or deeper inside if they can’t manage stairs! Go, go!”

“Come on, Murk! Unity! Both of you!” Coral grabbed me by the collar, pushing me in front before pulling Unity along behind her. Her horn was sparking with residual magic,

making the air near her feel electric after that unleashing of power she had given.

My hooves felt leaden. If I turned my back, I just knew they'd charge and get me from behind. The scars on my body felt heated. Across my neck and torso, where I had nightmarish wounds from Wildcard before that came within a hair's breadth of killing me. They were coming again. He was coming again.

Outside, the stomping began to get faster. I closed my eyes as I was led in further.

"Maybe less than five minutes." Brimstone rumbled, pushing us ahead.

"Heads up!"

A horrendous whine began to pick up, building in volume and accompanied by sharp detonations and rushing air. I saw Protégé look up through the open roof of the shop plaza and widen his eyes. Screaming a warning, he grabbed me and threw both of us into a shop cell to land harshly on our sides, mere seconds before an Enclave skyship slammed belly first into the top of the Mall at high speed.

The entire building buckled to the side under the impact with a sound so great that it almost seemed to form an audible void. I saw a main supporting pillar crack down the middle. Metal sheared and ripped, a shrieking noise that cut through my ears like a knife as the enormous vehicle crushed stone and tore roofing off.

I saw the whole plaza darken as the hole in the roof was covered by the ship, then suddenly light up again as it kept going and tumbled over the roof and off the opposite side of the building. Smoke and fire descended in its wake, with razor sharp slivers of metal pelting down on the cowering ponies. Dangerous creaks gave way to half of the uppermost floor collapsing down into a tirade of rubble in the plaza. Some balconies tumbled and shattered on the floors below as the Mall resettled on its foundations.

Outside, the sound of rabid cheering could be heard.

Coughing at the incessant dust clouds being kicked up, I tried to get up and simply fell on the spot as my limbs gave way. My legs felt like rubber, my core muscles felt twisted and painful. Only my wings seemed to move, fluttering stiffly. Stronger hooves wrapped around me and pulled me up; Protégé supporting me on his shoulders.

"Murky, are you hurt!?" He looked concerned.

"N-no... feel so sore all over." I coughed the words out, digging for my canteen and trying to take a shaky sip. The RadAway made me gag, but I had to take every chance I could get right now.

Protégé helped me limp out of the shop cell, into the now wide open plaza. Any remaining roof cover was gone. After the strafing run and that crash, the two top floors were a devastated ruin that was still falling around us every few seconds.

"Keep pushing forward, Murky." He turned his head skywards, following a lethal dogfight between three griffons and one desperate Enclave trooper, "This war isn't anywhere close to being finished."

What!? We'd been going for the better part of a day or something, right? How could there be more fighting? My eyes found the lines of wounded against the far wall, covered in blankets to keep dust out of the wounds that hadn't yet been bandaged. I could hear their cries, their pleading to help them first. Just one brave soul was trying to fight Weathervane away from him, telling the stallion to help the one beside him. Stretcher bearers were doing

their best, augmented by those whose telekinesis was powerful enough to lift the wounded, but getting them all upstairs to the aid station was proving to be slow.

Even now, above the din, the stomping got quicker, beginning to lose its cohesion as the bloodlust overcame the raiders. The stomps became a heartbeat, a rising pace. Thump. Thump. Thumpthump. Thumpthump.

Instinctively, I felt myself grip Protégé a little tighter. He held me up and shouted for more ponies to help the wounded, then his head turned to me.

“Murky?”

“I... I don't know, I just... the raiders. I've seen this in orbs and-and... oh-oh-oh...”

He turned to me and gripped my face with a hoof. “Murky, you're hyperventilating. Take a deep breath, slowly.”

I tried. I really tried, but my throat constricted and I felt my eyes roll back for a moment. Everything blurred as I fumbled for my canteen and coughed into it, letting the lukewarm thick fluid run down my throat again.

“Raiders! It's like before only... only bigger, they hurt me and-and the village and torture and a gun to my head and...”

Gradually, I pulled my breathing under control; and the feeling of somepony else holding onto me kept me upright. Something exploded on the side of the Mall, blowing dust across us all as something far away crumbled and fell, but I found his crimson eyes staring directly at me, not wavering.

“Murky, I know, and I won't let that happen to us again. I won't.”

“If-if they...”

I felt him hold me, pulling me in until I was pressed against his shoulder and chest with a firm grip.

“I will not let them have us for such a fate once again. No matter what I need to do to ensure it.”

It took me a second to catch up with what that truly meant. I wasn't sure what felt scarier, that such a thing was even necessary to contemplate or that it actually reassured me a little.

“Th-thank you.”

His hoof patted my back, before letting me stand up on my own.

“Now, come, we only have a couple of minutes before they charge and I need you to do what you do best. Scurry around and acquire everything you can that is lying loose or discarded. Lots of slavers died in here, take it all to the main thoroughfare to be hoofed out. If it even has one bullet, we want it.”

“Y-yes. Okay. Okay! I'll go!”

“And Murky?”

I stopped, turning around as he loaded a fresh round into the cylinder of his revolver. He looked tired, his clothing torn and body coated in dirt and dust, but he stood with wide hooves to keep his own battered body going.

“Equestria's waiting for us out there. Remember what comes after this and it'll keep you alive.”

“I'll... I'll hold you to a free lunch in the treehouse you showed me.”

He smirked, “That's the spirit. Keep trotting. One hoof then the other. We're too close to lie down now, Murky. Both of us. We're almost there.”

We both ducked as, from above, I heard raised voices and a burst of gunfire as a curious pegasus got too close to the open roof. Protégé turned toward it as we saw the black-

armoured figure spiral and crash into the balcony above our heads at a speed that belied them still being alive. Horrified screams began to emerge from those who dove out of the dead trooper's way.

"Go, Murky. I'll have to try and rally them together. We're on a knife edge and they could come in any second. Got to get them defending this doorway down here in the plaza. They don't want to listen to Brimstone."

Great. Just great, why couldn't they see who he was now? He was different! I knew that he had terrified me before I shared adventures with him, but I just wished they could see what I knew.

"Good luck." I muttered, not knowing what else to say.

Protégé galloped off to the stairwell, shouting over his shoulder.

"I shall make you another apple stew if you come over to my home after all this. Just look forward to that!"

I stood a little agape as he pushed the joke out, forced a smile, and then headed out of sight. He was as exhausted as any, but still pushing to keep me safe, to keep others fighting, to try for levity. Succeeding or failing, he took the role to inspire and lead.

Against the background of an imminent raider onslaught, I found myself fighting to even remember the same stallion who once spoke in rehearsed lines from his master, the one who had once given me an apple stew the very first time we met.

Protégé had been right. During my tired efforts to find every little bullet, grenade, and abandoned weapon I could, I saw ponies bickering over who got what. Fear was turning to anger as the stomping and the howling went on and on. Two mares half-wrestled over a weapon that still had rounds left before they turned and chased me from the room when they saw me carrying a saddlebag full of weaponry. I saw Sunny have to bodily throw a stallion to the ground to quell his outraged flailing hooves at goodness knew what reason. The word 'Dragon' whipped around a lot.

Occasionally, I stole a glance outside and saw the far buildings lighting up with fire barrels being hurled from them, creating small pillars of smoke that gave a demonic visage to the painted warriors behind it, who waited for the time to leave their covered roofs, rooms, and scrap-built rain covers to come for us. The Mall was becoming disorganised in its panic, and more than once I overheard Protégé fighting for order and to get ponies into better places, as directed by Brimstone. Protégé had to relay the tactics, for the old raider had become something of a pariah to most of the slaves.

Raised voices were not uncommon to hear as I made my way around the Mall. However, the raised voices I heard on my return to the armoury were different, as I felt a sinking worry set in when coming around the corner to witness two of my dearest friends in bitter argument.

"Here? Here of all places, of all times, is when you decide to mess around like some teenage brat?"

Coral Eve stood amongst a throng of stunned ponies in a circle, just outside the armoury doors. She was striding in a half-circle, looking down at somepony. In the background, I could see the enormous figure of Mister Peace watching the events with a perplexed looking private on his large screen.

Moving closer, nearer to the robotic bodyguard, I saw more clearly the target of her bile. Glimmerlight.

Coral was pointing a hoof accusingly at my sister. "We've got raiders about to come and try to murder us, just like before, and all you can think about is trying to hook up somepony? Do you even *think* before you do things, Glimmerlight?"

The pink-maned unicorn shrank back, looking hurt, before putting a hoof over a clearly terrified mare.

"For fuck's sake, Coral!" she barked, "She was terrified! I was just making a joke to—"

"Oh, sure you were! You think I don't know you? That I don't know every one of your little come-ons? We were living close enough for me to watch you do it, every single time! Every single pony you weaselled your charms into just to *use* them for your own gratification! Getting one-nighters to avoid any sense of responsibility to anything. You'd rather get off than work on the defences?"

"Hey, wait a—"

"Shut up, you-you shameless mare!"

Coral's voice cracked, bitterness turned to outright anger.

"We're about to fight for our lives against a raider clan. The same raider clan *you* brought down on us because you've got no damned self-respect and just *had* to go after some 'diamond in the rough', because he responded to your little 'jokes' and oh-so-innocent 'just saying' little lines. Yet here you are trying it out on another vulnerable mare, wanting a quick little toss in a cell before the likely *end*!"

Coral's face contorted, before looking down at the pink and purple mare, a few years younger than Glimmer.

"This is what she *does*. That's all she's ever been and I've still seen it in here! Glimmerlight, your *looseness* cost lives in the past and now you're still happy to be an easy ride for anypony needing to let off some steam? Five times I've seen you in here with somepony, did she tell you that one, love? How many of them do you still hang around with, huh? How many of them do you even know anything about any more? Or where they are? You're still just that young hormone-driven mare who came out a sterile bunker on a bridge! You don't care!"

"I do!" Glimmer snapped, but Coral's face came quickly to hers, nose-to-nose.

"You *don't*! You never have! You should be trying to hand out ammunition, trying to help the wounded up, or doing *anything* conducive to helping us live through this! But here you are, telling a mare you've only just met that she's beautiful and would be 'worth anypony who saw her'. You're trying to butter her up!"

My sister's face looked strained, her eyes scrunching up a little, "Coral. I... I know I—"

"Oh, I *know* you! How many times have I had to come drag you back from somewhere after you got a ride and passed out afterwards? How many times did I hear you in that cell? Was it *just* five? Do you have any shame? Any shame at all? Any semblance of self-respect for your own body!? Do you have any sense of *responsibility* at all? Haven't you learned *anything* from all this? Some of us are fighting for our children here and doing every little thing we can! You? You're just searching to get your next lay, nothing more than acting like you always do! Like—"

Glimmer leaned in and screamed back, "Like *what*?"

Coral roared back, "Like *some cheap harlot*!"

The sound of Glimmer's hoof impacting on Coral's cheek seemed to overpower all the sounds of war, and leave a horrible, pregnant silence.

Quickly, most of the crowd, Mister Peace included, started to back off at the mere sight of Coral Eve's horn sparking, her face twisting into utter rage. I could only stare, open-mouthed and frozen.

"How dare you." Glimmer ignored the magical buildup, her head down. Small wet drops were forming below her hung head, as tears dripped to the dusty concrete. "How... dare you!"

Then, suddenly, she looked up with welling eyes and a shaking mouth to look directly at Coral, stepping forward.

"How *dare* you speak of me like that! After... after *all* this. After all the pain and... and the sickness and journeys. All the blood, sweat, and tears we've all come through for this, after how much I've *endured* and done for *you*, for your *son*, and for *everypony we know*, you *still* say that? You still let yourself be the angry and bitter mare who refuses to just give up her grudge?"

Her teeth were bared as she leaned toward Coral. Then, sharply, she stood up tall and held her head high.

"You know, I'd actually been looking for you. I was looking for you to tell you something. Instead, you call me *that* in front of everypony else."

Her jaw quivered, and I saw her eyes strive to keep more tears from falling.

"That hurts. 'Cos, yeah, there's a lot you could say about me. A lot wrong with me. A lot of things I've done I might regret. A lot of times, especially before I came here, that maybe I... I was running away too much. Into orbs. Into pleasure. Looking for any way to escape thinking about the bad things. Being young and stupid in the wastes after being cooped up in a metal box all my life, what do you want from me?"

Her face hardened, and to my astonishment, a smile formed.

"You know what, though? I don't need your approval. If I *want* to find somepony willing and have an hour or two of relief from being a slave in this hell city, I'm going to do that. Excuse me for wanting a brief moment of feeling like I'm actually *alive*! But here? No, I wasn't trying to get this poor mare in a bed, I was trying to comfort her with a compliment! You think I'm that exploitative?"

She never gave Coral a chance to answer, jabbing her hoof forward to punctuate her words.

"Not a single time have I forced anypony into anything. They *wanted* that respite, and you better believe I've turned down enough of 'em if it wasn't right."

She pointed her hoof at Coral directly.

"So who. The hell. Are you? To dare try to shame me for being a grown mare? It's my life to lead, and I won't ever let you, or anypony else, try to tell me what is right or wrong by *your* standards because it's *none of your fucking business*!"

My sister paused, breathing hard. I could see she was sweating, shivering with worry and emotional exhaustion. Coral Eve stood impassive, yet she never had the chance to speak, for Glimmer continued. Only this time she was quiet; her throat rough.

"Like I said, I was coming to tell you that I've seen everything that happened back then. I came to tell you that I was sorry. I came to ask for your forgiveness because it was my fault that our village died. I watched the orbs. I always hoped it wasn't really me and that there was some mistake, but no. I had to live up to my failing and see that you were right. I had to watch it happen!" Her voice turned stronger once more, "And I did it because I wanted to make things better between us!"

She stumbled, making me start to try and move toward her, but a brief sideways look from Glimmer made me pause. She caught her balance, standing up again with wet eyes.

"But there was more; I saw that Diamond was, in the end, a good pony. He screwed up. Just like I did. He only had mere minutes to *be* a good pony before that rainbow-haired psycho killed him, but that's what counts. I saw that it doesn't matter what we were before. Look at us all, Coral. Raiders, reckless youngsters, ponies with tragic losses, and born slaves; we all came from somewhere that maybe we're not happy with, or proud of, but he was the first to really show me that we can turn it around."

She gestured around.

"We're all sick, hungry, and wounded. Many of us won't survive the next hour. There's raiders surrounding us, a war above us, slavers trapping us inside, and nightmares beneath us! Against all that, it doesn't *matter* who we were, because this is where we show how far we've come! So, you know what?"

She reached out with her magic, ripping something off the ground from below its canvas cover, revealing a weapon I recognised with a sudden shock to my memory.

Rough Diamond's hunting rifle floated in front of her. It bore modifications; a new set of sights were bolted on, an extra strip of rounds cradled on the side of the stock, and new clasps on the wooden framework to hold the old and heavy rifle's barrel true. On the rack of bullets, I saw one with a glowing azure-blue tip.

"I'm just the riotous ranger initiate. So I did what I was taught; how to piece a rifle, his rifle, back together. Shoulda' known it'd be here, this is where all the stuff Brim's Clan had was brought, like his armour. He'd want this."

Her magic slammed a rack of rounds into the rifle and drew the cover shut, before she turned and marched toward her old friend.

"I can't promise you anything. But I can say I'm sorry, and then I can try to beat them this time around. I've tried everything I can to earn your respect. I dropped an addiction. I became a big sister who learned to be responsible. I've been beaten, diseased, stabbed, and shot trying to do the right thing all this time, putting my life in front of others and doing most of the planning in an escape that I even factored your son into! I have lived a hell and walked through fire to get us out of this fucking city! So you know what?"

Glimmer's face stiffened.

"If after all this, when we're outside that wall, that still isn't enough for you to forgive me? Then to hell with you!"

The two mares stood inches apart, eyes locked. For a horrible moment, I thought Coral Eve was going to explode, as her horn pulsed and sparked. No pony, *no pony* would normally dare cross her so bluntly. Yet she simply stood there, intense and without reaction.

"You know, Glimmerlight..."

Coral's voice was quiet and brimmed with restrained emotion, as she took a few steps forward, moving slightly to the side to pass around my sister.

"You've done some growing up."

The older mare didn't smile, yet I could have sworn I saw her mouth twitch a little upwards. Her horn gradually dimmed and the raw magic faded from its tip as she put a hoof to her struck cheek and, without a word more, turned and trotted away. Ahead of her, the entire crowd hastily parted to allow her to pass. She looked rather deep in thought.

My sister stood and watched her old friend go, before slumping and quickly sitting down, looking emotionally exhausted.

Only when I knew she felt my hoof resting on her back did I see her mouth slowly turn upward a little, as she reached over to lightly ruffle my mane and pull me against her shoulder.

"Egads, I find these natives are quite the incessant bearers of volume. Surely in excess of Equestrian law, are they not? I wish to deliver a notice of eviction to them. From life!"

Mister Peace was looking down the corridor outside the armoury toward the outer windows with a dress uniformed officer on his screen. His metal clawed 'hands' flexed and whirred impatiently. Outside, the stomping was persistent and unordered, like rain on a small tent above your head. It pounded into your brain and set every nerve alight.

Protégé turned one pupil to his eyepiece. "How long has it been? Must be coming up on ten minutes now by my estimate."

"Any second. Those ponies getting the wounded up to the aid station better hurry." Brimstone grunted, "Listen, the big yin's leading them, aye? Kill him and Wildcard. Just like with Barb, kill the leaders and they'll break. Was always the way. We became their focal point, their demons to lead them. Their gods. Kill the god, you kill their will."

"I always wanted to destroy a god." Mister Peace reflected with a wistful tone.

Glimmerlight tightened a screw on the side of Diamond's rifle. "Give me one chance and I'll be putting that white bastard down. With all he's done to me, it'd be a pleasure. Of course, if anyone happens to blow his brains out first, I'll bake you a cake."

A few ponies looked confused, surprised, even. My sister rolled her eyes.

"Hey, who do you think baked Murky's? I told you all enough times. I know lots of little things. As for the big guy," Glimmer grinned deviously, "guess you want your own revenge shot at him, eh, Brim?"

Across the circle of ponies, I saw Brimstone narrow his eyes, then simply look away.

Glimmer gave me the (surprisingly heavy) rifle to hold as she got up.

"Brim?"

The big raider looked out over the internal balcony down toward the fountain area as the sound grew to a savage climax. Protégé was already giving out orders to the others to get everypony ready for a storming any moment now. He spoke to Blunderbuck, hearing about progress on the bomb. More time was needed. Always more time.

Brimstone's face could have been carved from stone.

"If he comes, I will do battle with him. He will come, so thus I will go to war." His low voice rumbled and ground the words out through his twisted jawline. The scarring from the bar mine rippled and shifted in unhealthy ways.

"And you'll kick his ass. So what?" Glimmer put her hooves on the railing beside him.

I joined them, standing on the other side of Brimstone from Glimmer. We were a trio; I was going to be here for any soul searching he needed.

Instead, he just grinned without any semblance of true humour, "You believe that, Glim. You look at me and see a pony you believe a hero. The others around here don't see that. They're just waiting for me to turn to join Brutus. I'm not a hero to them. They're right. I'm not a—"

"Scuse me but you frikkin' are."

"Uh-huh," I added.

Brimstone turned his head to let his single eye glance at us both.

"Maybe I could have been. Once. Now? I can but try. Aye, I will try. But Brutus is an engine of destruction, Glim. He is the Warlord. I fought him and he put me down in the worst challenge I have ever experienced. I am old, Glim. My body is sick from Fillydelphia. It is barely healed from all we have endured. Yet even if it were not carrying these scars, I am past my peak. I am not the beast I once was. Enough to break any pony who dares come to me, aye. Enough to fight Brutus?"

His voice turned regretful, "Twenty years ago, maybe. I see everything he does. I think fast enough, react fast enough. He has tells that I see before he strikes and he fights off balance. I *feel* like I can beat him in my head and in my heart, yet this ageing body lacks the speed, the strength, and the stamina to do it. It is frustrating."

I heard the sickening crunch of his teeth grinding. The balcony's guardrail slowly bent beneath his dinner-plate-sized hoof. Below us, I could see ponies still getting the wounded upstairs. Unity was among them, dutiful as ever, unwilling to sit still.

"Well then..." Glimmer tapped her chin with a hoof, toying with something in her magic. It looked like some sort of power source, glowing blue with a magical sparkle. "... what if I told you I had an idea to get you an edge up on—"

All sound stopped and was replaced by one call.

The stomping ended.

The raiders *howled*.

Then, even deep inside the Mall, I heard them charge.

A hunting call drove through the corridors, winding and twisting down each hallway and echoing off every shopfront in the plaza. That keening and haunting cry for blood struck to my very core and sent a shivering discomfort to every joint and muscle in my body.

"Everypony, go, GO!" Protégé waved off behind me, as ponies rushed off to their positions, or what positions we could hope to have.

"The wounded aren't all upstairs yet!" somepony cried out from the balcony.

"Help them! *Help them!*"

"Brim, come with me!" Glimmer pulled at his hoof, tucking that object into her saddlebag.

Protégé cut in, revolver held ready as the first shots started to break out in the background. "Glimmerlight, we need Brimstone for—"

"I need him. No time to explain; just hold em off, got a plan. Come on, Brim!"

She ran off into the armoury with the big earth pony behind her. Her voice picked up as she shouted to Blunderbuck, but then the door closed to protect the armoury again.

Protégé galloped forward, "Everypony, to the windows, get as many as you can before they hit! Come on!"

We galloped hard around the plaza, as ponies got back up and wearily took their weapons onto saddles and in magic once more, their haste dulled with a despondent fear. They joined us as we neared the outside windows.

Clouds had descended on Fillydelphia, bringing cover to the Enclave and making everything feel stuffed under a low roof. The dark smog mixed with it, lighting up with flashing auras of green, purple, and blue of hidden battles within it, as fires sent it whirling

nearer the surface. Lightning cracked, making me stand bolt upright with my wings flared, as some enormous weapon flashed from the clouds and cut a chimney stack in two before slugging the side of a factory. Following the melting walls, past the furious shellfire from the rooftops, and the madness of small arms fire to defend the batteries, I found the raiders at the very bottom of the scene, charging from the skeletal remains of flash-fired buildings toward us.

They came like a wave. Disordered and yet with one purpose. Their line spread to either side, sometimes only one pony deep, but surrounding the whole Mall. Huge brutes lumbered and built their unstoppable momentum, crushing the smaller ones beneath them in their berserk fury. Lithe hunters bounded and raised their long rifles to take pot shots. Snarling hounds flew ahead of all but one raider. At the front, like a battering ram, came the new Warlord. Big Brutus.

“Open fire! Open fire! Hit them with anything you have!” Protégé screamed, immediately blasting his revolver out the window.

Resistance drove the hearts of those around, who now saw only the choice to fight or die. Ponies, myself included, rushed to the lips of the windows and searched for any target. I had no idea if *Rarity's Grace* could even reach that far, but I sighted my little reticle on a gangly purple stallion with half his mane shorn off and pulled the trigger again and again. The sound of my small weapon was drowned out by Protégé's much larger one. To my right, three ponies had found discarded combat rifles and snapped off powerful shots. To my left, Sunny and the old gamekeeper from before traded shots in time. Above us, I heard the tripod machine gun kick up and stutter out its painful retort.

Raiders collapsed. I saw three snap backward, spinning in the air from their own momentum. The tripod gun bracketed a near-Brim-size hulk of a raider, and tore chunks of flesh from his frame until he skidded to a halt. Beside him, a powerful shot from the left tore the forehead from a Hunter who had been aiming at the tripod's gun crew.

They weren't stopping. The soldiers had hesitated when we shot at them. The Bloodletter's weren't. They numbered less than the small army we'd faced before, but they charged us with no care in the world for risk. Brim had been right. They kept coming, kept following the electronic scream of their new leader, who shrugged off bullets that either pinged from his cybernetic implants or sunk into him without visible effect. Numerous ponies fired at him, but so long as he kept running, they kept following.

“Hit them! *Hit them!*”

More Raiders ploughed down into the mud. I saw two of them still crawling, cursing us with rage as they ignored shattered limbs on drug-fuelled manias to keep coming for us. Wildcard's type, they never stopped. A blue explosion of energy marked one of Glimmer's traps scything and melting through three. Protégé shot another hunter. Two hounds whined and fell. A few fell into the ditch of the slave camp.

They kept coming.

My heart began to beat faster as I saw Big Brutus speed up. His legs powered like pistons, as his unending roar grew to a horrific pitch, and he braced his shoulder to ram the barred doorway, passing under us into the defenceless entranceway. He was going to crash right into the plaza!

Then I saw it in my mind.

Below us, I could see ponies still getting the wounded upstairs. Unity was among them, dutiful as ever, unwilling to sit still.

I felt a panic I had never known before. A cold and restless worry.

Then I ran. I galloped so hard my injured body flared in sharp pains as long-battered joints were pushed beyond what they should be. I ran back into the Mall, the short distance to the plaza, and looked down into it.

They didn't know. They didn't know they had mere seconds! I could see the last of the wounded being moved, but there were still the mass ranks of the slaves who couldn't fight waiting to be moved trapped down there. Ponies were trying to block the door with all the furniture they could find, including our cell's old sofa, but I knew the power of Big Brutus.

My eyes caught Unity amongst them, about twenty feet from the door.

"UNITY! GET OUT OF THE PLAZA! *GET OUT!*"

My voice turned to a shriek as I hammered the balcony edge and wailed down to her.

"GET OUT! GET OUT! PLEASE GET OUT!"

Her head turned, looking for me from down there. I didn't think she saw me, but she heard me. Her hooves grabbed those around her, hastening ponies to the stairs. Very quickly, order began to break down. Ponies started to rush and push. They could hear the same as me, and they fought to be the first up and out of the way of the incoming raiders. The queue was going nowhere, a crush of bodies blocking the single thin door. The guards downstairs began to drop into cover and pointed what seemed like a meagre amount of fire on the door, and readied the trigger for the mines and explosives around it. Exposed near the fountain, I saw Unity crying at them to help get the slaves away, but they were frozen in their own fear. I heard panic in her voice, and that hurt me deeply.

From below me, I could hear the *thud thud thud* of cloven hooves.

From my level, I heard Protégé shout that they were in the entranceway behind their leader.

I made ready to fly down and grapple her out of there, before I looked to the side and saw the most incredible sight. Dutiful, ever reliable, menacing; Mister Peace stood beside me.

"You have the look of one who needs rough ponies to stand in their stead. You have need?"

"YES! Yes!" I waved my hooves, **"They're going to get trapped and massacred! Please, help them! Stop Brutus! You can destroy anything!"**

"OH, THAT I CAN, MY BELOVED MINISTRY MARE! YES, MA'AM!"

Mister Peace saluted with his right arm sharply. Then his left. Then both at the same time. Then finally, he turned and hurled his not inconsiderable bulk over the balcony edge.

"TALLY HO!"

He landed with a hard crunch on the flooring, his wheel sinking on its suspension before springing up when he turned and levelled his fearsome arsenal at the doorway.

Not seconds after, Brutus hit it.

We had hoped it would last a few seconds at least. Hold them up so we could drop grenades down the hole Unity and I had fallen through. It had been a desperate little plan, yet even reinforced with sheet steel stolen from a mill, the cage door to the plaza that had so often been a barrier to myself or even Brimstone in the past did nothing to stop him.

The door, the surrounding barricade, and three feet of the wall to either side came crushing inwards, with a sound not unlike that of the Enclave's siege weaponry striking the ground. I saw rock fly and spin in the air, before the fearsome silhouette of an enhanced minotaur came surging through, the wreckage forming a second skin around him as his

body became the mould for the collision.

Then, the roaring began again. Clipped, projected through small audio-outlets on his neck, a digital rasp filled the plaza and drowned the wailing of defenceless ponies. This close, the scale of him made me fight the urge to wet the floor beneath me as he strode through the detonations of mines that only gave him a grand pyrotechnic display to his entrance. To either side of him, raiders poured through and jeered as they saw their prey, before the first group were torn apart by the explosives and their remains trampled by the second.

“Breaking and entering! A summary execution it shall be, then I shall report this to your parole officer so that he may know this for your next meeting!”

Mister Peace opened fire. The missiles in his shoulders, his quad-energy blaster, and gatling cannon levelled their devastating volley into the raiders. I saw a half-dozen crumble, evaporate, or explode, holding back the tide. Other ponies joined in and fired from the balconies, or from behind the fountain to level everything they had at the raiders and their leader. A dozen raiders dropped, then twenty, falling over one another as those behind Peace fought to get up the stairs or flee back into the rooms on the ground floor to hide.

Big Brutus powered through the firestorm, leading Mister Peace to target him. Somepony screamed to put everything on the beast.

“Begone, machine!” The minotaur roared, his massive claws acting like a riot shield in front of his body. They glowed hot white as Peace’s energy weapon slashed onto them, before the canny robot shot low and drove bullets into the minotaur’s legs.

Big Brutus fell. The flesh on his limbs seared, popped, and tore. Peace unleashed two missiles that detonated on the floor either side of Brutus and sent him stumbling and wavering before toppling with a heavy thud. His legs were shredded...

...and then immediately started working again.

Before my eyes, I saw the flesh re-knitting. I saw metallic implants below the surface still functioning and muscles renewing themselves around bones as though from a powerful healing potion. It finally clicked to me. Brutus’ back was covered in vials. Glass tubes and pipes implanted across his enormous shoulders and spine, filled with magical healing potions and other fouler substances and then sheathed in metal.

He wasn’t stopping. He was healing perpetually. Like his roaring, he had no end to his motion once he had been unleashed.

Driving a claw into the ground as leverage, the minotaur launched forward, and I didn’t find the time to scream before one of those enormous claws crashed into Mister Peace with enough force to split a brick wall through the middle. The screen that so displayed his personalities shattered, before the second claw slammed down atop his chassis. Brutus stood tall above the robot and drove the machine into the ground. With a grasp in both of his savage cutting implements, he lifted the ton weight machine like a foal, and hurled him across the plaza into the pillar below me.

The whole balcony I stood on quivered and cracked, making me scream and leap off it before the whole thing dropped away atop Peace, enormous chunks of concrete smashing on his chassis around the buckled and broken front.

Mister Peace lay still, the display background of his broken screen cycling endlessly through a dozen faces and his limbs moving only in short spurts. My mouth hung open. Was... was he...

Simply malfunctioning or worse, it didn’t matter. Mister Peace was out of the fight before it had even started, and Brutus had a clear path to the slaves.

The Warlord of the Bloodletters stared at his fallen adversary, threw back his claws, and roared to the open roof, bellowing at the aerial war lighting the interior of the Mall, as his raiders flooded around him into the screaming slaves ahead of them. Those defending them gaped and ran. I lost track of Unity in the madness.

One raider, wielding a crooked glaive, leaped ahead of the pack. A skeletal looking slave fell and held their hooves up, before being coated in the raider's brains. The sharp 'blam' sound of Protégé's revolver whipped pain through my ears as he took aim and fired shot after shot at those closest to the slaves. Others from the upper levels joined him, picking off raider after raider, but it was never going to be enough. Everypony began focusing on Brutus, but for every staggering step he took under the fire, he was being an enduring distraction, letting the Bloodletters gain ground.

Our greatest weapon, the monumentally powerful Mister Peace, was gone. There was no one left to stop them reaching the panicked crowd trying to get away. I felt myself wanting to cry for *someone* to appear to stop this, to make it not happen, but there were none.

Slavering, bleeding, and frenzied beasts piled into those slaves too slow or too hurt to flee the plaza. I saw the weapons rise and felt my throat hurt from a scream I'd never even heard myself start when those weapons fell.

I had to look away, trying to ignore the sounds.

"Murky! Murky, snap out of it! Snap out of it or we're dead!"

Protégé struck me with a hoof, then again as I didn't respond. I was shivering, fighting every urge to regress to what I'd once been. I felt the ground shake. I could smell the city on fire. Roaring engines and whip cracks of energy weapons filled my ears in the distance, overlaid by the haunting battle chants of raiders. Fillydelphia was a bloodbath, and I was stuck within it.

I'd made so much progress. I'd actually felt a little proud of myself. This was making me feel tiny again.

Worst of all were the agonised pleas for help and mercy that were being cut short in horrified squeals from below in the plaza. I could see ponies surging out of the stairwell's door onto our level and fleeing for the aid station, but so many were trapped at the back on the ground floor.

"MURKY!"

He bodily pulled me up and threw me behind him, as he raised and fired three shots into the wiry raider raising a sawn-off shotgun in his mouth. Falling against the side of the balcony, the shotgun's buckshot went wild and skittered off the marble flooring in a mad cluster of lethal shards.

I caught a grim sight of the now-streaked floor on the ground level. Raiders surged into all the cells, as I heard ponies run from them, try to fight back or be dragged out of hiding spots. Brutus eviscerated anypony left on the ground floor, moving amongst them like a colossal god brought to earth. Those claws would flash out, grab, and sickeningly snip a body in two cleanly with such gruesome results that my stomach clenched, and my eyes watered with fear.

Behind the body of the raider Protégé had put down, I could see down the large expanse of the upper plaza to the outer windows, where grappling hooks now rested behind dead

ponies who had been trying to hold that area off. One by one, raiders were climbing it with small pulleys and catches on their hooves. Those pulling themselves into the building sneered at the two of us down the corridor from them, before charging. The upper levels weren't safe anymore, they were coming from everywhere.

Protégé aimed and shot three more times, emptying his revolver's cylinder before the snarling raiders crashed into him hard enough that they flipped and rolled four feet backward.

The scholarly unicorn was bowled over, the radio and revolver he carried going skittering across the floor. The latter came to my hooves, where I quickly stuffed it into a pocket on my fleece and went to help him, galloping to leap on their backs. Before I could land, a huge weight barrelled into me instead. I smelled dampness and foul odours as cracked hooves lashed and struck down at me. I screamed, feeling myself skidding over the pebbles lying on the once smooth floor with a sharp welt on my forehead that started to throb immediately.

Behind my assailant, one of the raiders lifted and slammed into the wall hard enough to snap his neck around a pillar corner. Coral Eve skidded out from the direction of the old slaver offices, her horn lighting the thick smoke around the Mall. I heard her join the battle in a series of crashes and erupting magic.

Looking up, I saw the raider attacking me. One of Wildcard's drug-addled hunters. Behind him, Coral barrelled into one of the two trying to stave in Protégé's head with a forge hammer. I caught only the briefest sight before the raider dove upon me. My hooves came up in terror, before his weight crushed the wind out of me and made my ribcage buckle with a shot of pain across my body. The edge of a hoof stood on my neck and I felt my throat constrict.

"Aaah! Get off! *Please!* You-you're..."

"AH KNOW!" The thick accent belched forth, dribbling saliva down onto my muzzle as I tried to get the weight off me. Any second I expected a knife to the gut and the piercing hot pain to begin. A hoof shoved my head, and I found myself right at the edge of the balcony I had once been kicked from by Shackles. Squealing, trying to resist, I felt my head pushed right over it, the stone lip of the edge digging into the back of my neck, as I felt the bones strain. With a panic, I realised he was going to snap my neck over the stone edge. My hooves flailed, I cried out, and I only heard him laughing in return as he started to put his weight into it, and my whole neck started to feel ready to give.

I had to shut my eyes from the pain, that horrible feeling that the *snap* was coming. My hooves weakly flopped at his face as I swore I heard the bones grind and start to force further.

With the last of my strength, I stopped resisting and threw myself backwards. So committed, the psychotic came with me as his pushing left him without any traction to pull back. The pair of us tumbled, as I spun and threw my wings out. I felt the painful, stiff stretch in their still newly healed joints as the air caught me, and I tried to kick the raider off with a frantic barrage of little hoof strikes to his head.

I wasn't going to make it to a balcony, we were too low! The raider was dragging me down in irregular little gliding circles, clawing at my legs and screaming up at me. I tried to get my grapple ready, but the raider was holding onto the saddle! We were falling and—

A build up of pressure was the briefest warning I got. Crying out, I felt a harsh and sudden *impact* as an invisible force blasted the smoke around me and propelled me upwards

in a juddering shot that hurt every joint in my body and shook my teeth to the gums. The entirely confused raider began falling, thrown free and mouthing the words, 'What the fu —', before his head split on the stone. My dizzied mind caught up with just what had happened.

Coral Eve's magic had blasted me higher!

"FLY!" Coral's voice reached my ears.

Aching, feeling like my ribs had been bruised by Coral's magic, I leaned my head down and aimed for the upper levels again, using the extra height she'd given me to try and make it! Three shots stitched the wall near me, making me squeal and bank away before I dove toward an old information booth where a raider on the ground was atop a slave with a raised piece of rubble in his hooves.

Adjusting my dive with a raised wing, I cried out as I came in at high speed, feeling the wind rushing by my ears as I collided with the raider and immediately yelped in pain as my skull hit something hard. Our heads had collided on the impact, sending both of us tumbling and rolling back down the plaza, me finding myself wrapped around the legs of a bench to stop my slide.

Head hurting, seeing double, I fought to get away from the mangy figure, as a pony I didn't know galloped up to point a shotgun into the raider's mouth and pull the trigger.

The wet splatter on the side of my head was warm as my hearing become a long ringing tone from the blast of the weapon.

I staggered away as the ponies ran on, forgetting me entirely as raiders emerged from behind racks of musty clothing. I tried to pick up pace, swallowing to try and get my hearing back but simply finding my throat bone dry and hurting when I willed it to do anything. Falling on the bench, I fought to keep my balance as I saw what was happening around me.

There were no battlelines. On the opposite side of the Mall, over the top of the fallen ground level, I could see Protégé already firing down the plaza into the same outlet we had once been held in by Barb. Raiders were swarming in small packs, as I saw one group slashing a screaming slave beneath them apart with serrated hoof-claws. Coral Eve was sheltering a pony whose legs had been shot out as she sent two raiders hurtling over the balcony edge. I saw Brutus demolish a shop front to reach scurrying ponies hiding within. One was grabbed by those claws and crushed into ruin with a gurgling cry before the remains fell from Brutus' grip. I could hear Protégé's radio screeching with pleas for help. Small groups fought for survival on every level, running or killing or barricading or dragging their wounded friends. A hundred small skirmishes, melding into one another. A great panic, herded by maniacal killers that overran positions through simply not caring if they lived or died.

Old corridors were gone, roofs were collapsed, and the plaza was becoming gradually more open as the building slowly fell apart from the top downwards. The fountain at the middle stood like the centre of a great arena with how it had all opened up, affording me the view of savagery on an incredible scale.

The radio in my pocket fizzed.

"Hello! Hello, Protégé are you still there? PLEASE! Please someone be hearing this!"

There was no time to listen. I stood where Barb and Brimstone had once shared a brief duel before the final showdown with the shadowy raider, and now three other more brutish types spotted me standing alone after their own prey had fled. One had a hound chained to

his neck that fought and strained to get at the pony smaller than it.

With a sudden grin, the raider popped the lock on the chain.

Foaming at the mouth, the rabid animal tore toward me and I could do nothing but turn and madly gallop for all I was worth the way the others had gone.

I ran away from the booth, around the corner to pass by shop cell after shop cell as the barks and calls from behind me grew closer. Striving to keep my eyes open, dreading the feeling of a sudden trip, I let my legs use every bit of strength their little muscles could manage. A series of weaving shops, back rooms, collapsed tunnels, and balcony areas passed by me as I ducked smashed barricades and leapt burning benches from bottles of firefuel the raiders were hurling as they came. I skidded and veered as I nearly ran into a raider who turned toward me. I could see the dribbling blood from a smashed-in mouth, the pony who had done it dead at his hooves. I was already gone before he could gurgle a warcry at me.

"Please! Help! We're under attack! The guards are dead! Everypony's come in here to hide, all those who can't fight are here! Help! HELP! PLEASE! WE CAN HEAR THE BIG ONE!"

Ignoring the radio, I spotted a blasted out roof of the next shop along the plaza balcony. The gnashing teeth felt ready to grab my back legs. I didn't even know how close it was before I fired my grapple through the hole and bit so hard on the trigger I feared I had broken it. Whisking myself up, the hound leapt and I felt teeth scratch at my hindquarters before my front hooves found the lip of the hole and I pulled myself away.

Rolling to my back to let air into my suffering lungs, I moved away from the hole and looked around me rapidly. I was sweating so hard I feared I'd lose what weight I had left. Below, the hound barked and leapt uselessly, before scurrying off.

I had a moment to catch my breath. This shop up here was empty, but the radio kept my attention sharp as I realised that even just a few hours of war were desensitising me to the carnage of it all. Around me, everypony I knew fought for their lives, but this was the first time I could sit still since this had started.

Through the radio I could hear Weathervane screaming all manner of cursing in the background. The horrible sound of the immobile, the wounded, and the defenceless was overwhelming, making the frantic nurse with the radio seem almost inaudible. Just one word was clear. Again and again.

"Help! I... it's the-there! HELP! This is the aid station! HELP!"

Oh no.

It *was* the aid station. The place all the refugees had gone. The place the wounded, sick, and weak were kept away from the battle was now under attack. Everypony who'd fled the ground floor would have went there.

Mentally, I saw a glimpse of what was to come. Of wounded ponies being bayoneted and hacked at in their makeshift beds. Of nurses and doctors torn apart as they came in. Of Brutus turning a place of healing into a carnal pit.

"Oh, Equestria, I don't want to die. Someone be out there! Someone be left! They're laughing outside, I can hear them! Why won't someone help!? HELP!"

I didn't know what to say. Across the expanse of the plaza, I momentarily saw Big Brutus climb right up the wall to the upper level, his glaive-claws acting like hooks into bare concrete as he reached the level of the aid station, the first floor off the ground. Smashing aside a barricade, he headed right down the corridor I knew led to Weathervane's medical area, pausing only to rip those daring to fire on him apart.

"HE'S COMING! PLEASE, HE'S COMING! HELP US!"

A new voice cut onto the radio.

"You all hearing me out there? Tell me, can you hear me? We can't hear from anyone on our set! C'mon!"

Glimmerlight.

"Listen, if you're out there, help's coming! I promise, help is coming!"

I pressed buttons and held switches and screamed and screamed into the radio, but nothing I could do was getting my voice through it. Frantically, I stared at the device.

R... e...c... oh come on, what was the next letter? What word was this? Angry at myself, at my inability to properly read, I tried to remember, but with my thumping heart, aching head, and adrenaline coursing through my veins, I doubted I could even repeat my own name.

Glimmerlight couldn't hear the ponies outside.

She didn't know where to *send* the help.

I heard anguished screams through the radio, breaking into feedback. The pleas and frantic begging. I could hear the nurse crying. My ears could even pick out wounded in the background hollering that they couldn't move, begging not to be left to die. They had nowhere to run anyway.

I could remember Creaky Hollow. The image of Glimmerlight in the thick red light of the Bloodletters' flares, hearing the village hall being broken into. Looking up, I saw those same kinds of flares hanging in the air above the Mall, casting their glow upon this ruin. From the shop cell I'd climbed up into, I had a momentary relief, but I knew what I had to do.

Every instinct told me to stay here. Hide where nopony was right now. But every single pony still in my life that I'd ever respected, trusted, or loved was out there. They were all fighting or in some way striving to help.

Glimmerlight needed a messenger. She had to know where to send this help first, before it was too late.

If that was the most a little frightened slave like me could offer in the middle of a historic battlefield in the wastes, then that'd be my part to play.

I could get to the armoury in under a minute in a clean run without any fighting going on. From where I stood, I had a short run along the side of the plaza, past a line of shops. If I got to the end of that, I'd be near to the main stairway that led down to near the security office. From there, it was only a short run through the back to find the armoury.

Up the plaza, round to the stairwell at the top, and through the back. Simple, right?

Yet as my shaking hooves stood at the edge of madness, I knew it would never be that simple. Peeking out from the shadows, I could see raiders roaming the corridors, balconies, and shopfronts. I heard the squealing of those they caught amongst the war cries of those resisting. None of my friends were visible. This would have to be a mad dash. I knew I was going to get seen and chased, but there was no other route. Grappling anywhere made me

too vulnerable, as did gliding down, and trying to patiently sneak over a long period would take too long.

I heard the bellow of Brutus, and then a colossal impact.

"He's smashing the barricades outside! He's coming this way! Close the door! Put all the stretchers against it! Don't let him—sshhhhzzzzzzz—"

Clipping the radio to my battle-saddle, I flicked out the mouthpiece ready, and ran into the storm.

Leaping through the broken window of the shop I had hid inside, I hit the marble flooring and immediately swerved to the left, aiming to take the shortest route around the open plaza. If I stuck close to the low wall bordering the drop to the ground floor in the middle, I might have some cover.

Skittering on mounds of loose pebbles and chunks of small rubble, I slid into the cover of a long-dead tree, sticking up from baked soil in a silver metal container, and then rushed onward again when no pony was looking. Some pony shouted beside me, swinging viciously at a raider stalking him with a net. I heard one of them take a hit as I bolted past, not even staying to see who was winning. The wall beside me shattered and crumbled as bullets spun and punched off or into it from the other side. Half-crouching below the holes being made, I kept pulling myself onward with squinted eyes from all the kicked up dust and grit in the air.

A group of four raiders rushed up behind me, coming past the shop I'd left. I dropped beneath a bench and curled up. They were shooting at the lower level, screaming about a slave they thought they'd seen. Distracted, they didn't see me as their hooves passed by my face. Once they had gone down a side passage, I crept out again before breaking once more into a run.

"He's just in the next corridor over! Hurry up! Pull that fucking stove over and wedge it you dingleberries!"

Weatherwane's voice stormed over the radio, as static flared. I realised that was the sound feedback of Big Brutus.

I ran out to cross past the old janitor's route those raiders had gone down. Too late, I realised they hadn't moved on. They were just behind the corner and facing this way.

"Hey!"

I drew a sharp breath, and saw their heads whip up.

"Get 'em!"

My heart skipped, until the adrenaline running through my veins kicked me into action.

They turned, and started galloping toward me directly. The suddenness of their chase almost causing me to fall over a body so untouched it looked like she was sleeping.

Stumbling, panicking on my hooves, I tried to keep going, trying to veer and turn as I heard enormous bursts of gunfire around me. A plant pot above me shattered and dropped hardened dollops of soil on my head. A round zinged so close I felt the rushing air whip by me like a whip crack. Crying out, unable to stop myself, I strained and pushed despite hearing hooves getting closer and closer.

To my right, down the huge internal open plan area, I caught a glimpse of Protégé with a group of six ponies mounting a fierce defence of an abandoned cluster of refugees in a shop, before I whipped my head back, put it down, and *ran*.

"Get back here, little colt! Come on!" They whooped behind me, and I felt something slam into my rump with a sharp pain.

Yelling, I tripped. A throbbing pain shot through my spine from the impact, as my battered body responded to the impact before the hard floor met me. Scraping, feeling my skin burning against the debris below me and tearing little cuts, I tumbled into a discarded metal box and curled up, trying to see what had hit me, and fearing the sight of blood.

I had no chance to see before they were on me, reaching out with cracked hooves. Grabbing the box, I threw it at them and scampered on the spot, feeling my hooves slip and fail to get traction on the ground! They swore behind me as the box hit one of them, before another harsh thud whacked into my side and made my ribs lance with a sharp, penetrating pain! I saw a brick fly off me this time as my lungs emptied.

I couldn't run like this! Not much further!

In pain, gasping for air, I kicked out behind me, getting up and away from them, barely by a tail's length as they dove and grabbed and worried me around the tables outside a shop. The raiders hurled the tables aside as I clambered under them, fighting through the table legs and toppled chairs. Finding myself with no more to hide in, I hopped through the broken window of the cafe just to get some space, but found one already waiting for me inside.

The tall stallion had a dozen more earrings than I thought were even possible, topped up with red spirals dyed onto his cream coat. A small pile of bricks floated around him from telekinesis.

"We're hunters, runt! Think we can't cut you off? C'mere!"

Screaming, I found myself being chased around the cafe, running in circles around a cake display filled with grey paste to evade the hunter, his companion or the numerous bricks slamming into the old glass displays. My hooves crunched through glass, as I ducked a diving pony's hooves.

"Run little pony!" A screech of laughter heralded the red and cream raider coming around the display and rushing for me. My heart feeling like it was about to explode from panic and exertion, I ran a scant foot away from him and ducked below an old counter-barrier.

"C'mere, c'm—"

With a sudden and dull thud, I heard the maniacal laughter coming to an end, as his skull collided with the low barrier.

The other raider, a mangy hided earth-brown pony, swore at the first's clumsiness before leaping onto the counter and staring down behind it at me.

"Cornered, weasel!"

Or at least, he stared down where I'd *been*.

The moment I'd gotten under there, I'd doubled back, sneaking around the opposite side of the counter, where I now hopped up on an old set of stairs for the shelves and dove past the till before *galloping for my life*.

I got precisely three feet outside the shop before colliding with another raider. Their hard, wiry frame of muscles and tufts of bone impaled into their skin made me recoil off them. Falling back, I looked up into bloodshot eyes of yellowed pus and twitching drug-induced delirium.

"Fun, fun, *fun*!"

Screaming as filly-like as I had ever been, I charged away from him; as he threw his head back and barked like the hounds. Still calling, he stormed after me.

It was all about distance now. I could see the end of the plaza ahead! The armoury had to be guarded! There'd be help! Brimstone was there!

I fled, the three raiders chasing me and hurling bricks, insults, and even a javelin of carved wood! Gunshots whined over my head from the lower floors, before a sudden ripple shot right past me, sending me diving to the side so hard I almost went off the balcony.

My throat locked up in a coughing fit as I tried to yell for help. I couldn't get air in! I kept running, my lungs burning, but everything was stifling. The shots kept coming, I could hear them behind me. Up ahead, I saw two more raiders leap from a bench onto a fleeing mare, as knives rose and fell in bloody arcs. I curved away from them, struggling to breathe as much as struggling to not hear the sounds of somepony being brutally cut up.

Everywhere, raiders. Everywhere, brutality and fighting. Every corner I turned, there was more! With horror, I saw my route was blocked by a massive pony in thick armour. I felt surrounded so badly that I stopped. I didn't know where to go! The raiders stormed forward, as I swept out *Rarity's Grace*. Three shots, three ponies. That's all I had.

Solid thuds erupted into their chests, one by one. The last, a heavy rifle round, put a thick hole in one's neck and splattered the others. Crying out, wounded, they fell and tugged at the ground, before follow-up shots tore into them again and again until the drug-induced twitching stopped. The massive one fled as the shots started switching to him. The sound of clattering hooves gave way to somepony clapping my back.

"Murky! You all right, little bud?" Sunny cried out above the noise as she pulled us both down into the cover of the balcony barrier, "Keep going, you can't stay here. We're gonna pull back toward the aid station and—"

"It's gone! Or going! I don't know!" I wailed at her, looking out around us as two slaves with Sunny took cover and fired blindly to the opposite side of the plaza. It felt like raiders were right beside us, but everypony was just involved in their own little world. The way ahead was littered with chases and brawls and wounded.

"The radio said Brutus is there! He'll murder you! Glimmer has some kind of help, I need to tell them that—"

Sunny shook her head, took aim down the way I'd came and, with one loud crack of her trail rifle, sent a raider climbing up a level tumbling from their rope with a howl of anger and pain. The pulley system on their rope caught, leaving the wounded raider dangling upside down at the side of the plaza, unable to pull themselves back up.

"We'll cover you. Whatever you need to do. Armoury?"

"Yes!"

"Then go, now! We'll try to link up with Protégé and get some sort of group together to start taking back the Mall. Murky, whatever help she has, it better be big. This is only going to get worse. Go!"

Her hoof slapped my backside hard to set me running, making me squeak and push past the lack of oxygen and the resurgent pain in my body. Two raiders looked up from their prey at my approach, before one's head erupted into a spray of gore. The other looked shocked, before another heavy round sent him scurrying away. I sprinted past the corridor he'd gone down, seeing him fleeing into it, passing by their victims on the way, one pony crouched over a corpse.

"Pike! Pike! Come on, bro! Please, get up! *Get up!*"

Cosh shook his companion's body and wailed, crying to the air as I had to keep moving. Shots stitched the ground beside me, spraying me with chips of stone and marble, sending me scurrying for the cover of a bench, mere feet from the doorway to the stairwell!

"Murky! Keep going!" Sunny's voice was distant, before her rifle spoke again at something

I couldn't see.

Tentatively, I cantered toward the stairwell, watching raiders who could see me if they only turned their heads, stopped from coming here only by the crossfire from Protégé's and Sunny's sections they had held fast in on this floor and the one below. It occurred to me that maybe this wasn't all chaos. Maybe I just didn't appreciate the madness of such close quarter fighting. I'd simply gotten caught up between the areas that were fighting.

Could the raiders actually *understand* all this? Where their groups were? Who handled what? That small inkling, the realisation that bloodthirst like this could actually be in some small way *organised* gave a whole deeper terror to the entire concept of what a veteran clan of raiders was capable of. At least now I could—

"Aaiiee!"

The scream escaped my throat as an enormous raider barrelled out of the very corridor I was aiming to escape into! Jet black in coat, wearing armour as thick as my legs, he came thundering out and slammed into the ground, driving a pony hard through a bench. Immediately, fire from Sunny and her allies started to spank off the armour or smack in between the plates. The huge figure, having run past my now crouched and curled body, roared, stumbled, and fell beside the pony he had crushed, who lay in a sobbing heap amongst sharp wooden shards that had—

O-oh no...

"I... I just wanted to get out..." His tearstained eyes met mine, piercing my heart with the helpless need in them, before he lay still.

"Murky! Go!" Sunny screamed at me so hard her voice cracked, "We can't hold them off the aid station with Brutus there! Whatever your sister has, she better get it quick! So MOVE!"

Below me, I heard Protégé calling for whoever had ammunition to make a push on the aid station, but with an electronic scream from the minotaur, those cries immediately turned to hollers to pull back or screams of pain.

Ponies were trying to defend it, delaying Brutus, paying with their lives to prevent a second massacre of the helpless slaves such as what had happened on the ground floor.

My hooves felt like lead with fear. Raiders were everywhere. I wanted to run to Sunny, the only one nearby to protect me, but even as I watched, more were bearing down on her and pinning them down as the raiders kept pushing more and more of their numbers through the hole Brutus had made, sensing the kill.

"Help us! Somepony help us!"

"Shut your fucking mouth and help hold that door!"

My legs got moving. I didn't know what did it, but something got me going amongst the unending chaos and hurricane of feelings I couldn't control or comprehend.

Passing into the back corridors, I smelt death. The raider I had seen had found ponies hiding in here. As I passed out of the vast loudness of war and brutal melee, I entered into a muffled world where the airstrikes and raiders became a background noise. Leaping the pool of liquid seeping from the room where some had sought to hide, I pushed for the stairwell and headed down to the next floor.

As I turned to pass down the second flight, there was a shriek that set my hooves flying to my ears, before the entire building shook to one side hard enough to hurl me into the wall. Behind me, pieces of concrete collapsed from the roof. Each thick chunk cracked and wobbled at the stairwell. The stairs beneath me began to feel loose and shake with a horrible

sense of collapse. I scrambled and pulled myself down the next flight, resorting to rolling down them on my side, yelping as every stone step dug and crunched into my ribs, before leaping out the way from the rubble piling down after me. With an ominous creak, the stairwell broke off and fell away to the floor below mine, then another and another until all that I was left with was a huge hole like a lift-shaft from where I'd come.

Hacking, staggering, I tried to get my breath back. Ahead of me, vision blurry, I could see the security station, close to the armoury. Ahead of it lay the corpses of half a dozen raiders next to a set of bags filled with dirt acting as a defensive position. One hoof at a time, I stumbled and limped my way past them, speeding up and staggering in diagonal lines. My knees were sharp with biting pain, my ribs felt like they were crunching. Rounding the corner to find the armoury's own defences, I fell against the dirtbags and pulled myself over them. My chest felt tight and my throat hacked and spasmed, dry with dust.

I immediately began coughing. I didn't know where it had happened, or what I'd run through, but I knew that dust carried radiation. All this being kicked up by the Enclave and firefights must have been taking its toll. I'd been running through smog, smoke, and particles for hours. As I staggered to the doors, I fought for my canteen and found it empty. A bullet had shattered it.

Brimstone had given me it as a gift. Despite it possibly having saved my life, I felt so guilty.

Behind me, I heard voices in the maze of corridors that made up the back end of the Mall's staff areas. Panicked voices, slaves trying to figure out where to go. Further off, I heard the sky-shattering blast of an Enclave weapon right above the Mall. The ground rumbled as something in the distance was hit.

Outside the doorway, Blunderbuck's assistants were grouped together with a half-dozen armed ponies, two of them ex-soldiers from Red Eye's army.

"Hey, it's the little guy!"

"Grab him! Get him in!"

I fell into their hooves before I felt a growing pressure inside. A metallic tang in my throat was the first warning before I convulsed in their grip and roughly coughed a small spray of blood onto their leg.

"Shit! Get him inside! Hurry!"

The words felt far off as I coughed again, then again. My lungs burned as a disease I had been mistreating after so long with little trouble reminded me why it had its claws deep in my body. I saw black as my eyes rolled back and I felt the pain throb harder and harder inside.

"Do we have RadAway?"

"Why would we, we're an armoury! The ghoul took it all!"

Slowly, I felt my eyes opening again. I hadn't fallen unconscious, but I had been unable to control myself as I'd laid on a sofa somepony had dragged into the armoury during the coughing fit. My throat felt raw and tasted of copper. My chest hurt terribly as my radsore throbbled and stung on my nose and leg.

I hadn't felt this way in a long time. Even on the mountain I'd been given RadAway quickly afterwards. The battle for Fillydelphia was killing me by merely being near it. Not

even the sickness, but I could feel my joints shaken by the impacts of skyship weaponry and my body slowly seizing up from adrenaline overload. My mind reeled. There was so much fighting in here, but outside it was repeated again and again for every street, building, and district of the city, and even of the sky above.

I couldn't grasp the scale, but being in its presence was sucking the life from me in a way I couldn't have ever imagined. It just never stopped. Even lying here feeling miserable and sick I could feel tremors and hear gunfire again and again and again.

A clarity came racing back to me.

Trying to shout for Glimmer, my throat simply produced a raggedy cough as I rolled from the sofa. Immediately, Blunderbuck's assistants grabbed me up and I started pawing at them, resisting their attempts to push me back down.

"Gli—" I coughed again, "Glimmer! Sis!"

"She's here, buddy! Calm down, you've got radsickness! She's safe, she's in the ba—"

Writhing, I pulled myself from their grasp and staggered around to the back, moving around the cages. The first thing I saw was Blunderbuck, sitting amongst a mass of parts and bags of soil looking like the most pressured pony in the world right now. He looked up.

"Murk! By the great tri-barrelled shotgun of Auntie Flo, what are you here for? Hey, you alright?"

Glimmerlight turned to me from a workbench, her face smudged with oil and grease, her mane tied back in a tight upward-pointing ponytail. Her eyes betrayed a focused courage and determination. In her magic floated an Enclave power source, no doubt stripped from a fallen soldier's armour.

"Lil'bro! You're all right? Quick, get in here where I can see you!"

She grabbed me, pulling me with her behind the great weapon cage in the armoury. Hobbling and wheezing as my swollen windpipe tried to breathe, I felt her hoof rub the back of my neck.

"Hang in there, okay? I know it hurts when it picks up."

"Sis. The aid station," I retched and stuck the side of a leg into my mouth as I coughed and choked out some of the dust from my throat, "Brutus is going there! It's being attacked!"

Glimmer's excited eyes suddenly dropped, before she whisked me forward, guiding me past the next set of cages, right to the back of the armoury.

"Then no time to lose. I'm almost done! Blunderbuck, we're suiting up *now*, get over here!"

And then, ahead of me, I finally had a clear view, before a chill of awe shot down my spine.

"Big Brutus is a monster, Murky. If we need to bring down a beast of the new, we need ourselves a hero of old."

I ran in behind my sister to see it more fully. At the back of the armoury lay the great suit of power armour. The Armour of Macintosh. It had stood for hundreds of years, modelled after a great protector, so Blunderbuck had said. No pony had ever taken it to war. No pony left in the city could have been big enough.

No pony, that was, until Brimstone Blitz.

The main bulk of the heavy armour hung above him, suspended directly above his body. The stomach and waist section was opened up, like some great spider ready to slam shut around its prey. On Brimstone's clothing, there were small braces tied around his legs and

body with what looked like locks for something to snap to.

Clad in a rough fabric undercoat and standing with his hooves already armoured up in massively thick belts of metal, Brimstone already stood taller than he ever had. He could hear the battle, hear his rival, no doubt. Bolstered by the height of the all-enclosing steel horseshoes, he already seemed a monolith of power.

Glimmerlight bounded around him, strapping those locking mechanisms to various areas of his body, mostly around limbs and his core muscles, priming small gemstones in each and plugging the wires into each of them in some sort of network.

"I... woah." I could only stammer the words as I moved into the workshop and watched her work.

"Murk, what's brought you here?" Brimstone glowered at me, clearly deep in mental preparation.

"Fzzzzz—INSIDE! HE'S AT THE DOOR! EVERYPONY BACK, GET THE WOUNDED TO THE BACK! HELP! IF ANYONE'S ALIVE OUT THERE! HELP!"

The entire armoury stopped. The guards, Glimmer, Blunderbuck, and Brimstone all stared at the radio I held up, eyes quivering. The screaming was followed by the sound of weapons slamming on the metal doors and the rending of enormous metallic claws tearing into them.

"M-Mister Peace is down." I whimpered.

Glimmerlight looked stunned, shocked to the core by the sounds of panicked screaming coming through the radio. Of blow after blow on the thick doors we'd welded to the aid station.

"We'll save them."

My sister's voice was lethally sharp. Then her face hardened, and she turned back to her work with a sharp and serious attention to her movements. Her magic erupted into an azure blue glow, as she lifted a half-dozen tools and rammed the power source home into the armour above Brimstone.

"Primed! Blunderbuck, help me here!"

"But the bom—"

"Bomb can wait! Not much use if we don't have anypony left to save!"

"Okay, Ma'am!" The young buck leapt up, rushing past me to help Glimmer strap each individual slate of heavy metal to Brim's legs. Above us, I could hear a low hum from the massive torso section that began to grow and grow. It became a bass drone, heightening in pitch even as the sounds of war grew closer and the screaming grew more frantic.

"This is an old model! No E.F.S, no readouts, no self-repair systems! You haven't got any medical injectors in it, or any of the predictive talismans to help movement. These old things could pull joints and yank tendons if you don't keep powering through!"

"Aye." Brimstone stared directly ahead, out the door of the armoury.

Another lock was tightened on his shoulder as the wires were all plugged in. Then on a loop of metal around his waist, where most of the wires from his limbs seemed to connect back to, running through clasps on the undersuit.

"I mean it! This is a micro-piston driven suit, not a spell talisman-controlled one! This won't be easy on the body, but it will let you be more like you used to be, so long as it holds up."

"Afterwards is not an issue." Brimstone's voice seemed far away.

The hum rose, before Blunderbuck slapped the last leg section into place and signalled around, "All done! He's set up this side! Just gotta let the battery finish charging!"

Glimmer yanked a strap with her teeth, tightening the last one on her side down, before she hurled her threadbare robes to the side and dragged across her own set of armour. Lighter, made of rounded plates, and marked with the symbol of a Steel Ranger.

Segmented plate covered her front and side, before she slung Diamond's rifle over her back. A line of spark-batteries modified into rifle grenades shone on a loop of fabric she wrapped around her shoulders, along with a combat knife.

"Y'know, I never could choose in the bunker. Scribe or Knight? Build or destroy? My parents kept saying 'be this' or 'do that'. S'why I left. But I've made my choice at last, lil'bro."

Glimmerlight pressed a line of rounds into Diamond's rifle.

"I've decided to just be myself, and that's all that I need to be."

I smiled at her. I could have sworn Brimstone did too, for all his attempts to stay stoic and tranquil.

Her magic snapped up ammunition, placing it in small pouches on her flanks, along with one glowing blue bullet I recognised now from a memory of hers. The one with an old talisman in the tip to help it fly straighter, truer than any normal round. The one she had once gifted to Rough Diamond to keep him safe, before Wildcard killed him.

Briefly, I felt a little confused about that bullet. Hadn't she already put one on her rifle's strap earlier? But now I saw it on her flank too in an ammo holder. What was she doing? I tried to look for her rifle top check, but it was slung away from me.

Glimmerlight snapped her ammunition bag shut, speaking to Brimstone.

"I know you. When that armour drops and gets locked in, you're going to be out of here. So let me tell you this. Forget about me, Brim." She placed a hoof on his jawline, "You don't need to protect me now. I've got my own war to fight against that psycho. If you need to rage, then rage. Piledrive that beast through the floor!"

"No."

"Brim, you—"

Finally, the big raider looked down.

"You told me this before, and I lost. I was fighting like an old warlord, and he is the greater warlord. If we had been in the Clan, he would now have led them, as would have been right."

The hum intensified and the systems of the suit fired up, sending glittering blue sparks raining down around us. Some of the plates creaked and moved, responding to the power surging through it now, as though itching to be used and sensing the battle outside.

Brimstone leaned down, eye-to-eye with Glimmer.

"You were the one who made real what Diamond saw in me. I'm not going to fight like who I was, because you and Coral are both right. I can't try to pretend I'm not the Dragon, just as I can't deny who I am now."

Then he stood upright, and slammed a newly armoured hoof so hard, the floor quaked.

"I will fight to remember and defend you, along with anypony else, be they terrified of me or not. That is what my mark always meant, and if this be my last chance to fulfil that, I will. My judgement is not by those who cower in fear from me, nor to those watching from on high, but my own."

I gulped, memories of discussing the afterlife to Brim very clear in my mind before the

Pit fights.

"Regardless of what others think, I know this is right. Now for the first time, I go to war for the right reasons."

"Ready to drop!" Blunderbuck cried out.

"Do it, Glim." Brimstone leaned down, forehead-to-forehead with the mare who had helped him. His horrific scars and missing eye clashing with my sister's bedraggled and shrunken, but smooth features.

"They'll see you for what you do, big guy, even if you don't believe it. Let's do it!"

Galloping around, she took hold of the lever for the pulley holding up the armour. An electronic singe filled the air as I felt the hairs on my neck stand up. Blunderbuck was hoisting the heavy helmet beside Brimstone.

"Dropping in three! Get lined up!"

Brimstone stood up straight, snarling with his eyes locked on the doorway.

"Two!"

The radio wailed, screeching as the sound of tearing metal came through it, the sound of raiders braying, the sounds of wounded begging with them and a minotaur howling.

"One!"

Glimmer shouted, "Dropping!"

The lever was pulled, and I heard the shrieking of metal chains whining through loops and clattering with released tension. A metallic clatter filled the room as the armour came loose.

Dropping hard, the main torso section of the armour descended like the open wings of a Goddess, falling upon Brimstone's back with such weight that he almost buckled, before slamming shut with a great *clang* as it met the locking points. Then came a high-pitched whirring as each scale of armour tightened and locked. Pulled by the in-built magnetic talismans, the sides clamped down like that of a forge-plate closing around his body, and interlocked beneath his belly and around his waist. Like the sound I imagined a Stable door would make when shutting, one ton of armour slammed shut around Brimstone Blitz.

"It's on! Lock him in!"

Glimmerlight and Blunderbuck raced around him, slamming shut bolts and twisting levers to tighten the armour about Brimstone's enormous body manually. Blunderbuck drew thick greaves around each already armoured leg-like shields, before winding them to form with a ratchet. Glimmer slotted plate after plate over his neck, and fed the wires through them to keep them protected.

Brutus' scream echoed through the radio, shorting it out on that one word from his victims.

Help.

"Hurry, Glim." Brimstone seethed, hunching slightly, preparing, before leaning his head down.

Blunderbuck reached up, joined by Glimmer as they lifted the helmet on. Glimmer connected it to the main armour, as Brimstone slammed down the helmet's full-face mask. With a wrench, Blunderbuck sealed the sides to enclose Brimstone's head beneath it, only his eyes still visible through thin slits covered in thick glass. To the side, Glimmerlight sealed a tube of wires against his torso and struck a flipper switch.

"He's in!"

"Igniting hydraulic controls!"

Every surface and joint shifted, as Brimstone stood fully upright, carrying the weight of the armour, the groaning of thick metal filling the room as the Armour of Macintosh came to life, finding a host at last.

Brimstone had been big. Within this, he was colossal. That armour looked like it weighed half again as much as he did. His hooves slated in two inch-thick metal bands that turned them into metal hammers of power. His whole frame stood higher, as his legs, shoulders, neck, and body swivelled and activated every hissing piston along the armour. I felt myself shivering before this figure, as imagery hurtled through my brain at the power he could unleash with this.

Maybe enough that we might just have a chance to live through this.

"You're online!" Blunderbuck cried, ripping the charge lead from the power source and removing the whole box from the side of the armour. "Ready!"

"Kick his ass!" Glimmer waved him off.

She needn't have bothered.

Her first word hadn't even ended before a creak and a hiss signalled Brimstone launching into movement. I had to leap aside as multiple tonnes of metal and flesh went from a standing start to a full gallop within ten feet. I was sent staggering as cages rattled and the floor *shook*. Everypony cleared the way for Brimstone as he surged out of the armoury, sending shelves and tools collapsing to the floor in his wake as though under a minor earthquake.

Behind him, Glimmer and I charged forward, to join our friend in the coming fury.

Before, the Harmony Mall shook under airstrikes.

Now, it shook under a galloping juggernaut powering through the corridors. Brimstone went off like a magically guided missile for the battle. Behind him, Glimmer and I struggled to keep up. It was all we could do to keep the huge earth pony in sight as he stampeded through thin corridors, smashing doorways clean off to pass them and taking chunks out of the walls on tight corners. It was especially hard for me as I lagged and coughed, trying to hide the blood I was bringing up from Glimmerlight.

She had enough things on her mind. I could take care of myself.

Then, up ahead, Brimstone sent the double doors to the open plaza shattering off their hinges so hard that they hurtled forward and over the balcony behind it. Red light shone out from the open sky above the devastated top of the Mall. After the dark corridors, it made my eyes squint as I saw Brimstone power out across the plaza, his armour taking a dark crimson hue under the bloodied sky. His hooves left indents on the stained marble, making bodies shake and spasm by his passing.

Careening around the plaza's edge, he thundered over a group of raiders that emerged from a shop to see the noise.

Not through. *Over.* Brimstone didn't even attack them, he simply ran them over and crushed them. Two had their ribs caved in by the forward impact, as another was flattened beneath him. The slaves they had been attacking clambered and rushed away from the metal beast, as Brimstone spun on the spot and hurled himself at the raiders. A good dozen of them had formed up in the area, about to charge Sunny's last position.

Brimstone descended upon them with the wrath of a vengeful titan. He was terrifying.

Enormous armoured hooves lashed out, pulverising bone and splitting skin. I was finally seeing Brimstone as he had been in his prime, every sweeping blow that connected solidly sending a raider catapulting into the air or into a wall. Lightning fast. Hooves like industrial power hammers. Reactions of an apex predator.

A God of Destruction, one that now finally showed the newer Bloodletters why he had once been their Warlord.

The first two were swept aside in a single strike that clattered into both their heads, throwing two corpses with broken necks a good ten feet. Buckshot ringing from his armour. Brimstone spun on the spot and threw his entire body into the raiders. One was crushed as his whole weight collapsed onto the floor, denting the ground, before his legs grabbed, stamped, and stomped at those near.

Behind us, Protégé, Sunny, and the slaves they had formed up with emerged. Bloody and bruised, they watched as Brimstone fell upon their assailants. Limbs were torn. Skulls collapsed. Across the open plaza's upper balconies, raiders fled as Brimstone fell upon them and flurried within their ranks. One massive buck hit and destroyed a pillar, with one raider caught between hoof and concrete. A huge earth pony charged and made a diving tackle into the old warlord. Brim spun on the spot fast enough that he actually blurred, before catching the large raider around the waist clean out of the air and lifted him like a foal. Roaring beneath his helmet, Brimstone collapsed the raider's muzzle with a steel headbutt and hurled the limp body from the balcony itself.

The others *ran*.

Around us, slaves were fleeing toward Brimstone. They saw this metal warrior tearing into the raiders and headed for the safety of one who could protect them. I wondered if they even realised who it was inside that armour. Sunny fell in beside Glimmer and I, as the combined weapons fire supported Brimstone in clearing out the entrance side of the plaza on this level. Protégé waved his revolver in the air, trying to attract everypony we could to this new effort led by Brimstone. Below and above, firefights still raged, but we had space now. A chance to organise.

"The aid station!" Glimmer shouted to them all, before pointing after Brim. The big stallion was already thundering toward it.

"You heard her, pals!" Sunny waved, as the slaves fell in step, reloading with what they had as we all moved together. Brimstone in one action had given the momentum back to us.

"You, you! Watch behind us!" Protégé pointed to the two ex-soldiers as he cantered to the advancing group. The uniformed figures nodded and brought up the rear, letting the rest of us rush forward with our flanks covered.

Not far up, as we rounded the corners, we could see the aid station's door from the opposite side that Brutus had advanced. Or rather, we could see the monster tearing it clean off.

Claws digging, Brutus lifted the heavy doors and held them above his horns, taking their full weight on his cybernetic arms. Around him, the raiders piled inside.

"No." Protégé gasped, before snarling, "Everypony! Forward! Into them! Protect the aid station! Hurry!"

We'd been late by just seconds.

It was then I realised that Brimstone hadn't stopped.

My ears erupted into pain as my friend bellowed, crying out his own oath of war. I saw him accelerate, hurtling down the corridor toward the slowly turning Brutus like a runaway

train, travelling faster than I'd seen even the most lithe of ponies gallop without anything weighing them down. The minotaur had been about to go inside, follow into the slaughter.

Brimstone hit him like a three ton cannonball.

The sound made me recoil. The metal between them didn't so much clang as it did crash. Like the sound of the great power-hammers driven by pistons in the forges descending, only magnified ten times. Brimstone's frame careened into Brutus, tackling the much larger beast clean off his hooves, powering both of them away from the door and flattening half a dozen raiders that were trying to get inside. Bullets spanked off both of them even as they rolled and thrashed over and over. The doors Brutus had been carrying slammed to the ground, end over end.

Brimstone rolled over the top of Brutus, both of them moving far faster than things their size had any right to. He came to his hooves, drew back a hoof above his head and stamped directly down onto Brutus' chest. He moved like I'd never seen him do before, as he buckled metallic ribs and bent armour, slamming again and again, before bear-hugging the much larger minotaur and throwing him side to side, breaking holes in the thin corridor's walls with Brutus' head and shoulders. Leaning back, Brimstone roared and threw the minotaur over into the opposite wall. The roof began to collapse, rubble bounding from their backs as the two giants brawled and slammed in an area far too small to accommodate them.

Shoving Brutus away, Brimstone made a short charge, like a pony would tackle another in some ball game, carrying the two to the far end of the corridor and back out in the plaza. I lost sight of them, but heard their huge blows striking one another over and over.

Ponies rushed past me. Protégé and Sunny at their lead, as Glimmer took up a firing position atop a collapsed pillar. Firing as they went, they tore into the raiders who were fighting for the aid station. Inside, I could hear screaming. Two, then three slaves fell in the charge to buckshot and thrown blades, but the raiders had been caught unaware. Without cover, they were being slaughtered and brought down. At the door, three of them flashed with a magical aura and fell limp. Behind them, Weathervane could be seen with his horn alight, using a pain killer spell to disable them. From within, wounded ponies were slashing with scalpels in magic, or throwing stretchers in groups to hold the raiders out, sensing help coming.

In a few more seconds, the raiders were dead. Unable to retreat through the whirlwind of destruction between Brimstone and Brutus, unable to advance against a charging force, they were cut down to a pony. Sunny put a shot into each of the three numbed ponies, a terribly blank expression on her face.

"Protégé? You took your sweet fucking time, didn't you?" Weathervane rasped.

"Stay inside the station, Doctor," Protégé ignored the tease, "I'll leave ten ponies here, but we've got to start pushing out again. There's still dozens trapped outside."

"Send them here. We can squash them in."

"Understood. Everypony! It's not over yet, let's go!"

Turning my head to run, to follow the rush, I scrambled and crawled past other ponies to see how Brimstone was doing. As a group, we filtered out onto the plaza again. Most took cover to snipe at raiders across the massive open air interior, while some started moving cell to cell, calling out for ponies or shooting any raiders who were threatening the trapped ones.

My attention, along with Glimmer's, was to the right hand side of the plaza though, as we found Brimstone and Brutus in their duel to the death. No pony could avoid at least glancing at them as they battered and slammed one another. One raider got caught near

them and had his head almost liquefied by Brutus' swinging claws. It was like watching Brimstone against Bonecrusher all over again, only without a protective cage to keep us all from being in the way.

Landing heavily against the wall, Brimstone recoiled from a thundering strike by Brutus. Those claws would clench and punch with a mechanical precision I found terrifying. Crunching into the wall, Brimstone dug his hooves in and bounced right back out to get back into the fight. I saw marble paving shatter and fly up as Brutus took a solid stance, but Brimstone actually *leapt* as they neared, launching his entire weight in a jump I'd never know him capable right into Brutus! The two slammed down, rolling over and over, stripping the balcony clean of its barrier as they reeled along the length of the edge. Benches splintered below them. I saw those claws nearing Brimstone's face, trying to clench around the helmet before the canny old pony headbutted him instead, threw himself back, spun, and launched an extended front leg and his whole shoulder across Brutus' chestline.

Brutus' clipped voice brayed, and he rolled backward with the blow. The thin balcony rail disintegrated between them, before they both passed over the edge under the momentum of Brim's charge. Spinning in the air, each landing a single solid blow in mid-fall, the pair plummeted to the lower plaza and landed atop the long suffering fountain with an explosion of fouled water and masonry that sent me and many others staggering.

The two giants rose from where they'd fallen. There was a brief snarl, before Brutus snapped to his hooves and lashed out. Those two claws clenched together like an enormous metal club, and connected clean onto the still-rising Brimstone's chest hard enough to smash him off the ground entirely; the sound like an industrial hammer shattering metal.

Our friend tumbled sideways and landed heavily on the other side of the fountain, spinning to his hooves almost immediately to look at the bleeding minotaur he had slammed into. Brutus bled from the nose, dripping like a leak on the floor below him.

As for Brimstone, though, his breastplate was heavily buckled already. He had to flex a leg again and again to unjam the whining hydraulics that moved the armour.

Raiders swarmed out of the shops to fill the balconies around the plaza. Slaves picked themselves up from their points of defence. I saw Sunny and Protégé pause amongst their rescue operations, all watching the two titans below them on the ground floor. Around them, there were groups who had been fighting until just now that fled side by side away from being anywhere near to the pair once they properly kicked off.

Big Brutus raised his arms, snapping those claws in the air as he turned around in a circle to his Clan. There was a lull in the fighting. Not entirely, for I could hear combat in the corridors around the plaza, but all eyes were on them. He was laughing. Flexing his neck, he took up a fighting stance.

"This is the fury I wanted from you, *old* warlord! Come for your last fight against the champion of champions, forced to use armour to hold your broken body up!"

Brimstone snorted. "Least I didn't trade in my balls for a chrome finish."

Somepony might have laughed, had the fury in the minotaur's eyes not promised a gruesome end. He leaned back, raising a claw, before slamming it into the ground before him, as though taking up a stance to charge.

"Heed me, Bloodletters! Let none interrupt us in the challenge! Here you are, Brimstone Blitz, come to reclaim your Clan once and for all?"

"No."

Brimstone lowered his head and scraped a hoof along the floor, drawing sparks with the

edge of Mac's armour.

"I've come to end it."

Brutus crashed his arms down into the floor, breaking the paving stones and launching himself forward like an ape, claws raised and snapping with all their hydraulic power.

Brimstone met him half-way, bellowing as he broke into a charge. I could see the small pistons on his limbs powering that armour, pushing his body beyond its own strength and speed. Pushing him to be like the Brimstone he once was. One last chance to be young again, and fight for something he never had in his own youth.

Legs thundering, he launched for Brutus' midsection, right as the claws descended like maces on his back. The meeting between them sent a ripple of dust out as my ribcage shook. In a flurry of metal, limbs, and enormous power, the two spun, rolled, fell, threw, and surged again and again as they threw blows that would kill anypony else in a single strike. Eye-to-eye, always forward, cybernetic limb met powered armour as Brimstone warded off those lethal claws and speared a hoof into Brutus' face so hard that the minotaur spun on his own hooves.

Seeing his foe falling back, Brim surged forward, placed his hoof on a fallen block of masonry, and used it to leap. I saw him leave the ground, his hooves passing the height his head normally did and twist in the air, one front hoof raised. In a frame I could have drawn from memory, I saw Brimstone in mid-air, hanging with that hoof slowly descending, before it came *down* like a bolt of lightning. It crumpled Brutus' face and drove them both to the ground, his hoof landing atop Brutus in an eruption of stone and dust. Breathless, I choked on a cheer I couldn't quite get out, before a squeal did.

With his jaw looking curiously slack on his head, Brutus spun and slashed and grasped again and again from the ground. His claws closed around Brimstone's armoured hoof and *crushed*. The metal bands sprung and bent, snapping below the machinated force before Brimstone could pull it away. With a tear of metal, one of Brim's protective greaves and hoof covers came flying off. Staggering back, a great score in one of his now exposed hooves that had to have been agonising, Brim was now exposed, one limb of his armour disabled.

"Be torn!" Brutus brought both claws high, dropping them on Brimstone's back and crushing him to the floor. They raised again, slammed again, raised again—

Brimstone kicked off his rear hooves, somehow pushing himself and the weight of the armour with just two limbs to roll around his opponent. Unceasing, Brimstone rammed him from behind, lifting him and crushing both of them into a pillar at the edge of the plaza, cracking the structure. Straining, lifting, Brimstone clutched around Brutus' stomach and heaved the flailing machine, bending back and spinning to slam Brutus into the ground, rearing up to stamp *hard* on his foe's face.

One of those claws lashed out, open and extended. I could see it trying to snap shut around Brim, forcing him to roll away. My heart thudded hard as he rolled and they collided head to head once again, with Brutus picking Brimstone up and charging with him out of sight behind a shop, punching through windows and cages on their tour of destruction. Numerous raiders followed to watch, flowing around the corner. Only the regular thumps of their impacts and attacks continued to let us know of that fight continuing.

Around the plaza, it all broke loose again. Just as the two largest fought, now the rest did too. Glimmerlight and I rushed around to a part of the balcony still with cover. She took shots down toward the corridor of the aid station, before I—NO!

The cover between us exploded inward as something heavy shot right through it.

"This isn't enough, Murky! Come on!"

"B-but they'll see us!"

"*They already can!*" My sister threw me ahead of her with her magic, into the line of fire. I galloped straight ahead, knowing she was right.

Ahead of me, I could see a shop. Below our hooves, shots pinged and whined. A raider snarled up ahead, before a shot slapped into his back from the level above. With both of us leaping the shop window, we trampled loose glass to hide from whatever was shooting amongst the chaos, rushing past a group of armed slaves. Soon after we entered, they exited, running into a nearby corridor that would lead back toward Protégé's office. I heard screaming the moment they entered and hoped that the screaming was raiders.

Below us, I heard a harsh bellow and a solid crash. Someone had just been thrown through a wall in the conflict between Brim and Brutus.

"We're separated." Glimmer looked back the way we'd come, "Protégé and Sunny can handle themselves. We need to get back to them and... oh shit."

"Oh what?" I squeaked and gulped, before seeing my sister looking back the way we'd come at the plaza outside the shop. Her eyes were wide and fearful.

Trotting up, I then saw what she had.

Outside the shop, carved into the metal and stone of the plaza's back wall, above where the slavers had once watched us, a message now lay, bold and enormous, a title to the whole Mall amongst the chaos.

LET ME HEAR YOU SCREAM

And worse, below it a carved arrow, pointed directly at our shop.

We both knew who had written. 'How' was a question I had long stopped asking, but I felt my gut clench tightly.

"Dammit." Glimmer immediately readied Diamond's rifle again. "He's here. We have to kill him, Murky."

"Do we really?" I bit my lip, moving closer to her side.

"They're the leaders, Murky! We need to kill them to end this! We have to find Wildcard! Before he finds—"

"*Cooee!*"

Both of us stopped, looking at one another. I could see the sweat dripping down her forehead as her eyes went as wide as mine. Slowly, we turned to look behind us, out the far end of the shop.

Wildcard grinned and waved cheerfully at us from the centre of where everypony was shooting. He would have looked whimsical, as he smiled and cantered at a leisurely pace; that is, if he were not drenched in gore that dripped and ran across his raggedy white coat. His multicoloured, rainbow hair drooped in all directions above those mismatched eyes. He left a trail behind his stained self, both his machetes floating on either side of him like metal wings, the instruments that had reaped their toll and given reason to why he looked like he did. Around him, his metal hook on a wire coiled and spun like a snake.

I could see the trail leading back to a back corridor entrance, where those slaves had gone just a few seconds before. My teeth began to chatter as I backed off, slowly moving to the counter. My sister stood firm, but I could see her shaking as she met the pony she had said she was trying to find.

Wildcard caught her eye and lowered his eyebrows.

"So, figured out why you hate me, yet?"

His smile turned dark, as his eyes narrowed into a sick glee as he saw Glimmer's face harden.

"Hahaa. You do know!"

Wildcard's eyes went wide, the grin becoming a sadistic knowing smirk.

"Told you I'd see you when you woke up. Took you long enough, pink dream."

"Don't even dare call me that, murderer." Glimmer slowly removed the safety from her rifle.

Wildcard fell to the floor, rolling on his back, shrieking in laughter, "I just partied with half a dozen little slaves back there, not to mention killed the griffon in front of you, and *now* you call me a murderer? Well ain't I just the naughty one, haaa!"

Spinning, he came to rest on his belly, before slowly rising up on all fours at an uncannily even speed, "So what? Gonna do what you normally did and make a punchy line before just shooting me? That's what you did to Sooty, ain't it? I'm right, aren't I? Tell me I'm right? This is our moment see."

He began to trot forward, head low. Glimmer kept her barrel pointed slightly away from him, locking eyes with madness. Slowly, I kept backing off.

"Brimstone, Brutus. They're like the two big ones, and we're the two crazy happy ones! Ain't it right? Little sneaky Murky already got to fight the other sneaky one. Three for three, right? You three are like, the core, am I right? The ones everypony looks at and says, 'hey, those three are the main team! The ones who started your group!' So it's only right we fight! It's like, written in the stars! But *only* us two. Anypony else gets involved, I'll fucking kill them. Just for you. Because *you* want to kill me."

"You're insane." Glimmer muttered, starting to circle away to stop Wildcard getting too close. Those machetes began to drag on the ground as he matched her, slowly moving around one another. I could see my sister trying to move outward, get as much distance as she could before it started.

"Insane? *Insane?*" Wildcard stopped on the spot, before snarling and bucking a chair in the cafe over. It shattered against a table, as he spun and hurled a second one through the glass door of a cabinet behind the counter, "I'm trying to give you a reason to *be*! I'm telling you your place in our little world amongst all the others sharing it! *I'm being nice to you! And you call me insane? Bitch! Whorebitch! Ungrateful little... FUCK YOU, C'MERE!*"

My sister dove to the side as the hook shot forward in Wildcard's magic. Her magic propelled a table to catch the sharpened point, using the table like a shield before hurling it directly at the raider.

Skipping into the air, Wildcard shrieked in laughter, sending the table into the roof with his own magic. The moment it cleared his vision, he bent in the air like a feline, falling sideways onto a table to avoid the deafeningly loud shot of Diamond's rifle that ripped past him and punched a two-inch hole in the wall.

"*His* rifle? Oh-ho-ho! What would the softy think? What a little thief! Looting the dead of their weapons?" Wildcard looked behind him, before tilting his head to effortlessly dodge the second shot. Grinning, he slowly turned his head back to my astonished sister.

"Cheeky." The Raider sneered, then his horn glowed brighter.

Glimmerlight's eyes hunted around, looking for what he was lifting, before a scything whoosh of air heralded one of his machete's streaking through the air.

"Shit!" I heard her hiss the word, falling backwards to dodge as the blade scraped over

one of her armour's metal plates and arced away. The second one followed, making her roll on the ground, over and over before hopping up and diving through the window as they chopped on the floor after her like a chef preparing a meal with a knife.

Near to me, Wildcard broke into a gallop for where she'd leapt, making me cry out.

"Sis! He's coming! Watch out!"

Her head poked up above the lip of the window, before the burly raider dove through and landed atop her. The pair rolled out onto the plaza, cracking spilled glass and through Wildcard's bloodied path. Powerful, muscular, Wildcard got atop her and slammed a hoof down to the floor near where Glimmer's head once was before jerking as her magic sent the butt of Diamond's rifle crashing into his head.

Wildcard merely wriggled around it and grinned, his hooves pinning her shoulders.

"Try, try, hard as you can..."

He twisted, catching the hoof she twisted free and launched at his head.

"Can't hurt me. The reapers long ran..."

Hearing his maniacal laughter, I launched forward. Pulling myself free of the cafe, I launched my grapple at him, not trusting my accuracy with a bullet and my sister so close. The hooked end wobbling through the air before stopping on the spot in his hazy magic field.

"Hoh! Interrupting us! You already hurt it by having your little red-headed chum attack Barb instead of just you and him! This was supposed to be symmetrical! Don't ruin it more! DON'T!"

My whole body felt like it was moving. Wait... it *was*! Surrounded, by his magical grip, I felt myself raised into the air, before suddenly accelerating to the side. Screaming, I barely had time to curl into a protective ball before I hit the nearest wall.

Half a second before impact, I slowed and was redirected to the side, a second azure blue magic field grabbing me. Torn between them, I felt the telekinesis dissipate enough that I could struggle and flee from it, catching a glimpse of Glimmer, straining beneath Wildcard and looking toward me, before casting her eyes to his laughing face.

"Like I give a damn for your-ngh-madness!"

From her side, I saw one of the arcane grenades drawn, before she shoved it directly upwards and behind Wildcard with her magic. Then, she stopped resisting and curled up beneath him before it detonated.

With a bright glare, the charge exploded. I smelled singed hair and burnt blood as I hid my eyes. Looking back, I could see Wildcard writhing and thrashing on the floor, screaming with maddened laughter. His back was black, streaming thin smoke from the areas that now lacked any sort of coat. Behind him, Glimmer was already staggering up, grabbing her rifle, and moving away from him to get some range.

"That's it, pretty girl! Thaaaaat's it!"

He leapt off the ground as Diamond's rifle exploded the seared marble below him, coming to a fighting stance.

"If only the runt had accepted my drink. Maybe I would go nicer on you!"

With that, he charged her. There was a change in his movement. He wasn't prancing any more. This time, he was going for her, head down.

My sister leapt a bench, spinning backwards to fire on her pursuer, only to find him already diving over the bench and slashing at her. Ducking to the side, she evaded the machete, spun, and fired at point blank; or would have done, until her weapon was knocked

aside, pulled back by her magic just in time to block a second strike. Caught close, I found myself surprised as Glimmer took a lesson from Brimstone and straight up headbutted Wildcard.

Even more surprising was that it sent him staggering back.

“What... what was that!?” He shrieked.

“You don’t spend the time in bars I have, then hang around Brim and not pick it up. What? Not fitting your little script for what I’m able to do?” Glimmer grinned, confidence coming back as she yanked her rifle free, pointed it to his chest, and fired.

The weapon made a dull click.

Wildcard merely grinned, his magic holding two bullets from her rifle between them, “What? Am I not fitting yours?”

His horn flared, before a magical spark arced between the two of them that struck Glimmer like a lightning bolt. My sister fell backward, staggering and wobbling, before one of the machete’s crashed down on her back. My heart leapt into my mouth as I saw it land between the armour plates with fiendish accuracy.

Glimmer screamed. Then more so as the weapon dragged free and Wildcard hurtled into her. Picking Glimmer up, he threw her across the corner of the plaza into a group of slaves who had been trying to fight off raiders coming the other way. Chasing her, Wildcard tore through them in a scything blizzard of blades, sending streaks of blood whipping around him. He took a head off with one and gutted another where he stood, trampling over another mare. Ahead of him, Glimmer crawled along the floor, gasping and struggling to move. I could see her trying to unfasten a healing potion as she moved, before leaning against a shop window and raising her rifle to bring down a second raider charging her after reloading a single, desperate round.

“That’s it! Just us two! That’s what I wanna see!” Wildcard stalked her the way he’d stalked me, but his back was now turned to me.

Biting hard on my saddle’s mechanism, I fired all three rounds from *Rarity’s Grace* into him from close range. They landed clean, puckering three red marks into his white coat.

Wildcard didn’t even flinch.

In fact, he didn’t even turn and look at me. I was being ignored.

Even as he moved, he took a small vial of something from his hunting pouch and popped it into his mouth. I could have sworn it was some form of pink tablet, before he washed it down with a bottle of alcohol he had strapped beside it. It looked like the kind I would see in Weathervane’s hospital.

Ahead of him, Glimmerlight downed her healing potion in much the same way, before staggering to her feet, Diamond’s rifle pointed as she backed off, eyes focused on her target.

Then, below us, a deafening crash signalled the return of another duel.

Brimstone Blitz came tumbling out of a shop front, demolishing the cage at the front of it and rolling over and over into the centre of the plaza. Coming to his hooves, he immediately grabbed and hurled an enormous piece of wreckage from the Enclave ship that had collided with the Mall earlier back the way he’d come.

Two massive pincers grabbed the wreckage from mid-air and sliced it into three pieces. Eyes burning red, Big Brutus came storming out of the shop amongst spiralling smoke. He and Brim met directly in the middle of the area, bringing an avalanche of blows to one another. For a time, they didn’t even seem to block as they simply battered one another to the end of fortitude. Brimstone’s armour was dented and blackened, while Brutus’ body

looked bruised and deflated in areas.

A loud gunshot from beside me signalled Glimmerlight firing at Wildcard. The raider was bounding toward her as she ran directly away from him. My sister fired and reloaded as she went, veering around raiders and slaves fighting, a running battle with her foe. Wildcard dodged her rounds with uncanny movements, before suddenly reaching sideways, grabbing somepony around the head and throwing them out of the shadows of a shop and into the balcony side.

I saw Protégé's head crack against it. He lay very still.

"No late comers sneaking into my moment to try and shoot me, it's *very very rude!* And another thing—"

Glimmer had reloaded. Her five rounds slammed across the gap between her and Wildcard, leading to him making a strange leap and twist in the air, coming around them before charging head on at her. Almost as though expecting it, she strapped a magical energy rifle grenade to her rifle and fired it at the ground below Wildcard.

Amongst the flare and the explosion, I lost track of them and instead ran to Protégé, hopping up on and balancing atop the plaza's balcony to bypass the fighting raiders around him. The unicorn was stirring with a pained look on his face and blood trickling from his head. As I landed beside him and tried to support him, I had to duck his hoof lashing out at me.

"It's me! Protégé it's me!"

He stopped struggling, eyes opening hazily before squinting closed from blood trickling into them. Fighting to control my shaking hooves, I used the sleeve of my fleece to wipe his face and forehead.

"Murky? Thought I could... get him when he wasn't anticipating it..."

I tore the same section of my fleece off and began to tie it around his head as I heard Wildcard's laughter and the bark of Glimmer's persistent shooting from down the plaza. Below us, the whole Mall shook as Brutus and Brimstone hurled and slammed one another off the supporting pillars and ground. Their cries were like two feral beasts brawling.

"We're coming apart at the seams," he continued, "The force we have is sending more ponies than can fit in the aid station back, but we can't spread out much more or we won't be able to defend it!"

I gulped, "Wh-what about Unity?"

Protégé looked up at me, before shaking his head.

"I haven't seen her since the ground floor was attacked."

Every feeling inside me reeled. There were few worse thoughts than the image of horror passing in front of my eyes. Of simply finding a cream-coated body lying somewhere alone.

Protégé looked up through the hole in the top of the Mall, past the ruins that had become the upper floors into the sky. Laser beams stitched back and forth.

"What I would give for some of those Enclave to help us out, Murky."

"Y-yeah." I stood beside him, trembling to my very core.

"Reality comes before wishing. We have to keep fighting. I thought I heard Coral Eve's magic somewhere nearby, she—"

The floor above us virtually exploded, and four raiders were sent blasting through a wooden wall with enough force to make them hit the other side of the plaza, before tumbling to the floor below.

Protégé blinked. "...there she is. I'll try and link up with her, maybe she has more ponies

to help us expand the rescues. If anypony's left."

"MOVE! ALL OF YOU MOVE!"

Brimstone's voice turned from rage to one of fear, a fear for others. It wasn't shouted at us, he was talking to somepony else.

We both peered over the edge of the ruined balcony to see the massive figure of Brim waving with one armoured hoof toward a shop cell. Somehow, unbelievably, there were slaves left alive down there! A cluster of them were frozen with fear inside, wounded and filthy. Survivors of the raiders, taken as prisoners for whatever sick intents. Brimstone had torn the door off and was struggling to get them to move.

"You can't stay here!"

They looked at him with tears in their eyes and backed away with screams as he came close.

"YOU HAVE TO—"

Brutus launched onto him from behind and sent them both tumbling through the cell's bars. The slaves wailed as the titans of war fought right before them. Growling, Brimstone threw his whole body weight to force them both back out of the cell, but in doing so opened up his guard, he had to allow Brutus to land on him.

"Perish, old pony!"

Those claws descended. Brimstone slammed one away with a hoof, before the second snapped down and closed around his head.

With a hiss of machinery, they crushed. The helmet bent and broke, crushing inwards, slowly. Brimstone roared, his hooves trying to push the claws open, but they were unstoppable, powered by enormous pistons much larger than the power armour's own.

I screamed at Brutus to stop. Protégé's revolver barked and slammed six rounds into Brutus' shoulders and neck, but the minotaur only screamed his digital filth and crushed and crushed.

Brimstone was waving to the slaves, crying at them to run. To run now. He lifted Brutus, trying to move them both further from the ponies, carting him bit by bit, before falling as Brutus sent a knee crashing into his gut and forced himself above Brimstone, that claw still closing, biting in.

Then, with a last rage-filled cry, Brutus' claw ripped down and free.

I saw the helmet spin through the air, arcing over and over to land in the wreckage of the fountain and its bloodied water.

Brutus watched it go, laughing and raising the claw above his head, before he was lifted clean off the ground.

Brimstone, his head now exposed and bleeding, a long wound across where he had lacked an eye anyway, dug in beneath his foe and *rose*. He rose high, on his hind hooves as he lifted Brutus above him, spun, and dropped him upon a great length of rebar. The metal erupted through the minotaur's chest, before Brimstone bent it to stop him coming off again. Excitement surged through me as Brimstone took up one of the shredded pieces of Enclave ship wreckage and speared down again and again upon Brutus' body. The metal tore flesh, stripping Brutus of muscle. A horrendously brutal method of attack that on any non-raider would have left me feeling pity.

This was no normal raider, however.

Brutus snapped a claw up, grabbing the wreckage and crumbling it into scrap. The second claw snipped the rebar away before he surged off of it. Blood poured from his body,

more than any living thing should be able to and still survive as he cut and lashed at Brimstone, driving the raider back. Those claws were the real advantage, something Brimstone had to constantly avoid. He couldn't get too close for long. They reached for his exposed head again and again, sending Brimstone into a hasty retreat.

Brutus made a space for himself, looked across his own awful wounds, and raised his arms. On his back, I could see the vials of potions bubbling and injecting their contents into his body directly.

“Watch in awe, Brimstone Blitz! As I regenerate before your—”

Brimstone's hoof crashed into his face. He wasn't 'watching' anything.

Ahead, I saw Glimmerlight spin around a bench and magically hurl it into Wildcard. The raider cut it in two, launching directly at her with a keening howl. Ramming the muzzle of her rifle into his chest, Glimmer pulled the trigger and sent the insane pony flying backwards. Two ambitious ponies rushed to finish him off, before that wicked hook sliced around and grabbed one by the jaw, piercing up through his tongue. Lifting the pony off the ground, his screams carrying around the Mall, Wildcard threw him into the other.

“Nopony else! NOPONY ELSE!” He was shrieking, almost in frustration as he pouted and stomped like a foal, ignoring his gunshot wound. **“ONLY US! IT'S MEANT TO BE ONLY US!”**

“How about everypony that wants to? That's what makes *us* strong!”

Glimmerlight fired another rifle grenade at him, before it veered off from Wildcard's magic and hurled end over end into the plaza centre to explode between Brutus and Brimstone, who both charged through the burning energy of its detonation to crash on one another. Brutus' claws were trying to get a hold of Brim's body, while the earth pony slammed again and again onto Brutus' face, tearing a horn clean off with one impact so hard that it flew into the air, embedding into the rock above me. Squealing, falling down from it, I saw above me to where two raiders were blasted in a concussive wave of magical force from the upper level to fall and crush their heads on either side of Protégé, who finished them off. He looked around and frantically ducked as Wildcard stormed through the area, machetes spinning like an auto-axe around him in an aura of bloodied destruction to try and get at the rapidly-moving Glimmerlight.

She bounded through the shops, before skidding to a halt and aiming over the ledge of the balcony and whipping off two quick shots. Below, I heard a shattering of glass as Brutus' remaining healing potion tubes and vials shattered behind him, sniped off by her aim. The minotaur turned in rage, before hurling an enormous portion of debris up at her, making everypony scatter before it completely collapsed a ten foot section of our level. I felt the floor go out below me, sliding away.

“Oh no. Oh no, oh no!”

In a panic, I leapt up and threw my wings out. Suddenly gliding, I passed above Big Brutus to land just outside our old shop cell. Behind me, Glimmer came tumbling down the ramp of wreckage from Brutus' strike, rolling end over end to the lower plaza before Brimstone caught her in a dive. Rolling with the much smaller mare, he had to roughly dump her before spinning and arcing a hoof up to catch Brutus under the chin with such an impact that the cyborg's hooves came clean off the ground, turning end over end before crashing down on his head. Brimstone himself fell from throwing his whole body into the attack, before rushing in to grab one of Brutus' arms in a grapple.

Sitting on the minotaur's back, he hugged the gnashing claw and *pulled*. His armour

vibrated and struggled, pistons firing again and again as he roared and tugged at the limb, trying clearly to rip Brutus' implants right out of him. Horrifyingly, disgustingly, I saw metal and flesh parting, wires snapped and hydraulic fluid leaked like yellowed blood.

Wildcard landed upon Brimstone's back, his machete's primed.

"She attacked him! I've got to attack you! *It's fucking symmetry! Why do you keep messing it up? WHY, WHY, WHY, WHY!?*"

Those blades hacked down again and again on every screech of the word, scoring wounds into Brim's neck or more often the collar of the armour until he was forced to release Brutus and roll to throw Wildcard off. The raider spun to land clean on a bench, before Glimmer's magic yanked his landing spot away and left him to collapse in a heap. She was up, firing as she came into the pile of furious raider that came to his hooves, bleeding from the mouth and nose.

"Fine! Ruin it all! I'll just fucking *kill* you then instead of making it *fun*, huh? *How'd you like that?*"

He came charging toward her, fury overtaking all 'fun' in his madness. Glimmer used a discarded bin as a shield, lifting it to intercept those blades, trying to fire around it at him, reloading and moving, backing off and dodging. A fast and lethal bout against her insane attacker. Once, they even both lifted up briefly as their magic fought for control of each other's bodies for just a couple of seconds, the bin crumbling between them from the magic duel amongst the very real and physical one.

They separated as Brimstone and Brutus slammed between them. The minotaur was leaking a small river of fluid behind him from his implants, drug vials, and lifeblood, but his claws still snapped and scythed around him fast enough to blur in the air. Catching Brim on the cheek with one, he stunned the raider, before snapping one shut on Brimstone's back.

With an explosion of sparks, he tore the armour's power source clean off.

Shoving Brutus off him, Brim looked back on himself and tested the limbs.

"Brim! You'll have only a minute or so before it—fuck!" Glimmer dove and rolled from a machete, before screaming as the hook wrapped around and caught her in her back right thigh. With a tug, she was sent spilling over, twisting to get an armour plate between her stomach and the blade of Wildcard's weapons. The impact still looked like it hurt bad.

Wildcard drew the machete up.

My grapple gun fired. The hook snapped around the machete, whipping it from the air. I squeaked and jumped as the bloody blade whirled back towards me and skittered beneath where my hooves had just been.

"You little—" Wildcard actually laughed at me, before sweeping the second one up instead.

He ended up turning back into the lunchbox mine Glimmer had left for him, one of the many she'd made for the defence of the Mall.

Covering herself with the bin, Glimmer hit the trigger with her magic and detonated the device. A crater was blown in the centre of the Mall and sent marble skyrocketing to the upper levels. Wildcard was caught head-on by the blast and hurled backwards, denting into the bars of a cell with his second machete flying to the floor above us. I saw him lie still.

Distracted by the explosion, Brutus turned to look at his second-in-command flying away. That spare second was all Brimstone needed. Propelled by the armour's remaining power, fast enough to catch Brutus out at last, he threw everything he had at the minotaur.

Bellowing a colourful oath, one I could never have repeated for all my recent foul mouth,

Brimstone tackled Brutus to the floor. I had seen Brimstone unload on a pony before. I had seen him crack skulls and crush ribs. I had even seen him against Bonecrusher and a Steel Ranger when his fury carried him to brutal victories.

But here, he had a target down in front of him. One who wouldn't die from one good hit. To that end, I witnessed Brimstone's pure ferocity unleashed in a way he hadn't for perhaps a good decade. Crushing his weight atop Brutus, his remaining armoured hoof came up behind his head and thundered down onto Brutus' face directly. I heard bone shatter and metal bend, as that hoof rose and fell again, each one lifting half his body up, twisting at the shoulders before bringing the raised hoof or elbow crashing down. Every strike like a blacksmith slamming on an anvil as those pistons in their last gasp of power drove down again and again and again. He didn't stop, his hoof becoming a blur of back-and-forward motion, as machinated as Brutus' own implanted body. Brutus' muzzle was shattered. His eyes crushed. Teeth and jawline were broken and his skull caved in. I saw brain matter explode from the ground and yet still he struck and struck. Brutus' body writhed, snapped, and fought, twitching in his last throes. Still, Brimstone struck until his hoof was sparking off the marble beneath. Until the armoured hoof of Mac's suit was dented, then bent, and then cracked.

Gradually, the suit slowed as its power waned, and Brimstone fell back from the body of Brutus, pulling at the strap to drop the suit's main torso section off him before it locked up. Finally, I could see the devastation that had been wrought to my friend. His body was blackened, torn through the armour's holes, and bleeding profusely.

Around us, slaves began to drop down into the plaza square. Protégé, Coral, and Sunny slid down the slope of crushed debris at the head of two dozen armed slaves and ex-soldiers. As the raiders reeled from the death of their leader, my friends and those willing to fight for their freedom pushed hard, powering past where we lay to reach the survivors on the ground floor. Bloodied, shaken, and terrified, they slowly began to stagger out from the cells, crying and traumatised from the massacre. All around us, I could see the mutilated bodies of those the raiders hadn't taken prisoner.

Glimmer and I leaned against one another. Brimstone limped and fell against a pillar. He lay back, battered and exhausted, finally having a chance to let out his breath.

And then Brutus got up.

I couldn't believe my eyes were seeing this. Convinced I had fallen unconscious and was in a dreamstate, I watched the nightmare rise.

On his back, the remaining vials were blinking red, as I saw them furiously pumping *something* into him. Pale grey substances and glowing chemicals swam with filthy blood in their tubes as the drug cocktail was forced into the body. Limbs thrashed and moved in furious spasms.

Then the screaming began. Oh, the screaming.

Before, he had an electronic tinged voice, but as he stood and I saw the ruin that flopped and fell from where a head should be, the emitters on what remained of his neck attempted to project a battlecry, but ended up as a banshee's scream, if played through a digital nightmare of static and white noise mixed with an organic gurgling and stomach churning sucking. There was no skull left! The loose remnants with one baleful eye fell across his

shoulders, still connected to the machinery in his body.

"What in Equestria..." Glimmer breathed from beside me, rapidly reloading her rifle.

Brimstone stared in what may have been the first look of fear I'd ever seen in his eyes as Big Brutus' implants drove him to fight long after he should have died. I couldn't bring my mind to even consider what Brutus himself now felt or thought.

Directed by some sort of intelligence, he turned to view his opponent, claws ceasing their twitching to shear shut with purpose, Brutus hurled himself at my friend. Moving faster than before, as if the organic limits had been removed from how far he could go, Brutus slammed into Brimstone, and slashed at him again and again with those claws.

Behind him, the raiders cheered their Warlord continuing the duel. Every grasp sent Brimstone reeling, as without Mac's armour he was driven back by the lightning attacks of the... cyborg? *Robot*? I had no idea what Brutus even was now!

Brimstone, in a desperate move, rammed his shoulder into Brutus' hips and clenched his legs around both of the claws. He tried to hold them down, weighing his whole strength into it as he wrestled and flung his bodyweight, trying to drag Brutus to the floor. But without the suit, without the powered strength, it was never going to be enough. I'd seen this very thing proven before.

Big Brutus was stronger than Brimstone Blitz. He didn't tire out. Injuries didn't decrease his heights of power. Now, those broad shoulders shifted and the thick metal forming the joints began to whirr and hiss as Brutus widened his arms. Slowly, then easily, he broke Brimstone's grip. Heart in my mouth, I witnessed Brutus sweep around and up, lifting Brim atop one of his claws and slamming him to the ground.

Twisting in the air, Brim managed to land on his side rather than his face and then roll his big body to retreat. His blocking hooves were battered away, his guard opened and reduced him to frantic dodging from each snap of the minotaur's cutters. Brim was stumbling, limping, losing.

The roar of the Bloodletters echoed around the Mall. Their immortal leader returning to life before them. The god they believed in fighting again. The sights and sounds drove them to new heights of frenzy, as raider after raider dropped into the plaza. They rushed from the upper levels or swarmed out from the back corridors to the site they knew would be the final battle. They wanted to taste it, share in its bloody glory.

"Find cover! Get the survivors safe! You! Get out of there, you'll be left behind!" Protégé dove aside as buckshot scattered around him, firing up at the level above us as he crawled and rolled behind the ruins of the fountain to reach the pony he'd shouted at and pushed them to get away. Around him, slaves tried to help the injured and weak away. Ponies carried others on their backs or dragged them by biting rags. Those who could move fled back to their cells, as the raiders descended, firing as they came.

Seconds later, they met the slaves head on. Muscular raiders leapt and bounded into close combat, raising blades and spikes ahead of them or blasting with shotguns and submachine guns. We met them with rifle fire and chattering pistols, before they swarmed among us and it became every pony fighting for themselves. A mixture of close range firefight behind what little cover existed to the levels above between bouts of brawling and clashing weapons.

"Forget about meeee?"

Glimmer shrieked beside me as a machete dropped down over her back. Spinning, I saw her armour broken and falling off her as it cut the straps holding it on her body. Below that, a long and deep cut began to bleed over her white coat.

Wildcard limped toward us. His body was coated in shrapnel, including one penetrating through his cheek like some enormous piercing. Then he raised a hoof and took in the chaotic war around us all. From the skies above to the ponies rolling over and over one another mere feet away.

“Don’t you have to love what I’ve crafted? Ol’ Brutus thinks real ‘straight-forward’ like. I’ve got the eye though, see?” He tapped an exposed eyeball with the tip of his blade, “I see the beauty in chaos.”

“Glimmer!” I tried to pull my sister away. I could see one of Brutus’ dropped healing vials, maybe if...

A rock dropped on it, courtesy of Wildcard’s magic.

“Awww. Too bad. It’s not even yours! Ever think about that? No, always so concerned with your *own* wants, not mine! Why never me!? *Why never me, daddy, huh? What do—*” He paused, then seethed with fury, “*I’M GONNA MURDER YOU!*”

Glimmer screamed in agony as she, through some incredible force of will, pushed her slashed body up and galloped a short distance to put herself out of reach of Wildcard. Immediately, she collapsed, her back opening as the wound was twisted. I could see tears in her eyes from the pain, I could—NO!

Magic grabbed me. I was yanked toward Wildcard through the air, no matter how much I struggled. That machete floated worryingly.

“You never saw it last time, pink dream! You didn’t! Maybe you don’t hate me enough yet to do what *I* want, huh? Ever think about what *I* want in life? It’s always *you, you, you!* Well I’ll make you see me!”

I felt his blade over my throat. Tears dropped off my cheeks. Not again. Not again! Oh Goddesses, no no no!

“You think it can’t happen? What about everypony else I’ve killed today who won’t find their family again? They’ll just disappear, unimportant! It’s only the names you know that’s important, right? How many of you out there stopped caring about the nameless ones until one whose name you know was threatened?”

I felt my skin part near my windpipe. It was going deeper, running across. Blood dripped down my neck. Glimmer’s eyes turned to horror, as I saw her reaching into her pack.

“So here’s one for you! One you’ll all fucking *care* about!”

I felt his muscles tense. The second blade touched my back. Slice and impale. I could feel my scars being broken as they went for the same places. Terror gripped my heart enough that I couldn’t even scream or beg. To my right, Brimstone was stricken down by Brutus, slammed through a piece of skyship hull. I could see Protégé spot me, but he was pinned down, panic in his eyes. Coral Eve was staggering, her horn surging with uncontrolled energy, having overused her magic. Please, somepony—

A blue flare exploded from the end of Glimmer’s rifle.

I saw the bullet fly true, just like she said it would. I felt Wildcard’s head twist and the machete start to push deeper before yanking off me to let him spin in the air as the talisman-enhanced round she had given Diamond erupted from the heavy rifle.

Dropping me, Wildcard spun on the spot as it slammed into his shoulder and tore a huge chunk of flesh clean out.

Then it hit the wall behind him, detonating on the concrete rather than inside Wildcard’s flesh.

Wildcard finished his spin, bowing at the end of it, despite one leg standing uselessly

from its destroyed shoulder. His magic flared brighter, as telekinesis wrapped around the dead limb, acting like a magical brace to move it by his mind instead of his body.

Then he just smiled, like he didn't even feel pain like the rest of us.

"Saving that one, huh? Oh how *obvious*, pink dream. Trying to end our little feud with the very bullet you gave to the stallion I killed? What made you think I wasn't waiting for that? Come ooooo! I can fight with a wound, can you? Well?"

Falling to the ground, I tried to back off quickly, but my tail was tugged back by telekinesis. Glimmer's mouth hung open in disbelief that her enhanced bullet hadn't done it.

"C'mere, runt!" Wildcard lifted me upside down by the tail, as my whole view inverted and the blood started to run to my head. He was red, coated head to tail in gore, his own and his that of his enemies. He had been blown up twice, had lost most of his shoulder, been burned to the muscle on his back, but he was still happily smiling.

"What are you?" I whimpered at him.

He smiled at me, before licking the side of my head like a big dog, "I'm the most sane pony in the room."

His machete drew back. I screamed as it began to spear forward.

Sunny careened into the side of the blade, tackling the flat part to knock it aside before pushing onwards into me. I felt myself clutched and rolled with before being thrown away. Hooves came down near my head as three ponies fought with empty guns above me. Sunny got herself up, bucked a raider, stole his pistol, and blasted every shot it had at Wildcard. The meaty unicorn danced and advanced around each one.

"What are you doing!?! You're not even supposed to be here! Aren't you meant to be *dead* long ago or something, you little shit?"

Weapon empty, Sunny kicked me to get me moving.

"Murky, get out of the plaza, before—"

She shrieked. Her body went stiff as Wildcard's lightning-like spell struck her from behind, before falling on the spot, stunned and twitching.

"Fucking told her." Wildcard spat on her, before recovering his machetes, "Now, back to our regularly scheduled not-so-fucking weekly killing."

He turned menacingly toward Glimmer, before breaking into a run. I fired my grapple-gun, only to have it slapped from the air by a magical surge. Sunny was immobile. I couldn't hear the others. I could only see Glimmer frantically reloading her rifle, panic on her face and pain in her eyes from her back being moved while wounded.

She fell backwards as Wildcard leapt and descended, both machetes rose. Glimmer brought her weapon up, braced on the ground beside her.

"You already used the special one, pink dream! The cliché's dead! So what if you just—"

That same blue flare erupted a second time.

I saw the look of surprise on Wildcard's face. Genuine surprise. I saw him try to react, try to twist, but it lacked the speed of his apparent foresight from before. The magically enhanced round blasted through his grinning mouth. Wildcard's brain exploded out the back of his skull.

He landed short of her, falling dumbly every time he got up. I could see the empty space inside his skull dripping nausea-inducing fluids.

"But... but you only had one. The special one..."

Glimmerlight leaned on the bin, the rifle dropping from her grip.

"I made one before for Diamond. What made you think I couldn't make another?" She

forced a grin. "What's wrong? Not dramatic enough to pull the same trick twice?"

Wildcard fell to the ground, balancing briefly on his hind legs, then all four.

"That's... not how it works. It was... his..."

He reached out with a hoof, before wobbling and falling over in a curled-up heap, his eyes glazing over, as what had happened to the back of his skull finally caught up to whatever drove him to keep speaking.

Finally. Whatever had given him his almost supernatural perception was—

My body froze as he suddenly sat up and looked around. That empty skull, in a way I'd never understand or be able to explain how it was possible, bobbed and turned.

His eyes found mine. They held a far away look, wide with tiny pinprick pupils that shivered and turned in opposite directions.

"You're not going with them."

Then, he laughed. A horrible, maddening, choking laugh of unrestrained glee and sadistic joy. Even as everypony in the area turned and unloaded every single round they had into his spasming and dancing body, he laughed.

Even after he had fallen, and his throat long made silent, that laugh continued to echo around the Mall above the battle, wavering back and forth from ear to ear and leaving me with a cold sweaty dread on the back of my neck.

My sister stood up, limping over to support herself on me. Despite the hell going on around us, she took a second to get her breath, tying a bandage around herself, before looking down at her rifle.

"Rest easy, Rough Diamond. Your pink dream's gonna' do better now. Just like you did."

I didn't know what else to say. Instead, I just hugged her side as I helped a stiffly-moving Sunny bandage her up, sheltering at the side of the plaza as the battle swept into it and ponies began to run around the area we'd just fought in. Raiders and slaves fell from the balconies, getting up to keep fighting more as everything spilled into the centre for the end.

"Help! *Help!*"

Ponies fled in all directions as raiders cut down those resisting in the plaza. Surrounded, running out of ammunition and running low on fighters, the Mall's defenders were being depleted at a horrifying rate and in often even more horrifying ways. Any left in the open were being cut down. Few escaped.

We'd managed to pull back into a couple of shop cells on one side, but the raiders controlled the upper levels, and had turned the entire plaza into a vast melee. Clubs, auto-axes, knives, and pistols were swung, fired, and thrown just to keep the hordes out. Behind the front line, lay the rest of the survivors we'd found from the massacre down here before, along with any slaves that Protégé hadn't been able to get up to the aid station in time, possibly the only other defended place in the entire building.

Behind Sunny, a raider slashed with a knife and she yelped as it sunk into her shoulder. She fell with the brute, smacking him again and again with the butt of her rifle. Protégé shot two, before the third bowled him over. A couple of ex-soldiers turned to fully automatic on their rifles and sprayed at the swarm of feral ponies, expending all their remaining ammunition to give us even a hope of keeping them out for a few seconds longer.

Brimstone Blitz, without his armour, wounded, and on his last gasps of energy, clasped

his hooves around Brutus's waist and swept him to the side, powering the monster into the pillar beside the cell. In return, the taller body he was holding began to wildly buck and kick, impacting on Brimstone's head with its metal elbow again and again until the raider let go.

He was the only one of us still outside the cell, still 'protected' from the rest of them by Brutus' commands to be his prey alone. Even as I watched from my place behind a cash register in the shop cell, I realised that was the truth. Prey. Brimstone was outclassed now, bereft of his armour.

Spinning, one of those claws swung down at the earth pony, who only barely ducked out of the way, being just clipped. Even that touch was enough to buckle his shoulder and drive Brimstone to the floor. Snapping forward, Brutus stamped and drove down again and again to Brimstone. Those claws impacted on his ribs, his skull twice, three times.

They went for his midsection, aiming to cut. To snip. Twisting to avoid, Brimstone left himself open and the claw descended.

The dull noise felt wickedly sharp as Brimstone fell. He toppled to the side, was caught and slammed into the ground hard enough to buckle the paving beneath them.

Then, he lay still. Very still.

The slaves seemed to pause. Those he had saved stared out at the pony they had rejected, now defeated. Glimmer was screaming something. I just stood in shock.

All that planning and even the armour, but Brutus had still won. The minotaur might be dead, driven only by implants that didn't know when to turn off, but he had still won for his raiders.

"Let's go!"

Protégé screamed out to everypony, pointing at Brutus. With Brimstone clear of his massive assailant, a firestorm tore into the minotaur from everypony without a raider coming at them. Glimmer, Sunny, and Protégé fired, as did I with *Rarity's Grace*, for what it was worth. Bullets sprung off armour or bit into flesh, driving Brutus in the wall. Roaring, Brutus fell against the concrete, coating it in blood and sparkling liquid as he used those metal arms of his to shelter from the gunfire. One by one, our magazines and weapons ran dry, while the beast remained standing.

Then he came for us all.

I had seen him go for others, but seeing this headless, machinated beast charging for all us ponies made me fear my mane would turn white with fear. Brutus surged through the raiders. One sweep of his arm sent four others crashing aside.

Coral Eve exploded into the plaza from our cell, sending the raiders hurtling back out the doors at a speed that broke bones and snapped necks. Turning to the beast, she grit her teeth and lit her horn. Brutus charged and her magic slammed forward with what sounded like the sonic booms the Skyships made.

Brutus was thrown over. He got up, he charged.

Her horn flared, screaming her lungs hoarse as she hit him again and threw him end over end.

She hit him again and again. Every time, he would get back up and every time she would grow less powerful. The pain on her face was clear, her horn glowing dangerous, sparking and ready to burst the spell.

"I... I don't know if I can." Coral seethed, as Brutus began to stomp toward us, building speed again.

One last effort from Coral sent a blast so strong that even some slaves were caught up in it by accident, blasting Brutus head over hoof, hurling him onto the fountain's remains. No different, he got up and continued his efforts, stalking toward us. Then running, then leaping. I saw those claws extend, ready to descend.

An enormous red figure came down from above him, leaping from the fallen rubble. Using his weight, the size of his body, Brimstone Blitz landed atop Brutus. Wary, but fired up, seeing us in danger, he cast aside the snatching claw and drove Brutus to the ground enough that he could get a grip on the machine. Roaring, half in rage and half in pain, he lifted Brutus clean from the ground and used his hind legs to unsteadily rush them both in the opposite direction from us, stomping over some of the raiders recovering from Coral's magic to plough Brutus through a wall.

"GO!" He screamed, before the minotaur could recover.

Protégé charged from the cell, revolver firing and reloading as fast as he ever had, before waving his hoof to the others.

"Come on! Get the survivors clear to the stairs! Get them out of the plaza!"

He ducked and lifted a charging raider over his head, driven to combat feats I'd never seen him do by sheer adrenaline; before turning to execute them on the ground. Behind him, others moved out. Coral was lifted by two slaves, as Sunny got her new-found team to help cover Protégé. With them, the injured and the raiders' newly freed prisoners began to sprint for the stairwell, led by the ex-soldiers, now grabbing raider shotguns from the floor.

The raiders were getting up again. They were regrouping even as we put down as many as we could from Coral's attacks. I tried to help Glimmer to the stairs, before another team of raiders began to fire from above.

"Protégé!" I screamed, pointing at the raiders now taking pot shots at us. *How many of them were there!?*

Below, with us, they were furiously charging again to our weakening ranks. We didn't have the ammunition to truly kill them all after Coral's magic, and we were paying that price now. Close combat was their speciality, and very quickly they began to hurl themselves into us again. If we fell, the aid station would too. We'd come this far but we were just being overwhelmed.

At the edge of my vision, I saw Brimstone being thrown clear of the shop again.

The stairwell was blocked by the raiders above, pinned down. Deep in my throat, I felt blood begin to gather and bubble in my lungs. Before I knew it, I had to fall and clutch my stomach as the dust kicked up got into my airway, as the Battle of Fillydelphia's smoke and smog kept my sickness high. Gasping for air, I tried to get to the side, throat burning.

We were going to die here. After all this time, all this distance, we were going to die.

I was going to die.

I didn't... I didn't want to d—

"Into them, my ponies! Throw them out!"

That was List Seeker's voice.

Above us, the raiders on the balcony were suddenly very distracted and then screaming. I saw other heads emerging. Other ponies. The sick, wounded, and scared.

The ponies we'd been protecting.

Anyone who could possibly swing a hoof or throw a scalpel was joining in. Raiders mercilessly cut down the first ones, a submachine gun tearing through four slaves, but two or three other ponies would fall on them. I saw the badly hurt, the protected, forcing

themselves into the fight for their own freedom. I saw Unity, List Seeker, Weathervane, Cosh; the nurses and doctors, Blunderbuck and his assistants, and every other pony who could move their hooves hurl themselves into the fight. I saw a raider fall with only a magical spark as Weathervane numbed every limb on his body. I saw List Seeker cough up blood even while forcing his body to give just one more strike. Just one more swing with a metal pole. Unity held a cooking pot in her magic, that she swung with a fearful desperation at any raider who came within her magic's reach.

They surged around the balconies to protect the ponies who had been dying to defend *them*, before pushing down to the plaza.

Protégé reloaded and charged in. At point blank range, he shot raider after raider, leading the defender force to join up with who we had once considered non-combatants. Slowly, we became a grouped force, one that made a counter-attack.

Along with them, I found myself joining in, my last effort of the battle as I saw just one more act through with my sickened body. With a cry, I went with those running forward. Leaping on the back of a raider, I beat my aching hooves on his skull, wishing I had my old metal ruler, the weapon of kings! Coughing even as I did, hacking blood onto his neck, I struggled to hang on as he tried to throw me off, before two ponies piled on him to end his struggles. Moose and Lemon, my old FunFarm bullies, fell upon the raider with a gang-style beatdown, not caring for me being there. They had freedom from slavery on their minds now. Another pony caved in the raider's head with a full cash register he'd pulled to strike with.

The ponies around us took that as their moment. Our one hope.

One last breath to be taken.

And they *fought*.

I didn't know who had done it, who had inspired them, but together, we took the fight to the raiders. All of us, friends and comrades. A propped up Glimmerlight and a protective Coral shot and blasted ponies away from the stairwell, as Protégé organised those coming back in to fight as one. Surrounding the centre of the plaza, we lashed out, worked together, and fought for our freedom. Many ponies had been put here by these raiders, many had lost friends to them. I witnessed Glimmer throw an energy grenade to Protégé, who with unerring accuracy sent it flying through a small gap in a shop window to kill off an outpost of raiders inside. I saw Coral scream and hurl four raiders into the air, where Sunny picked them off like a sport shoot. I pulled a wounded pony from harm by looping my grapple around him and using the winch to tug him away from gunfire. From near the entrance, a burst of furious laser fire tore through the raiders, as the malfunctioning but shifting body of Mister Peace somehow managed to operate for one brief moment. Briefly, as he saw me, one metal arm raised in a salute.

Yet behind me, came that electronic howl.

Six raiders and slaves were crushed as Brimstone and Brutus came into the melee. Hooves and claws smashed and dodged, forcing raider and slave alike to scatter before them. Both were moving slower now, from damage or exhaustion. Compared to the opening stages, they seemed lethargic and striven to make each blow connect. The effort to move on Brimstone's face was painful to see, as was the body of Brutus being torn up by his own cybernetics trying to go beyond what his body could cope with.

Yet Brutus was still winning.

Together, they grappled, wrestled, and threw one another across the plaza. Brimstone got

a hoof against Brutus' damaged shoulder and slammed it again and again against the wall, before Brutus rose up and slammed down. Clutching his skull, Brimstone was knocked toward the stairwell, where slaves, many of them terrified of him as much as Brutus, screamed and backed into a corner.

Brimstone saw them, the same ones who had insulted him out of fear before. The same ones who had stayed back in terror in their cell. They begged him to go away.

Brutus collapsed atop Brimstone, those claws reaching for his limbs, aiming to snip them clean off. Brim held on to Brutus, staying inside the reach of those claws, straining and struggling to push the beast back from these ponies behind him. I could see Brim's teeth gritted, his eye clenched closed. His limbs were shaking, his body weakening.

"Go... run! RUN! I can... hold him."

The ponies were frozen in fear.

Brimstone couldn't hold him long. Big Brutus showed why he had his name, as he lifted and sent a claw over Brimstone, aiming to get to the slaves, before gurgling some word from those emitters around his ruined neck, words without a mouth.

"Ponies! MINE!"

The claw raised, and the slaves screamed. Brimstone, held still, unable to move or risk being slashed in two, watched Brutus try to reach them. A deadlock of immense strength between them holding both rock solid.

Trying to remain hidden, I fought to take my eyes off it, but found them held glued by the horrible sight. My friend dug his hooves in, trying to hold Brutus still, trying not to let that claw get around his own waist, or the other one reach the ponies behind him.

"MINE!"

The claw dug into the concrete and ripped chunks free, nearing them.

"MINE!"

Shots powered into Brutus' back. They didn't have any discernible effect.

Brimstone Blitz lowered his head, keeping it pressed against Brutus' chest, keeping away from the claw, keeping the minotaur in one place. Baring his teeth, I saw his one eye open. He could see all I could, see ponies fighting and dying for something. For a chance. To see the weak fighting the strong.

Somehow, I just knew that he saw what he wished he could be to the others, and it lent him the strength. The strength to give them a chance, no matter what.

Roaring, ducking down, he pressed with all his might in a new direction. Lifting Brutus from beneath, he pressed the monster directly upwards to break the deadlock, lifting the beast a good ten feet off the floor. With one mighty heave, Brimstone threw Brutus directly upwards.

The claw shot out, seeing its target, the head of the old Warlord. Even as he was in mid-air, Brutus didn't stop. He saw the opening and threw his body out in the only way it could while off the ground, by swinging one of those mighty arms down before he could land, closing toward Brim's head.

I didn't even hear my own scream. Only felt the pain in my burning throat as it emerged.

Brimstone didn't dodge.

Experience prevailed. He *anticipated* it. He threw his whole body around the cutting tool as Brutus descended.

Both of the mighty warlords came crashing down. Rolling, clutching the claw tightly, Brimstone threw himself away from the slaves and dragged both of them over and over onto

the ground. Making the other claw, he flung his whole weight over, tugging the first arm with him, using his own weight on top of his strength to overcome Brutus' strength through sheer experience and technical skill to flip the beast over. He came to a rest atop Brutus with the claw arm in his hooves before sitting, ripping and straining his muscles like never before to *pull* at the arm.

I'd seen him lift a buffalo, out-wrestle Chainlink Shackles, and kill a pony in one strike, but here he sought to quite literally tear a heavy metal fixture clean out from something stronger than he was. Arcing his head back, roaring like a dragon, he stepped one hoof on Brutus' back before *ripping*. The minotaur belched static and roared in tandem, the free arm unable to traverse that far back on its clunky hydraulics to reach behind himself or lift both their weights alone. Brimstone made a sharp pull, then another. Then one almighty *tug*.

In a spray of fluid and sparks, Brutus' arm came clean off. Brim turned it, using it like a weapon to slam onto Brutus' back. The claw at the end opened and closed, malfunctioning with vicious power, before Brimstone upended it, waited for it to open, and pushed it around Brutus' midsection.

The claw closed, and in an electric screech that felt like it burst my eardrums, the cybernetic figure of Brutus flailed, broke, and split in two beneath its own weapon. Tearing upwards, Brimstone ripped out the power source at the centre, built around a heart forced to keep beating, before crushing it beneath his hoof and roaring to the heavens above, the claw falling from his grip as he threw the broken body to the raiders. As the mighty beast's carcass crunched and tumbled amongst them, Brimstone himself stumbled and fell to his knees, head low and bearing a vicious look.

Around us, raiders were stopping. They saw their warlord, their god, fall. They saw the split figure on the ground, the crushed heart, collapsed head, and the torn limb.

Stolen of their leader's presence, the raiders seemed to freeze, to lose interest. They howled, cried, fumed like pack animals, half-broke and half-bickered. Just as Brimstone had said, they floundered in their rage, stolen of their intensity.

That was when the slaves made their move.

Myself, Glimmer, and Brimstone played no part in the remainder of the Siege of the Mall. Together, wounded or sick, we limped and clutched to the edge of the war. Around us, Protégé, Sunny, and Seeker led the Mall to victory, as they finally managed to push out of the plaza amongst the heartbroken raiders. The last of their warlords, the last of the Big Four, were finally gone.

And with Brimstone's last mighty duel, the Bloodseekers became history.

And finally... finally, the Mall was clear.

It had been bloody. It had cost us enough that the floors were forever stained with the bodies of those who wanted freedom, but we had done it.

I witnessed the ponies stuck on the ground floor emerging. They moved around Brimstone. He was tilted and weary, utterly spent and looking like every one of his long years had suddenly come crashing down on his shoulders. Even as he tried to stand, his legs gave out and his massive body fell to the side, landing against the ruins of a pillar. His one eye turned as his whole body rose and fell from heavy breaths, silently regarding those who had spurned him. Ponies he had put in this city.

Slowly, the mare who'd been in range of that great claw moved forward and tearfully hugged him.

As the last raider fled, and as we watched them strafed in their retreat by the Enclave, we saw figures on the rooftops turning to leave as Glimmer's radio intercepted those much sought after messages.

Orders to leave the Mall alone, that it was consuming too many resources from the bigger war. Outside, we could see the slavers on the nearby rooftops beginning to move away from us.

The Battle of Fillydelphia was not over. Not by a longshot. The city burned and wreathed itself in the fires of battle between slavers and pegasi that carried across every street we could see. Stern and the Enclave were locked in a deathgrip of violence that was growing more desperate and bitter by the hour. It would rage for hours to come and be the backdrop for anything we did now.

But for one small moment, in one comparatively small building, there was a victory. Our victory to keep who we could safe from the hell outside.

We'd done it.

Somehow, under the full war and an invasion of those who had held fear over ponies in here for years, we had done it. We had done the impossible. I hadn't seen any of my friends die. We had taken ponies in and we had protected them, held on to our care and healing specialists.

We were heroes. All of us. Surrounding me, ponies cheered, clapped hooves, and hugged one another. More than a few, even ones who had spurned my wings, screamed to me or patted me on the back as they went to their own friends. We had survived.

Then, beside me, Glimmerlight collapsed.

In the aftermath, I found myself sitting outside the aid station.

Glimmer had been rushed inside by Brimstone, who now sat opposite me with a very nervous-looking nurse trying to tend to him. The big raider was lying on his side, his eye half-closed and looking close to dropping into a deep sleep. Pink welts covered the massive rends Brutus had made in his body, where Weathervane had used intense healing magic to try and close them. Black bruises showed up through his course coat, and half his face looked swollen. It was becoming clear that Brim's fighting was, for now, done.

I'd met him as a raider seeking redemption with little hope of ever managing it. How far he'd come.

How far we'd all come.

Earlier, we'd watched in on Glimmer, but as more and more wounded had come, we'd been ushered out. The moaning and crying from inside the room told of how crowded it had become as things ended. One sight of that room had effectively killed the sense of victory. It had been all I could do to keep the RadAway I'd drank down.

Over half of the ponies who had come here for salvation were now dead. Another quarter badly hurt. Of those who couldn't fight, a full third of them had been slaughtered in the plaza floor at the start by Brutus.

We'd won our right to be left in peace for now, but it had cost us dearly.

Something Wildcard had said struck deep when I realised I was only thinking of

Glimmerlight in there right now, not the dozens of others calling for potions or help.

With a light squeaking of a broken wheel, I heard the approach of Mister Peace. Turning the corner into the aid station area, he slowly trundled toward us with Unity perched on his arms.

The moment our eyes found one another, I was up off the ground, and she was down from his arms; as we ran into one another's hooves and held on tightly. I was crying. I was pretty sure she was too, as we just held on. Even those few seconds of exertion sent my body into weary pain, and our tight embrace slowly faltered into a tired leaning.

Behind her, Mister Peace continued his own repairs to his chassis with great care, now looking a good deal less pristine than he had before. His screen was still badly flickering.

"Murky. I... I..." Her voice stammered under sobs, and yet I found my own did too. My tears simply ran down her back. In pain and relief in equal measure. I felt her eyes wet against my neck as I saw the bloodied bandages around her shoulders and a vicious bruise on her back. I wasn't much better, even after a couple of high strength potions.

"Glimmerlight, is she—" Unity started, then stopped as she leaned back and looked me in the eyes, "Mister Peace said she was, um, hurt."

I looked down, my wings drooping, "We-Weathervane says she lost a lot of blood a-and because there's s-so much radiation in the air from the dust we all need RadAway but..." I gulped, "she can't take RadAway."

Unity bit her lip, "Is she—"

"I don't know. The radiation's making it hard. Weathervane's working on her personally, brewing up some RadPurge. We couldn't stay in there. Weathervane ordered us out, even Brimstone. The only one he couldn't get to move was Coral Eve. She's by Glimmer's side."

Neither of us really knew what to say after that.

"It's still a win for us." I choked out.

"I know. We saved so many. Just doesn't feel like it. It's foolish but I always sorta' hoped we'd not let anypony die at all. They say it's worse outside."

In the distance, away from our brief peace, I could hear the roaring flames surging through the city, and the steady but unending thump and rattle of bombing runs and anti-air fire. The slaves caught out in that, I just couldn't imagine it. We'd even heard rumours of living shield tactics.

"And the orb." Unity continued, looking pale and withdrawn, "Shackles got it from us, right under our noses. I know it's not our *only* way out but just... Aurora trusted her spell to stop the memory nexus to me before she died a-and the orb was always to be our way to round it all off. He wants us, but who's to say he won't find another two ponies years down the line, after we're gone? Aurora died thinking I'd stop it forever. I know she understood I wasn't expected to do anything heroic but..."

Unity paused and sighed, "Sorry, I'm tired and rambling and worried..."

"S'ok." I had to take a few seconds to gather my energy to speak any more, "f-for all we know, we might get it back when we go for the foals, right? Shackles might be... and we can steal it off him."

Her hoof lightly rubbed my shoulder, before she rested half on the wall and half against my side, "What happens, happens... I suppose. Too tired to think more than a few minutes ahead. Just hope for your sister, Murky. Whichever way it ends, we still did the right thing here, today."

Slowly, I felt Unity and I lean on one another as tiredness crept over our bodies, and

stayed like that for however long it took. Minutes may have turned to hours. I may have dozed, or sketched aimlessly. I looked at the drawing I had done of my friends. I could see myself, Coral and her son beside Caduceus, and then Unity beside me. Behind them all, Brimstone towered above Glimmerlight, who was grinning beside Coral.

I had at least one more I wanted to add to it, but I just couldn't bring the energy to do more than randomly draw lines in the vague shape of Skyships and wings after the first. Unity watched, but said nothing. Around us, other ponies concerned for their own friends began to filter in to wait. Every so often, some would sigh in relief, while others sadly trotted away. More than once, some Enclave strike would rattle the foundations of the Mall or the thud of cannons would come from nearby. We only sat in fearful silence amongst it, waiting for news.

Finally, at last, Weathervane exited the aid station. All three of us stood quickly as he looked at us directly.

"She's awake."

No force in the world could have stopped me leaping onto that stretcher to hug my sister. Ahead of all the others, I buried my muzzle into her shoulder, wings stiffly trying to flap behind me as I cried and cried, yet laughed and smiled as I felt her ruffle my mane with a weak hoof.

"Hey, lil'bro..." she said weakly, tiredly, "next time we party my way, okay?"

"I'm just so glad you're okay!" I held on to her hoof, sitting beside her on the bed.

"Couldn't let go yet. Still gotta find you that dashing stallion." Glimmer smirked, before turning to the side and seeing Brimstone there, holding out a hoof to bump one of his, "Nice work, partner. How come you're the one who was fighting most, and yet I'm the one in bed? How do you do it?"

"Glim." Brimstone nodded his head. There was something specific about the way he worded it.

"Ever the eloquent one." Glimmer giggled, then seemed to regret it as she grimaced at the movement in her back, before her view found Coral.

The older mare stood with her eyes tellingly red.

"Coral, I'll try to be better in time for—ngh, for going after Chirpy and—"

"Hush," Coral's hoof landed on Glimmer's shoulder, "you've done enough."

Those words, shades of what she had once said to dismiss her help, now sounded entirely different. They came with a small smile and a recognition. It was all Coral needed to say, and all Glimmer needed to hear.

"Hey, Unity. Keep lil'Murky out of trouble, will you? Big sis' is gonna be in here for a while, just remember to occasionally poke fun at him about Protégé and I'm sure he'll get by."

Unity chuckled, before reaching forward to hold Glimmer's hoof briefly, as I groaned.

Glimmer nodded to the side, "Speaking of Mister hot flanks himself."

I saw Protégé limp his way into the aid station. Weaving around the rushing nurses, he approached us with Sunny in tow.

"Glimmerlight, how are you feeling?" He asked, his voice measured and polite as always, even as he looked and sounded drawn and exhausted.

"Like I've taken some Buck while drunk and accidentally bedded a Hellhound."

"An improvement, then."

"Oi..." Glimmer laughed, then gasped, "Ow..."

Protégé smirked, clearly as relieved as anyone else.

"We've been keeping eyes out, but it seems the radio intercept was right, we're being left alone. Means we finally have a chance to do what we needed," his eyes crept to Coral, "go after the foals. Now's the time we can go on the offensive, while Blunderbuck finishes that bomb. We'll need a raiding party, a small group of those still healthy to go to Shackles' den, the one with the mining just outside it. We suspect the foals are there."

"Then you know I am going." Coral Eve trotted around the bed to face him.

"Of course, but there was one other thing. We had a brief visitor leave us a message when Sunny and I were out by the front just now. Someone I never thought I'd see again."

All eyes were on Protégé.

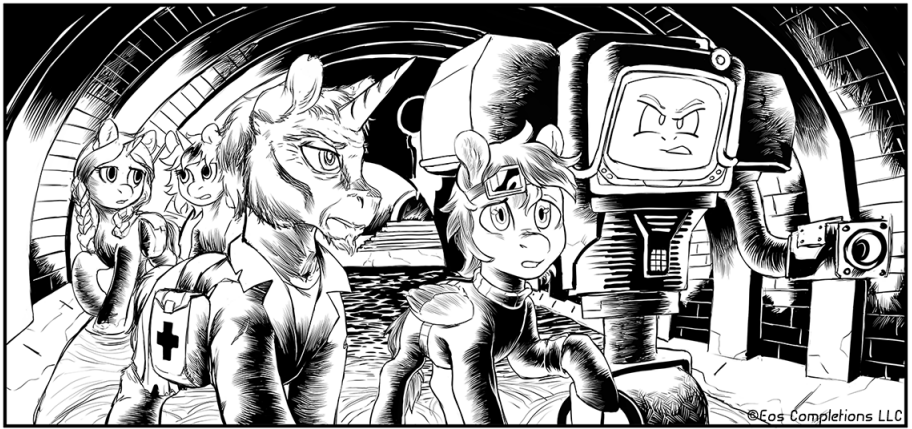
"So, who?" Unity asked.

Protégé hesitated, almost as though he didn't believe it himself.

"Xenith."

Nopony spoke, as he read aloud a note in his hoof.

"When the sky returns, make your attempt."

Duty of Care

“So? What then? Come on, don’t hesitate now, tell me! What happened next? You got Xenith’s letter telling you when to go, you’d defended everypony who came to Protégé’s message, so... did you? Was it time?”

Almost. Within hours it would be, yes. We’d won. The war barely noticed our struggle and it raged on a massive scale all around us still, tearing the entire city apart, but we had won our small part. We just had one last thing to prepare before, as you said, ‘it’.

“Small part!? It was a miracle what you all did. The Miracle at the Mall, huh? So what was next? The foals?”

Yeah, they were the final piece of it all. Chirpy Sum, Starshine Melody, Lilac Rose, and all the others torn from their parents were not going to be left behind. Coral and the other parents with us would never stand for it. Neither would Protégé. Nor any of us, I suppose.

This wasn’t our first plan, as you know. First we’d tried to escape after Stable duty. We’d gotten caught. Then we’d planned to try and use the metro tunnels to get outside the walls, until we found that the Outer Metro was just... no. It wasn’t possible. Then we had tried to use the portal in Ministry Station, get out of Fillydelphia the way that zebra infiltrators had once gotten in, except Shackles had stolen Aurora’s orb from us.

Now, we had another plan.

Get the foals, get to the Wall with enough ponies to work together, blow a hole, and be free. Friendship and hope had carried a group of weary slaves this far, driven by inspiration and a will for freedom. Protégé had given them back their reason to try, and soon he would lead them to the barrier that held them in. Now it was just a matter of collecting those that hadn’t been able to come to us.

“If you fail, try, try, and try again, huh? There’s a lot of ponies could do with remembering that sort of example when things go wrong. But hang up a tick. You said the

foals were being kept in Shackles' slave den in the Inner Metro. That's right beside Ministry Station, wasn't it?"

Shackles' Den was connected to a sealed-off portion of the Outer Metro, which led to Ministry Station; that was how they set up shop there after they found it. It's where he took the ponies he wanted to... put into his plans for the Station and the Memory Nexus within it. Where he wanted to try and influence them with Aurora's memory research, teach them to be perfect slaves by imprinting it from a projection orb into their minds.

"The den of evil. This isn't going to be a pleasant recollection, is it?"

We were walking into a place where he had free reign. Somewhere hidden away from prying eyes where he could do whatever he wanted, to anypony. This was his dream. Our nightmare.

I'd been horrified on the mountainside when I'd realised his plans for me. How he wanted to use me as his template for the others, break me, and store my slave mind on an orb to project to every other slave he brought to the Nexus for 'programming'. It wasn't just the foals, we knew there were dozens of slaves down there, trapped beneath the city in Shackles' madness. If we were getting the foals, we wanted to get them too. Doctor Weathervane felt he had to; his friends were amongst them. He couldn't stop mentioning over and over about how he had a duty to bring them home.

Foals and slaves who were stuck in hell. The most vulnerable of all ponies in the city. We knew we couldn't leave them. It wouldn't be right.

Yet in doing so, I was about to see the reality of what I'd feared. It would push one of us right to the brink, and another, well...

If we wanted to save the foals and any other poor souls still trapped in there, then we'd have to go through the darkness he'd created before we could go for that Wall. If we failed in *any* of this, then we'd have a terrible choice to make, because time was running out. Our window was closing to make the attempt.

These were the last hours before we had to start the escape.

This was the deep breath before the plunge.

No pony would have been shamed for not choosing to go, yet there was no shortage of volunteers.

Parents, siblings, and even one grandmother gathered in Protégé's old office. About a dozen in all, backed up by another ten ponies who simply cared enough to want to help. Most of them had firmly tied dressings or hastily washed bandages. Most limped. Yet the fire in their eyes made it clear. These ponies were the willing ones. The ones who would go to any length to get those foals back.

And I was proud to stand with them.

At the head of the office, Protégé laid out a map of Fillydelphia upon his desk. He had to clear debris from it, for the room was strewn with holes from the heavy machine gun that had battered the Mall. Through the gaps you could see the entire spectacle of the war played out across rooftops and streets in all directions. Every so often the room would light up as something in the distance erupted, or a gust of wind would race past us in the wake of some skyship roaring overhead at roof level.

Truth be told, replace the rocks with books and it didn't look too different from how tidy

Protégé normally kept it. The thought managed to bring a weary smile to my face as I hopped my front hooves up to see the map on the tall desk. I only felt slightly put out that Unity was just tall enough to not need to do the same.

Only *slightly*.

"We aren't looking for a firefight." Protégé spoke gently, his voice hoarse and (as I had learned) his head thumping hard from the throw Wildcard had given him. "We raided them. I spoke to Brimstone Blitz on this, and he recommends making an intimidating push to get past any defences, and then leaving as fast as possible before they have time to organise themselves. We go in, rush the doors, get the foals, and anypony else still trapped down there, then we get back here in time for, well..."

"In time for the zebra's signal."

To my left, Coral Eve and Weathervane stood amongst those slaves determined to reclaim those they had lost to Shackles' dark lair down there. It had been Coral who spoke up, her eyebrows lowering with doubt.

"I'm not sure what she was meaning. What kind of clue is that? Why even a clue?"

"I believe she was being literal." Protégé cut in. "I don't know what exactly she meant, but the way she spoke, it didn't leave much doubt that whatever it is, they have big plans that she couldn't dare pass along to us. Whatever it is, she said we'd know. Then she handed me the note and left. First time I'd ever heard her speak, so I was too taken aback and exhausted from the battle to ask questions."

"Hmph." Coral snorted and continued, "So long as you're sure. You've seen us right this far."

Anyone who knew her couldn't help but turn in surprise. I was sure if Protégé hadn't taken his eyepiece off, it would have popped off in surprise to hear that from the same mare who had not too long ago threatened to liquefy him with magic on a train car.

"My little boy is in there, Protégé." Coral's voice was dangerous. "I know you can plan well. I'm not going to disrespect anything now. Not when we're so close."

"We'll get him, Coral Eve." Protégé nodded softly. "We'll get them all."

There was a half-hearted round of cheering. They were willing, but they were also all exhausted.

"I'll bring three of my best with me, along with some nurses," Weathervane spoke up, "if what I hear about that underground slave den is true, many of them may not be able to make the journey without help. I know you're all keen to get your foals back, but everypony's going to have to help to carry the sick and injured out of there. If your foal can walk, they walk. Yeah, call me the cold bastard if you want, but I have my own friends in there to bring out, so don't dare think I'm pulling your dicks about this."

The ghoul snarled, his leathery and cracked skin crinkling and stretching into a hideous mask of pain and anger. Those around him quickly backed off in worry, as his eyes slightly glazed for a second.

"I will... save them... last thing..."

The memory of his friends, the old hospital workers, was still fresh to me after seeing their broken bodies in the metro mines, held to life only by the eternal death of their ghoul state. No normal pony would have survived what they'd been through. Now I saw a pony who knew his last remaining friends were finally within his reach to save.

"If there's a pony in there who isn't in Shackles' service, they're coming out." Protégé spoke up for Weathervane in the silence after the ghoul shuffled away from the table.

“Coral, you have made it clear you’ll be going, so we’ll need you to kick the door in if we can’t make a quiet entry. Murky, Unity, and Weathervane have also elected to come. Sunny will lead the Mall while we’re away.”

I knew he’d have preferred it to be List Seeker or Brimstone, possibly Glimmer. Unfortunately, those three wouldn’t be in action for a while.

Protégé briefly glanced at me with a thankful smile as he pointed out the route on the map to the others, an old pre-war aerial shot of Fillydelphia marked with my charcoal to show post-war changes. I’d been asked to go because I knew the entrance tunnels there and what to expect, even if I’d never been inside the place. I’d been sitting with Unity when he asked and told me I could say no and he wouldn’t think any less of me, but there wasn’t any way I wasn’t going.

I felt dearly about the foals. I knew Starshine Melody and Lilac Rose were in there, the two little ghouls I’d helped save from slavers or fanatical crater ghouls. Not to mention Coral’s son. I wanted to help. I’d spent enough days as Shackles’ plaything to want to help any other slave he had for himself down there. They didn’t deserve to go through what I had.

From beside me, I saw Unity shivering. She had volunteered, saying she’d feel guilty to be one of the more able-bodied ponies left if she didn’t, but I knew she was scared. Anypony would be.

This was Chainlink Shackles’ personal lair.

The cold shot of terror passed down my spine. I imagined him chasing us out of there as we fled, coming right up behind us as we returned to the Mall and had to make a desperate flight for the Wall, hoping we got out before he caught up.

I looked out the hole in the office, watching Fillydelphia consume itself in war between sky and ground. Amongst the shattered buildings and slowly toppling metalworks, amongst the crashed ruins of skyships and frantic firefights, he was out there.

Chainlink Shackles was out there.

And for once, we were going to *him*.

Somehow, it didn’t feel heroic at all.

“We’ll leave in an hour. Gather what you can from the armoury and bring any medical supplies we don’t need here. Until then, get some rest.”

While there would always be distant sound in Fillydelphia or the ambient noise of worried slaves surrounding us, there was for once at least a sense of quiet in the aid station. Ponies rested and recovered, either asleep from Weathervane’s magic or simply wanting to appreciate a hushed moment to let the horrific rush of the last day finally ease off.

Between Glimmerlight and myself, sitting back-to-back on her bed, there was only the sound of clicking mechanical tools and the soft rub of charcoal on paper.

That was just the kind of moment of comfort I needed. To feel my sister at my back, and the drawing before me, and imagine there was nothing else in the world for just a little while. I couldn’t have slept even if I wanted to. Instead, I drew pictures of what I remembered the world outside to be like. Tall and thick lines captured the sky-rises of Manehattan, while lightly strung curves and long motions created the rolling expanse of the Equestrian heartlands. After a moment of deliberation, I leaned forward and softly drew

lines from the sky beaming down. What I imagined sunlight to be.

When the sky returns.

Behind me, Glimmer groaned as she flexed her legs out and caused her thickly bandaged torso to bend at the wound, before she settled and I felt her rest her back against mine once more, avoiding the side with that recently closed gash from Wildcard's savage attack.

"Whatcha' drawing, lil'bro?"

"Outside."

I felt her shift again, carefully turning her body to look over my shoulder.

"Looks like home."

"Really?" I looked up at her face, my eyes widening slightly. I'd just been guessing what out there might look like these days.

One of her front legs hooked around my shoulders to tap the page of my journal over the Manehattan skyline.

"I used to see that every morning. Even when I had left, I still saw it in the distance all the time. Hard to miss. Seeing it again there, at this time? Makes me think we'll make it."

That brought a warm little feeling to my gut. It wasn't often others saw my drawings, less often that I heard somepony really connect to them.

"Hey, Murky?" Glimmer spoke while facing away, but I felt her lean backwards, the back of her head lightly touching the rear of mine.

"Yeah?"

Glimmer hesitated before speaking quietly, "It's been a hell of a journey for us, hasn't it?"

Placing down the charcoal, I nodded, "Mhm."

"Never would have thought it when I met that little defeated colt of a pony sitting on a sofa beside me downstairs. Damn. All the stuff we've been through together. Glimmer and Murky against the world, huh? The escape attempts, the moments when each of us started losing hope, the battles and digging into the past to find a way to our own future, and now here we are."

My sister sighed and continued, "It all just kept getting worse for a while. I lost count of the amount of times I thought that was it, but now we can see the finish line. We're ready to escape together, ready to be free at last."

Her voice sounded disbelieving on those last three words. I could hear very clearly the pang of emotion or dire want. We all felt it, the wish that slaves rarely dared to think might actually happen. To finally escape all the pain. Every time I thought we'd made it before, the doors had slammed shut again. But every time, I'd had her to come back to, and know I wasn't alone.

A momentary worry shot through me. Out there, we'd all be free, but what then? One particular worry seemed silly, and I regretted saying it the moment I did, but still the words came out.

"Will... will we still be around one another when we're out?"

Glimmer perked up, before she lifted up from our 'back-to-back' sitting and gave me a shocked look.

"Murky... we're friends. Beyond friends. Hell, we're basically family now."

She leaned in and clasped a hoof around my shoulders.

"And friends don't leave one another. We're the dream team, remember? You and I. It's gonna be like this long after Fillydelphia is just a bad memory. Just think, we're still both young. Sure, Filly really fucked up the first quarter or so of our lives; we can't ever fix that,

but there's still the whole rest of them to go."

Her cheek rubbed against the top of my head.

"Just imagine how we'll be making good memories. Better memories than these ones, and I promise it'll be a wild ride. Big sis' is gonna make sure you see it all! La vie Equestria! Nights on the town. Building our new homes. Seeing the world. Trying all the foods. Meeting mares... and stallions. Enjoying *life*. We've got *all* that to look forward to and catch up on, and we're gonna do it together."

She held her hoof out, a sincere but goofy grin on her lean and bruised face.

After a second, I smiled and knocked my own little hoof against hers.

"BSBFF?"

"Always, lil'bro."

Carefully, wary of her injuries, I leaned into her light hug. There were a lot of things that I'd come to realise I should be thankful for, but Glimmer really was one of the most important.

"What are you two chatting about, hmm?"

We separated, as I turned and saw Unity trotting her way toward Glimmer's bed. Behind her, Coral Eve and Brimstone were trailing along.

For a moment, I genuinely thought Glimmerlight was going to cry at seeing her friends gather around her while injured, before she sucked it up and dragged some cushions over with her magic for the others to sit on.

"We..." she had to pause and sniff, "we were just talking about all the crazy stuff we're gonna do afterwards. I was gonna start telling him about all the plans I had for a new home too. Was speaking to Brim and everything about how to find a place he knows raiders won't bother with; hopefully close enough to be a part of the main settlements this time. We won't be isolated like before."

"New home, huh?" Coral genuinely smiled, a rare expression for her. "A chance to start from scratch. That feels right after all this. I don't think I could go back to Creaky Hollow and rebuild. After this is all over, a clean break is the right thing. Start all over again."

Coral smiled at me, "And do it right for everyone this time."

I felt myself blush a little, being surrounded by the warmth of friends. I coughed and raised my hoof to talk.

"So what would you do, Coral?"

"Me?" She raised her eyebrows. "Well, you haven't gotten to know half of me yet, dear. I used to care for the foals if their parents were away, help them learn. I could set up a small school. And as Glimmer can confirm, you'll want me cooking for the town."

"Oh... my... goodness... Coral, you evil pony. Now I'm thinking of your fruit stew." Glimmer exaggerated holding her stomach in dire want, a cheeky smirk on her face.

Coral chuckled. She looked slightly awkward, still trying to get used to communicating with her old friend again. "I could certainly set up a cook house, attract traders and caravans with the promise of hot food on the road."

I couldn't deny it, my stomach fiercely rumbled at the thought. Proper food. A lifelong dream to want. A town with no more slop or scraps.

"Get that set up, you'll have all the slaves wanting to join you there." Unity giggled to herself.

"They can come. Five isn't enough to start a town after all." Coral patted Unity's hoof. "So what about you, little miss?"

Unity suddenly looked very on the spot, her cheeks flushing, before composing herself, “Well, I... I’d have to go home. Friendship City, I mean. My parents will probably want me to stay there awhile but... I’d, well... I’d love to come live with you all.”

If I wouldn’t have felt too awkward with it, that awesomely cute ‘nervously asking’ smile of hers would have made me launch myself across the room to hug her. I couldn’t even deny that thought slightly.

“I can make trinkets, ones that make you feel like somepony’s there. It’s my talent, a little memory magic. Especially now Aurora Star’s given me, well, spells she knew. I feel like I could make them better than ever. Oh, I think I explained it before though so, sorry. I mean, I could set up a shop of them? I used to sell them to long haul traders who missed their family on the road. Murky?”

On cue, I brought out the Littlepip statuette she’d made me. Unity’s magic lifted it away from me to show.

“I know it’s silly, but I do like little unquities and odd things. I could make a little shop of random items and run it to help contribute?”

“That’d be lovely.” Coral Eve held the Pip statuette in her hooves. “Your talent is a beautiful thing.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Unity blushed a little, before floating the trinket back to me.

I couldn’t *not* feel Glimmer making a not-so-subtle elbow jab into my side, before she looked at Brimstone.

“So, big boy? What’s your take? Retirement home?”

“Funny.” Brimstone slowly and flatly responded. “Feel like I want to give back. Something simple. Farming.”

“Yes, I can clearly see those dinner plates you call hooves gently pressing seeds in.” Glimmerlight teased.

“Earth pony, Glim. Just you wait and see. You think those dumb bastards in raider clans knew how to farm without us smarter ponies showing them?”

Brim winked. Or blinked. Come to think of it, I couldn’t tell any more with him.

Regardless, without saying it specifically, he’d answered my question from before. The big guy was coming with us.

My sis’ held up her hooves in acknowledgement.

“How very practical, Brim.”

“Sure, Glim. And I imagine you’ll be repairing my tools and being the town mechanic?” Brimstone smirked on one side of his cracked jaw.

“Nah. Think I’ll be mayor.”

There was a sudden outcry of laughter that set nurses hushing us from around the aid station, with Glimmer at the middle raising her hooves.

“What? Whaaat? Hey, if we’re dreaming here, I’m gonna dream big! Just you all watch! This town’s gonna be huge. Mayor, sheriff, something! Sure, I’ll build all the contraptions you need to cook or farm or for water, but I told you *all*! I’m a pony everypony should know, the type who knows all the little things. Any one of you know how to get news on the radio from afar? How to admin a caravan stop? How to make Brahmin moo louder? Thought not! I’m gonna go get myself elected! First rule of Glimmerville? Less rules! All ex-slaves get a free drink every second Tuesday while Sunday will henceforth be known as ‘Cakeday’.”

I had to hold on to her to not slip and fall from my aching body laughing. My cheeks

hurt, but yet somehow I didn't disbelieve her.

Besides, that drink rule sounded good.

Unity smiled at me, struggling not to keep laughing and looking like she was genuinely interested in hearing my thoughts. "Ahaha... hey-hah, Murky? What would you want to do?"

Of course. I was the one in here who'd never gotten a chance to make anything of it before.

"I..."

Suddenly I noticed everypony else looking at me.

"I... I'd like to... help everypony."

There was a moment where they didn't seem to understand. Gathering my words, I sat upright and held my journal to my chest.

"I've always had a job, all my life. Somepony telling me what to do. I want to be able to choose what I do each day."

Gulping, I continued.

"I'd like to just have no plan, s-sorry if that sounds not as helpful and dedicated as any of you. But it's what I want. If I wanted to come help sell things in Unity's shop or help make the evening's meals with Coral. I could help Brim plant seeds, or gather the food, or even help Glimmer with whatever trouble she gets up to each day."

I snickered slightly at that, trying to make a joke. The others giggled slightly, and I felt Glimmer nudge me from behind.

"Lil'bro, not a single pony would look down on you for that. It's a big step for you. You do what you want until you feel settled and safe, and if you ever think of what you want to do, we'll all support you in doing it."

There was a brief, slightly embarrassing round of nods and muttered agreements from the others. I felt like I'd just killed the mood, so I pushed myself to comment on something else.

"Well... I mean, I could always draw pictures to put around town or sell in Unity's shop? I could decorate the houses or sew or... things, you know? Maybe even an art gallery."

"With some of your pictures, we'd have half the stallions in the wastes in our town." Glimmer snorted.

I immediately blushed, and the others chuckled, before my ears quickly picked up somepony approaching.

"If you're okay with an art gallery..."

Across the aid station, we saw Protégé shuffling over to us with an apprehensive, cautious look on his face. He gulped, hesitating. His voice sounded unusually meek.

"...then perhaps, if you would all permit me, there could be a library too?"

In the short silence, I knew only to do one thing.

I hopped off the bed, trotted over, and gratefully hugged him to tell him that yes.

Yes, there could be.

Within the hour, we had gotten underway with little fanfare.

Leaving the rear of the Mall via our old cell's now unblocked door, we headed out into the madness unfolding around us. The sky was filled with the contrails of passing skyships, artillery shells, and glimmering sections of burnt air from energy weapons, all beneath a

mixed hue of red and orange. The clouds had turned to a colour of ash as smoke rose and mixed with them. The war had moved to other sections of the city, adding an eerily distant echo to the sounds of fighting, mixed with shockingly sharp reminders as something passed over our heads or the sight of Enclave Troopers rocketing by made us all duck behind the old generators out back.

It wouldn't do to get caught up in all that again. We had to avoid the front lines, skirt the edges of war zones, and find a path to the metro entrance unmolested if possible.

Protégé, Coral, Unity, and Weathervane were with me, alongside other ponies split between Weathervane's medical team, relatives of the foals, and those who simply wanted to help out.

The one unexpected addition however, had come just as we were about to leave.

"Good golly, Miss Fluttershy! Isn't this the most wonderful of holiday treks? Such ambience!"

In the distance, an old radio tower of Red Eye's was cleaved in two by a spinning and flaming skyship torn from the sky by anti-aircraft fire. The ground shook as the metallic pillars crumbled around the hull of the ship and brought both crashing to the ground at the edge of the crater.

I heard Mister Peace make an artificial sound of somepony taking a deep and relaxed breath as the smoke and dust cloud it kicked up washed over us, his monitor on the front displaying a cigar chewing veteran in utter relaxation.

"A museum of natural beauty."

"You, um, you really didn't have to come, you know?" I spoke as we quickly hopped through the chain fence at the rear of the Mall's grounds one by one. "We're not really going to war. There shouldn't be any fighting if we're lucky, and—"

"A NONSENSE!" He thrust an arm to the sky. **"We are IN war, Miss Fluttershy! What kind of a stallion-like-facsimile with three years extra warranty—that I suspect is expired—would I be to permit such a gentle mare to wander alone into this? Why, you could have quite the boo-boo without me around."**

I bit my tongue at correcting him as to my status as a stallion myself, feeling a little pang of guilt. It had been easy to start thinking of Mister Peace as another friend, an ally. He was. But it was always 'Miss Fluttershy'. Wires crossed to believe I was a Ministry Mare because I'd sounded a bit like her once.

I thought of him as a genuine ally, but that's where the guilt lay. I felt like I was taking advantage of him every so often.

"Why, I do believe all your little animal friends must be terrified, Ma'am. I shall endeavour to commence [ANIMAL CARE PROGRAM NOT FOUND] as soon as we find them. I am delighted that so many have come to join us!"

He grabbed the fence we were slowly crawling under and haphazardly tore it clean from the ground before hurling it across the yard, leaving a shocked Unity lying on her back, having been half way under the fence.

"Thank... thank you?"

"You are welcome, friend of Fluttershy! You. Are. Welcome."

He rolled onwards as Unity stood up and looked at me with quite the query in her eyes.

All I could do was make a half-hearted shrug and watch the big machine trundle on into the fringes of a city at war.

Protégé and I gazed at the streets ahead of us in their wrecked glory. What had once been crudely rebuilt and bearing old scars long since ‘cleaned’ up now lay ruined all over again. It was a subtle, but noticeable difference. More debris lay untouched, bullet holes and energy sears coated walls, and great swathes of knocked down homes were no longer all in one direction away from the crater, but instead lay in chaotic patterns. I could have sworn I’d been through this street before, but it was now impossible to tell.

We tried to go to the sewers we’d used before and use them to navigate unseen across the city. Unfortunately, that hadn’t ended quite how we wanted. While we had been able to piece our way through quiet areas to the sewer entrance, we had quickly discovered that it had caved in about half a kilometre into the tunnels. It had gotten us out of the area around the Mall and it would help on the way back with the trapped slaves, but it meant we’d have to go above ground.

That meant going through areas with fighting. In the next street over, I could hear the dirty cough of wasteland weapons and the whip-crack of lasers sporadically; while up ahead a group of soldiers were trying to tow a large gun. Up above, a V-shape formation of griffons soared and quickly veered away as a heavy roaring of artillery shells passed through their airspace. Like runaway trains, the rounds passed above us and impacted a long way from us. The rumble and sound reaching us long after the flash had erupted from over the rooftops. Distantly, I could hear the shouting of the ponies towing that gun as they passed around the corner.

I knew the metro was in the next neighbourhood over, a ten minute trot without interruptions, but felt like it was as far away as Manhattan when thinking of walking through all that.

“Stick low, everypony.” Protégé spoke cautiously. “The longer we can stay unseen, the better. This isn’t our war.”

Gradually, we crept out from the sewer station we’d come up in and began to work our way down the street. We hadn’t even gotten fifty meters before the sound of a skyship made us all flee for the station or nearby shop fronts. I huddled in below an old wagon with Protégé, as we saw the black shape in the sky bank and dive toward the road end. Glittering energy blasts erupted from it with a sound like the roar of a dragon at some target I couldn’t see.

“Come on, come on!” Coral pulled herself out of the empty window she’d leapt through and started to rouse everypony. “We’re in more danger if we stay still. The faster we get there, the faster we can get away from this place!”

With her authoritative voice, we got underway again. In single files we moved down either side of the street, so that we could quickly hide in the buildings if need be. Stepping over rubble and ducking the fallen lamp-posts and collapsed walkways, we gradually moved into what seemed to be a market street. The bodies of several soldiers lay scattered around here, and some of the slaves behind me relieved them of their weapons as they ran past. The sounds all felt closer; every bombing run and firefight being louder and more threatening.

Looking up ahead, one of the burning buildings slowly began to collapse and spill its framework onto the street with a shower of sparks and embers. Past it, the market opened out onto a long square. After a few seconds, it clicked in my mind. I knew that one! If we passed through it, then the metro entrance was only a couple streets over! We could be there

quickly! Hastily, I patted Protégé on the back to get his attention and pointed with a nod.

"All right," he whispered, "let's—"

Up ahead, we saw figures coming toward us from beyond the square. Half-hidden in the smoke that drifted lazily from the flaming household, they came in ones and twos.

"Get cover! Hurry!" Protégé pulled me by the saddle behind an overturned scrap-wagon, the kind I used to pull, one of a group that had been abandoned by slaves in the street.

Peering up, I watched the shapes approach.

They were Red Eye's soldiers, or Stern's soldiers... whichever it was now. Their movement was hasty, before I realised they were fleeing.

They passed the market square we were headed for, just as the first burst of energy fire rang out. Ducking down harshly, my whole body reacting to the sound of close gunfire, I realised that none of it was coming at us.

Then I heard the soldiers screaming, and looked up.

Their sources hidden from my view, searing blasts of energy were stabbing out from the market square. Greens and reds lit up the smoke in weirdly colourful hues as the weapons did their grisly work. The soldiers had gotten caught in the open, and even as I watched, they were cut down one by one. I could see the energy shots chasing individuals, concentrating with horrifying precision to make the kills. They all emerged from somewhere off to the left, from an unseen part of the market hidden by the edge of the street we were in.

It stung me to hear their panicked yells as some tried to take cover while others simply put their heads down and galloped. One even tried to surrender, but the Enclave clearly had their orders. The laser fire intensified, more and more joining it.

There must have been well over twenty of them out there shooting.

Two of the soldiers made it across, out of the ten or so who'd made the attempt. They fled up the street we were coming down, heading right for us. The laser fire started to angle, as the hidden Enclave started to chase the soldiers.

The soldiers who were fleeing right toward us.

That cold wash of fear dropped down hard, and as I looked around, I saw I wasn't the only one. Our group was starting to slowly back off and stagger backwards. We heard the soldiers see us and shout for help, thinking us to be allies. They were coming right to us, drawing the Enclave in.

Then we saw the first of the black armoured figures appear at the end of the street beside the market.

And they saw us.

"RUN!"

I didn't even know who'd shouted it, but we turned and fled directly back down the street. I got my little legs firing hard as I put my head down and fought the horrible game that I always seemed to have to play, to be able to keep up with larger ponies when something was chasing us! My muscles felt rigid and stiff, and my wings wobbled and twitched in fear as ponies rushed past me, close enough to bump into me in their effort to not get left behind.

The first laser blasts begun to sting the ground around us as the Enclave took to the air and soared after us. Spinning on his chassis, Mister Peace unleashed a furious burst of heavy rounds after them that set the Enclave spinning in the air to avoid it, delaying their pursuit.

Powering my hooves as hard as I could on the hard ground, I only saw smoke and dust

and ponies leaping rubble or veering across one another to not be an easy target. Up ahead, another of those roaring freight train like sounds grew and grew before an old bank down the street from us had its front end explode into the street with a shock that knocked us all from our hooves. Wood and brick fell like rain, and I curled up as heavy bits of debris fell either side of my head.

Staggering, I was disoriented and nauseous. The shockwave had tossed my stomach and I found myself retching on the ground. Two more explosions rippled over us as something hit one block away. With red eyes, I tried to see where I was. The fighting on the street over had only grown louder. Up ahead, I could see battle saddle-laden soldiers moving down the other side of the street, pinning us between them and the Enclave. Two or three griffons bounded across the rooftops, firing into the sky. The war front was moving into this zone!

“Get up! This way! THIS WAY! Get into the smoke! We have to get out of here!”

Coughing, finding somepony yanking me to my hooves, we headed into the smoke cloud, praying it might hide us from the Enclave coming up the street behind us. We crammed onto the far side of the street as rounds started to pass either way between the Enclave and the soldiers. A firefight was brewing, and we only wanted out of it.

The pony pulling me pushed me ahead, and I saw Protégé standing beside the bank that had just been annihilated seconds earlier. He was waving down the alleyway beside it, to get us off this street. We passed foul garbage containers and low barred windows as rubble tinkled around us from the unsteady and tall building to our left, before we emerged into the wagon park behind it. Ranks of long rusted wagons, unusable and rotten, lay toppled on the other side of the alleyway.

“Coral, block the way through!” Protégé fiercely pointed to the unsteady walls of the bank.

The blue-haired unicorn looked from the bank to the wagon park, before clenching her teeth. Even amongst the pressure and choking atmosphere of the war, I felt my hairs stand on end as the air around us thickened, and I quickly warded everypony away from her.

Then, with a snap of magical force, she unleashed her unsubtle power. A telekinetic wave caught up the wagons ahead of her, hurling them into the side of the bank with enough force to crack the one remaining steady pillar. I covered my ears as they crumbled against it, smashing concrete back into the building interior and removing the last supporting pillar.

A few pebbles became a rushing avalanche of wood and stone. The entire side of the bank came down and filled the alleyway we’d passed through. Air rushed over us as bits of the walls pinged off our sides and heads.

Behind it, there came a furious exchange of gunfire, as the two sides met one another in front of the bank. Already, the air was filled with artillery and air strikes being called in to decimate one another, as the war spread through this area.

We didn’t hang around long. We had to find another way to the station. Hopping the fence to an old play park, we decided to try the next street over, hoping to stay ahead of the advancing noises of battle behind us.

My muscles ached. Not from the numerous bouts of running or diving onto hard floors to hide from passing soldiers, but from the constant unspecified terror.

It was a weird feeling. As though every muscle was clenched so hard, waiting for it all to

go mad around us, that I was hurting myself from staying too tense. It was exhausting me, wearing on me to be this close to it all. I could hear mortar impacts coming down just a few hundred metres away in a steady *crump crump crump* pattern, aiming at Enclave we'd seen on a rooftop across the park behind the building we now hid in. The slaves with us were, almost bizarrely, watching as an escaped herd of Brahmin stampeded down the street, aimless and trying to avoid all the noise.

Yet we were almost there. Up ahead, I could see the entrance to the metro. Behind us, the advancing wall of combat as Fillydelphia's defenders were being pushed back was still coming, but hopefully would pass over us while we were underground. It made sense to me that the Enclave wouldn't go down there, their strength was the air. The defenders however, were a bigger worry. We'd need to be careful to not get trapped between fleeing soldiers and Shackles' slavers.

I could see the old staff building beside the metro. That was my goal. Protégé had asked me to lead us to that instead, to 'circumvent the main opposition at the primary entrance'. (I was fairly sure he was just showing off with that first word.)

It made sense though, and I agreed entirely. It was how I'd gotten in before.

"Um, okay. Follow me?"

Taking the route through the café's old conservatory area, I began to skirt the edge of the streets, giving the main entrance a wide berth. I could see a couple fallen Enclave troopers in the middle of the road. They *could* have just fallen there from the sky, or the whole main metro entrance *could* be a big trap that they got caught in.

I wasn't a soldier, but I also wasn't stupid. So I took everyone on a long route that used the opposite side of the street's alleyways and back gardens to make my way toward the staff building and the little sneaky way I knew in. I knew that—

Freezing, I slowly lowered myself to the ground.

Protégé's hoof had landed on my back. He'd started doing that to silently alert me if the EFS tracker in his eyepiece picked anything up.

"Ere! Ere! Where you been?" A slaver's rough voice.

I could track the sound easily. They were right above us on the upper floor of the staff building!

There was a rough crackle of a radio. I looked back at Protégé and mouthed, 'how many?'

His hoof tapped me four times. It was amazing how in just under an hour we'd already started to work out ways to survive in a war zone. Even after all our fighting, this felt different. We felt alien and isolated. Back then we'd had direction and a defended position. Out here, we were just another exposed little group lacking many of the good fighters we'd had back then. We'd seen numerous individual ponies out there, pulling away from windows when they saw our group, or fleeing with a bag of belongings into an alleyway. We weren't much different from them, really. Without a goal, we might have been doing the same right now.

Behind me, everyone else had ducked down and was looking upwards with their weapons ready. Mister Peace was staying still as a robot could, almost looking deactivated.

We could easily overpower them, but we'd be giving away the game as to us being here. What if they had a radio to warn those inside?

Grabbing my journal, I started to sketch down words to the best of my knowledge. Struggling, thinking; I scrawled three words down and showed them to everyone.

mov wen xploshun

I felt oddly proud of working such a big word in there (And getting it spelled right, I was sure!), more so when everypony nodded without needing to ask what it meant. This time, the clap on the back from Protégé wasn't a signal, and the brief smile he had proved it.

Then we waited.

"Aye, the mills are a write off, mate! The pegabastards had too much open skies there. We're havin' to draw them into tall areas where we can keep them from flying far out and shooting down. Force them to come lower to see us, or better yet, inside! That's what Stern's saying to everyone, get them on the ground somehow, but she went dark about an hour ago. Yeah... yeah, no fuckin' clue, mate. We... shit!"

I heard the whistling just before he commented on his radio above us. The roaring of an incoming Enclave air strike. It hurtled above us, burning the air as it passed with that flaring energy power their weapons had. Forcing myself to grit my teeth and pray it didn't land here, I moved forward and stopped when it passed away, aimed somewhere else.

That became my life for the next half an hour. Moving a few feet every time a skyship passed, a bomb dropped, or the massive AA cannon on a nearby rooftop opened up. We moved right under their noses into an old greenhouse out back. While it may have once been a glass structure, it was nothing but a ruin of thin metal wire and shards now to creep through. While waiting, I caught myself looking around while holding painfully still, wondering if it had once supplied food to the café.

Time passed achingly slowly. Outside, an ambulance wagon went hurtling down the street, carrying wounded soldiers and (to my surprise) even an Enclave trooper. Ten minutes later, a small group of slaves came trotting past, before being startled by something and rushing away into a garden. As we advanced, I crept out of the greenhouse and into the next building to find a general store.

Eventually, slowly, I figured we were far enough away, and we departed for the next alleyway. Passing through it, we made our way to the bridge across the road to use its solid barriers as cover to cross it and eventually, mercifully, reach the staff building of the metro.

Briefly, I remembered the audio-diary I'd found in here once of ponies fearing the balefire siren tests. They'd said if it was a single note then it was a drill, but if it ever rose and fell then it was for real.

That same siren was playing a single note for very real now. Presumably someone in this blasted future didn't know that.

Those noises heralded a world of nightmares approaching for ponies back then. It seemed worryingly appropriate for where we were going now.

The miners were gone.

Detaching my saddle from the rope, I immediately rushed to the side of the doorway out into the metro tunnels and listened. On the way down, I knew they were gone. I'd have heard them if they'd been here.

Cautiously peeking my head out, I began to descend the stairs to the metro lines. I'd been sent in ahead of the others to check if the way was guarded. The others would follow in a few minutes, giving me time to rush back if we had to call things off. If all was clear, then we'd open the main entrance to the metro and bring the full group in through there. There was no way that frail ponies like Weathervane or massive machines like Mister Peace could

handle a rope slide, and then these long neglected stairs.

As though to reinforce my point, those same stairs creaked and swayed under even my weight. I could see the small flakes of rust floating off them as I crept my way down to the tunnel levels.

Eventually, after a few levels, I found myself in the small maintenance room I'd hid in before when investigating this place. After a moment or two to collect my breath, I poked my head out.

Just as I'd thought, they were gone.

The twin tunnels that made up the Inner Metro's construction stretched out to either side in slowly sloping arcs. Where once there had been lines of malnourished, sick, and slowly dying slaves lining the walls beside the rails, there were now only discarded tools and lengths of chain. Every so often, fragments fell from the ceiling from the warfare overhead, slowly covering every minecart, train carriage, and lonely pickaxe in a soft blanket of fine dust. If it weren't for my recent knowledge, I'd have assumed this place hadn't been touched in months.

Already, I began to feel a worrying grip on my heart. This didn't bode well. This *really* didn't bode well.

Stepping out, I scampered into the nearest and darkest shadow to crouch, and hold myself to the wall. Shivering, I peered down the opposite side tunnels and saw, once again, nothing. No ponies. No sound. Just a dead metro junction filled with distantly echoing sounds.

The entrance to Shackles' slave den lay between both tunnels ahead of me now. Its metal doors were tightly shut with no lights illuminating it like there once had been.

Maybe I should have—

Beep!

I stopped dead, and then bounded back into the maintenance room again, pulling the door shut as fast as I dared without making a slam.

Beep!

My heart pounded. Beeps? No, please no! I smelled the air, taking long sniffs, waiting for that dreaded tinge. I was sweating. How could they have—

Beep!

Click.

It took a second for the panic to subside, before I realised what I was hearing. It had felt like so long, I hadn't even given it a second thought and assumed it was the sound of those horrid things. It wasn't the nightmares from lower down. It was Sundial.

"Hey! Hey! Wait up!"

I spun the volume dial down. I'd had it up because of the hell going on above us, but down here it had been shockingly loud. In this desolate metro, hearing his voice was oddly soothing, like an old friend.

"Phew... Aurora runs faster than I do. We've stopped, though she's gone ahead to check something. I don't even know why I'm turning this on now, but I worry it might be the last chance I get. We're going back to Ministry Station."

With the volume low enough to only be heard by me, I moved back out into the metro tunnels. Slowly, I started weaving between the train cars, staying hidden as I scouted it out and listened for anyone else in the area, or any sign of the slaves and foals.

"It's crazy. I barely even understand it all. I just... I just wanted to work hard and get a

Stable ticket for Skydancer. That's all I wanted! Just some peace of mind, but I just kept falling deeper and deeper, and things only got bigger and bigger."

A pang of hurt shot through me. I knew that feeling. I had just wanted out, but now it was all this too. War and secrets and factions. Swallowing the emotion, I zig-zagged between pillars to check the nearest tunnel, finding only scraps and bloody stains on the walls where slaves had once worked.

"Just... all of it. The zebras wanting me to spy for them, getting caught by the Ministry and being set on this thing by Pinkie to spy on the zebras; finding out that Aurora had been forced or coerced into betraying Equestria and then learning about what she'd been making. This memory magic, it's crazy. Unicorns are sometimes incredible enough but this is insane. The things I've seen it can do to ponies. The things it can cause them to forget, or make them think. Now I've seen what the zebras want to do with it. Make unwilling ponies into willing traitors and zealots. Aurora says there's worse, when you start changing the very nature of what makes a pony a pony. She didn't talk much about it. Only to say that we had to stop it."

Sundial's voice slowed down from his almost panicked rambling.

"Aurora Star says we can get into Ministry Station. She knows it better than any of the zebras, says we can sneak to the Memory Nexus, that crazy machine she made to implant memories into ponies, and shut it down for good. I see where she went wrong, thinking it could be used for good, to help ponies learn good things or skills from orbs. I'd have thought the same. I can see it hurts her to have to destroy it, but she can always try things a new way. This needs to be stopped. We're just at the Ministry now, ready to go down to the Station. I'm so scared... I don't feel like a hero. Aurora said I was one for helping her escape the mountain lab, but I'm just so scared."

Briefly, I stopped and looked at the PipBuck, blinking away the dust. Alone in the metro, I felt very much like Sundial was giving me a heart-to-heart talk, opening up to me. It felt oddly rude not to give him attention.

"But what can I do? Zebras have infiltrated Fillydelphia and they know who I am now. If I don't help her, stay hidden with her, I'll just wake up with my throat cut. But I... I want to do this. Look, I can't explain this but just... it's right. Equestria's in danger, or at least Filly is. I've been given a road to help it. To stop ponies from being hurt. My mother always used to tell me about Twilight Sparkle and her friends. They weren't born to save others, they just did. Now I know what she meant when she told me those stories of the Ministry Mares in their young days. I'm just your average pony who got a chance to help like they did and I... I want to. I want to help stop this. I'm a part of it. I'm involved. I'm... going to save ponies."

My hooves trembled as I held the PipBuck. A curious surge of pride shot through me.

"Dad always told me he wished I'd gone into medicine instead of helping build weapons to make money. I argued, I knew why I'd done it. It paid more. But I'd always felt like I disappointed him. Now I'm realising I'm probably never going to see him again and I feel... I just..."

I heard him stutter and snuffle. He was crying.

"Dad... I wish I could just talk to you now. I only ever took that job to help save a pony I love, and I'm still trying to save her now. I was going to propose to her, you know? You inspired me. You always did. Now that I'm about to go do something so dangerous and try to save so many lives that I just... I just wish you were here to give me your advice

and so I could let you see that I really am trying to be as good a stallion as you are. I'm going to save everypony down there, Dad. Do what you do. I'll make you proud. If I don't come back, then please don't worry if you hear this. I'll be with mom, okay? I'll—"

"Sundial? Sundial, we have to go."

Aurora's voice was distant, hushed. She sounded so much younger than the ghoul I'd met on the mountain, closer to the one in the memory orb I'd seen in her office with that nasally tone.

"Okay... okay. This is it. Goodbye. If anypony finds this, please let my family know what's happened. Hopefully this isn't my last entry."

"Sundial, come on! I can feel that it's powered up, we have to go, now!"

"Coming!"

Click.

Slowly, I lowered the PipBuck and took a deep breath. Wiping my eyes with the back of my hoof, I let it all sink in.

Then I felt the hoof on the back of my shoulder at the same time as the voice.

"It's all empty."

I yelped and leapt backwards, crashing into the side of a tall mine cart. The pony behind me jumped in shock as I frantically tried to bite for my saddle's trigger.

Then my eyes adjusted to the dark a little, and I saw the dark figure of Protégé.

"How... how did you..." I breathed, sitting down and leaning my head back from the shock.

He let out a breath slowly to calm himself and half-shrugged. "I was trying to be quiet. I thought you'd have heard me. You usually do."

"I was distracted, sorry. When did you get so good at sneaking around?"

Protégé tilted his head.

"Well, we've had no shortage of practice lately. From watching you, mostly."

"Suppose." I looked away, then back again with a squint. "Wait, you watch me?"

"You're very educational." Protégé smirked and trotted past me. "The others are just coming up behind me. I went ahead just in case you'd gotten into trouble. Didn't expect this though."

He cradled the massive padlock on the slave den's doorway with his magic.

Behind us, I heard the others slowly shuffling in. A few ponies started moving up the stairs to the main entrance to let in the others.

Coral Eve entered last, before quickly cantering over to us.

"Well?" Her voice was curt, allowing for no nonsense. I could *feel* the anticipation brewing inside her. I almost felt sorry for anyone who wanted to get in her way right now.

"Place is locked up tight. No guards. All the slaves Murky and I saw here are gone, possibly inside. Like they're collapsing all their operations to the Station deeper in, now they've found it. Looks like they've decided to stay defended by offering no reason to think there's anything here. Smart."

Unity trotted past me and took a glance at the lock. "If you give me a minute, I think I could get this."

"Go to it." Protégé nodded. "The rest of us have to be ready. No guards here, but there's almost certainly some inside."

The wavy-haired mare nodded and started opening up her small saddlebag while sitting herself beside the lock to work.

In the time that passed for her to try and pick the lock, the others took a moment to get their breath back in the comparative safety of the abandoned tunnel from the war we'd just come through. I trotted down a couple of the tunnels, even checking in on the old room that Weathervane's friends had once used. Other than a foul stink, I found nothing. The walls of the tunnels were roughly hewn and scarred by the work that had once happened, and I found a few disgusting sights of those that had been left behind, or rather, their remains. A couple of skeletons resided near the corners and dead ends, a reminder of the horrors being carried out down here.

Returning to the den entrance area, I found Protégé beside the mine carts with a hoof to his chin.

"Have you asked the question yet, Murky?"

"Huh?" I trotted up beside him.

"Dozens, possibly over a hundred slaves were in these tunnels. Add on dozens of foals. They don't need miners any more, and they clearly weren't released. So, why take them all inside?"

"To help do what we saw others doing? Repairing the station?"

"These ponies weren't in any condition for any sort of specialist work, Murky. And the foals weren't taught for manual labour."

Protégé pulled the dust covers from the mine carts, more out of curiosity.

Then his face betrayed a horrid shock.

Feeling my body shiver with worry, I pulled myself up to see. Behind me, Weathervane's eyes bulged with concern. The ponies with us began to mutter and gasp.

Inside the carts were piles of belongings. Rags, face masks, blankets, bandages, and cloth bags. Everything that slaves would normally own had been separated and sorted, taken from all those who had been down here. I could swear one of the carts looked like it had bags of mane and tail hair.

Every possible thing to be stripped from a pony had been collected.

"Why... why..." I muttered.

Protégé's voice was grim.

"When they've outlived their usefulness as manual labour, what is a slave to Chainlink Shackles but a disposable resource to be used to try things no one else would? Great Equestria... that's why they were all taken in there."

"Protégé. You're scaring me. What do you mean?" My voice was quivering, I didn't understand. What did he mean by resource? What things?

Then it hit me.

Shackles had said he wanted me to be the 'Heart of Fillydelphia'. The template for the perfect slave to imprint onto others.

He wasn't going to risk me on an untested memory magic process.

Every warning, every nightmarish and twisted outcome of wrongly used memory magic came flooding back to me. Aurora's terror as she spoke of what zebras had done to refugees they'd tried it on was still clear to me.

Protégé seemed to whiten as he removed the last cart's covering. My hooves carried me rather unwillingly to look as he lowered the side panel and it all spilled out to the floor

The school saddlebags and Red Eye designed robes of the foals were piled high. Their stationary, clothing, and foal sized-items all lay together.

My blood ran cold.

Behind me, I felt the pressure in the air before I even heard Coral's voice. It was brimming with cold fury.

"Unity. Get out of the way."

There wouldn't have been any stopping her. No one with us would have dared try to tell her to not do it.

The doors to Shackles' den, inches thick in steel, folded like paper.

I felt myself flattened to my side as the surge of magical power washed back from the doors and blew all of us from our hooves. My ears rung. My eyes were stinging from the dust whipped up. Coughing the rough particles from my throat, leaning on Protégé with one hoof, I dragged myself up to see what had happened.

Through the now open entranceway, I heard the doors finally land on the other side. In front of it, Coral Eve strode in and out of sight, her horn sparking like a frayed cord in a machine.

Protégé retched to clear his throat, squinting his eyes after her. Realising this had pushed everything ahead of schedule, he frantically waved to the recovering ponies.

"Come on! Help her!"

Regrouping, readying out weapons, we galloped through after the furious maternal unicorn. I heard shouting within, the rough and guttural accent of the slavers in Fillydelphia. Warnings and swearing, before another concussive wave washed over us and kept us blind. The shouting turned to screaming. I heard things breaking.

Through all the rock dust and smoke, I couldn't see a thing as we pushed through the doorway and finally came to see the interior of Shackles' own personal den of slavery.

The first thing I saw was three slavers being catapulted across the floor toward the low brickwork arches. One of them hit the edge of it so hard he tore a dozen bricks from it, sending his lifeless body spinning to the ground.

"Where. Are. They?"

Coral's voice echoed around the dark chamber. Another blast of her magic shattered a wagon and sent slavers scurrying. Two soldiers appeared from one low tunnel to the side and didn't even get their weapons raised before the broken remnants of that wagon hit them like a furious cloud of sharp objects. Another took cover behind one of the many fallen pillars, only to find the massive stone construct launched right over him as the one mare wrecking crew tore through them with the wrath of a vengeful Goddess. Enormous objects flew around like small toys, crushing and smashing off walls. Every one of them in a singular, blunt direction. I could see her in the middle of the large room, bathed in an aura of blue and white magical light, her teeth clenched.

Finally, organised behind her, we joined the effort. Or at least, ponies capable of *fighting* joined the effort. Weathervane, Unity, and myself stayed at the back with his doctors. Protégé, Mister Peace, and the others swept past Coral on either side. Slavers either put up their hooves the moment they saw them approaching, or were quickly taken down. Coral's onslaught had broken them and sucked their courage dry before we'd even appeared. In just a short time, the slavers had either fled, died, or now sat in a close circle, held at guard by our party. They didn't look well-armed. It occurred to me they were probably just leftovers to watch the entrance from inside.

Finally, I could get a better look at everything. My first look at Shackles' world.

We'd emerged into a low room. Long and wide, it had numerous arched tunnels from every one of its walls leading into deeper darkness. Lines of chains were strewn on the ground, each dotted with collars from the lines of miners that had once been outside. Wagons were filled with rubble or confiscated objects to the right, while to the left a series of squat pillars held up the brickwork roof. The entire place felt damp beneath my hooves, slimy with mould and dripping brown water from the roof that gathered and ran between the deep cobblestones that made up the floor. It didn't look like someplace designed to be an entrance, but then the way in seemed to have been built from scratch by Shackles after he'd no doubt found this place. Whatever it was.

Yet covering all of it was an oppressive gloom, one that already felt like it was slowly seeping into my body with its claustrophobic darkness of arched walls and low ceilings. Mister Peace had to bend his chassis forward to fit in here. I could see locks on the walls for hooking chains to. Piles of foal's clothes lay scattered in stained puddles, near to rough shears and razors. Below my hooves, thin strands of hair ran in the disgusting trickles of water. Without really realising I'd done it, I found myself slowly moving behind Weathervane as the closest pony to me. The thought terrified me. I'd come so far, but this place struck right to the core of my fears in slavery.

"Coral?"

Protégé approached her carefully from the side. Her horn had subsided, and now she stood unsteadily on her feet and shivering. From the pain of using so much magic or the worry for the foals, I didn't know.

"Coral!" Protégé repeated, making her head suddenly snap toward him. He quite obviously twitched backwards. "You with us?"

Slowly, she nodded, her eyes holding nothing but an intense glare. Then, she stomped toward the slavers we'd captured. They glanced up at her, before, as one started to crawl and panic, her horn lit and began to furiously spark with magic.

"Stop! Stop! Sto—yargh!"

The closest slaver was catapulted toward her, before finding himself knocked to the ground and Coral's hoof planting on his breast. He was one of the older ones. They were a source of intimidation to the slaves and even other, younger, slavers.

Beneath Coral, he looked like a frightened child.

"Tell me where the foals are."

"I... I..."

"*Where are my foals!?* I have a son and a little filly who I only *just* told I'd adopt, don't you dare keep them from me now. *Where are they?*"

"DOWNSTAIRS!" The terrified slaver didn't even last a second, pointing his hoof toward one of the low archways that dropped off into darkness. "W-we didn't touch em up here! I promise! We were just told to take all their c-clothes and belongings and send 'em down! We're just the skeleton crew watching the door in case the Enclave came in!"

"WHY?" Her question clearly wasn't about the Enclave.

To my surprise, the petrified slaver looked confused that she'd ask.

"It's Master Shackles, w-we don't ask. We wouldn't dare! Serve and earn! Never ask! Serve and earn!"

Coral snarled, before turning and bucking the slaver hard in the side, knocking him back into his comrades with a yelp of pain. She strode away toward the indicated archway.

"Come on." Her voice was curt and stern.

Protégé watched her go, before waving a hoof to begin to gather the others near the slavers. The one Coral had questioned was lying in a curled heap, shivering.

"Right, you all heard that. We've got a lot of tunnels, and not much time. Some of them got away, so we're probably going to have Shackles knowing we're here soon, or whoever is watching this place if he's still outside. Split up and find those foals and anypony else still trapped in here. Understood? Gather them all in the metro outside and we'll escort them to safety. Any questions?"

"What is this place?" One of the stallions, a father of a lost foal, was looking around.

Protégé rubbed the ground with a hoof, and turned in a full circle.

"I don't know, but Fillydelphia used to have a lot of underground facilities even before the war started. We've seen it went as far as the Old Metro, there was a high-security asylum down there. This is probably something similar, especially if it's connected to Ministry Station like the asylum was. Just be wary, this is Shackles' domain now."

He hesitated, before speaking once more.

"You all know him. You all know what we found outside. Be careful; he doesn't have any limits on what he might have done down here."

Quickly, we organised ourselves with Protégé's help, splitting up the medical team and then by what weapons we had available to us. Several slaves began to filter into each tunnel, while the main group with the doctors would move to the biggest archway we could see, one that led to lower levels down a slope. A couple would stay and guard the slavers we'd captured.

The way most of us were going was the one the slaver had pointed to, the one leading into the depths. Others went off to check the metro tunnels, in case we'd missed anypony left behind. Cautiously, we began to descend over the lip onto the just slightly too sharp slope. Some of the taller ponies had to duck to get into the very low tunnel.

Feeling my small hooves slipping and bending over the sharp cobblestones, I began to immediately see everyone else having the same trouble. Trot too fast and your hooves began to stumble and slip, put too much weight on a hoof to support and the slimy water would make you skid and slide, as though the very floor was designed to prevent ponies trying to get somewhere in a hurry.

Or to give difficulty to someone trying to escape up here from below.

No. No that had to be me just being panicked about it. It couldn't have been designed that way. The water running everywhere had just worn down the cobblestones over time to make them feel worse than they once were, that was all.

All the same, that didn't solve the thought that Shackles perhaps saw it as an unintended design feature. Every step I took only reinforced that, as my hooves quickly became soaked in foul liquids and sore from constantly rolling over sharp cobbles.

Just ahead, I saw Unity slip and almost fall, grabbing Mister Peace's arm to keep her footing. Not a few seconds after, Protégé hissed as a missing cobblestone caught his hoof and made him stumble.

The ceiling only got lower.

Behind us, the darkness had settled in. I could no longer see the top of the slope we had begun descending. Water streamed between the cobbles, flowing around my hooves if ever I blocked its path. I began extending my wings to help myself balance. Behind me, someone fell and gagged as they got water in their mouth.

That worry, that dangerous little thought in my mind began to get louder. I *knew* Chainlink Shackles. I *knew* how he thought. He wouldn't miss this. Ponies couldn't run up this at any speed, we could barely trot upright. A weak slave would struggle to make it up this at the best of times, compared to the stronger, healthier slavers. The old and worn cobbles were slowing us to a crawl as it quickly became clear that our main group were the only ones truly entering the real lair. Up above, it had to have just been side rooms. Shackles wanted this to be a place you didn't return from.

Around me, no one talked as the tunnel kept going down. It took a good while for it to finally begin to even out.

Then I heard something.

Trying to hold my balance, I waved my hooves at the others, getting them to stop. One by one, the message filtered through. Protégé edged closer to me, tilting his head to ask a wordless question.

Closing my eyes, I let my ears take over. I could hear the slow trickle of water. The distant vibrations and rumble of total war. The scared breathing of the ponies around me.

Then I heard it, underneath all the other sounds. Like a background noise.

I heard a moan.

Close. Unnervingly monotone. Raspy from a dry throat.

Whispering it to Protégé, he drew his revolver with his mouth, not even daring to use magic for the light it gave off. Slowly, he led the party. Every creak of Mister Peace's damaged chassis and every slip of an unsteady hoof sent a shiver up my spine. Protégé waved forward two of the fighters we had with us, ex-Red Eye soldiers. Bearing their combat rifles, they flanked Protégé as the slope finally gave way to level ground. Slowly, we passed through the darkness of a massive portcullis gate to find another low room. The floor had pooled the streams into a long and stinking puddle that felt far too thick to be just normal water. We waded through it into this new and pitch dark chamber.

The moaning was louder. Others could hear it. There were other soft sounds, clinks of metal and the shuffling of hooves on stone that weren't ours from left and right. We all froze as we heard a fearsome retching sound.

"Light." Protégé whispered.

Two high-powered torches turned on from the soldiers. Protégé's red magic glowed as he took his revolver in it again. I added my own sickly green glow from my PipBuck. The combination of colours lent a twisted and unnatural light to the area around us, making it feel almost otherworldly.

We were standing on the same cobbled floor, in a long room with shallow arches lining each of the walls. Above my head, chains hung.

The ex-soldiers played their torches around, before I heard one of them scream.

The light illuminated a ghastly sight of what was perhaps once a pony that turned and shrieked. Dried and baked skin crinkled as it moved.

"FERAL!" the soldier shouted to us, bringing his weapon up. The shot rang out deafeningly loud as his weapon fired into the roof.

Protégé's magic glowed around the barrel, having forced it away from the creature.

"Hold! Stop! STOP!" He waved to all of us, before looking back.

It wasn't a feral.

Then my stomach dropped as I realised the truth.

It wasn't even a ghoul.

Cowering, skeletal-like legs covering its face, a bone white pony shrieked from the pain of the bright light that had stung its eyes and the fear of the gunshot. Its neck and hooves barely even fitted the collar and chains keeping it held to the wall.

“Fuck...” Weathervane breathed, before making his way over.

My stomach was turning. The pony, so far gone that I couldn't even tell if it was a mare or a stallion, was struggling and unable to even stand on their own. A bare remnant of a pony, missing both mane and tail; more bone than flesh. Lacking even the muscle to lift its chained neck or legs for more than a second or two. A crude line of fabric was tied around their eyes, with the stains of blood surrounding it. The marks of whips on their back were thick, similar to my own.

Gradually, we all used our own light sources. I turned up my PipBuck's light, as the two ex-soldiers played theirs around more. Unity and the other unicorns lit their horns, while Mister Peace activated a thick spotlight on his chassis, his monitor locked in as a grizzled veteran for now. Shadows were driven off in bright sparks as Coral strode through the new area, her rage stolen from her in utter shock.

Suddenly, with this new light, I realised what this place once had been.

Either side of us, those arches weren't just tunnels. They were lined with steel bars and only went back a few feet or so, filled with nothing but blank stone. Each had a doorway in the cage. At the back of the long room there were newly built metal cages against the walls. As the light travelled, I saw this one poor pony was not alone, as withered heads and thin bodies lifted and shifted in the dark corners, sometimes thickly on top of one another like crudely stored livestock. An office-like room was situated far down the right from us next to a thick steel doorway. The low ceilings bore long defunct strip lighting. Gradually, I could see all the cell doors were connected via wires hung from that low, curved ceiling to that office. On the back wall, an unmistakable icon was visible.

This had once been a prison. A horrendous and secret prison of the Ministry of Morale.

“Unlock those doors! Help them!”

“Watch their limbs, they'll be brittle!”

“I... I can't believe they would do this.”

“Bring the water over here! Oh no. Has anybody got a splint?”

“If I catch any of you dickweeds shirking from any of these patients, I'll have you shovelling shit for the sole purpose of my fucking amusement! Organise yourselves!”

Weathervane's team set to work, held just short from panic and revulsion by the ironclad discipline of their lead doctor. Blood packs, bandages, dressings, and the sickly smell of medical liquids began to fight with the growing stench of unwashed bodies, blood, and filth that permeated the air down here. The more the slaves in the cells moved, the more it wafted around. Most were too weak to move, but struggled and reacted with fear to the doors being opened.

That made me wonder for a moment. I knew that feeling well.

They were afraid of where they might be taken any time that door opened. With the things we'd found and realised in the metro above, that became very obvious to piece together to me. These slaves knew they were being used for things, kept as a living resource. None of them had tails or manes. Coats were short, bearing crude marks of shaving.

"No! No! No, no, noooo!"

"Sssh, it's all right. I'm not going to hurt you!"

Unity's voice caught my ears, and I trotted toward one of the further away cells where her soft red magic was glowing. She was sitting at the doorway she'd unlocked, a roll of bandages in her telekinetic grip and trying to convince a slave to let her near.

This one was tall and lanky. By his voice I could tell he was a stallion, but his stomach was drawn right in like a racing dog's, while his whole face was detailed more by his skull than his features. His eyes, however, were brighter and more intelligent, and his coat was thicker than the others. He was newer.

"I don't... don't take me!"

"I'm not going to take you there, sssh." Unity crooned, slowly reaching out to place a hoof over the slave's own. "We're here to get you out, take you home."

The slave wailed and fell away, "He told me that before! They took us! Said we were being released! Train was here. Go to train, go home! No train! There was NO TRAIN! That's how they got us here! With HIM! We're not ponies!"

As I came up beside her, I could see Unity's cheeks were wet as she slowly edged forward, carefully winding the bandage around a horrifically infected tear on the pony's hind leg.

"What did they do to you here?" She spoke, distracting him as she applied the bandage. Leaning in, I helped to tie it off, working together with her to try and aid this poor stallion.

"Just kept us, like pets. T-told not to talk, not to do anything. Just exist, just sit here, and wait! Eat when told, drink when told, sleep when told ever since the mining stopped. *He* hurt me..."

"You said to not take you?" I asked, trying to make my voice sound as gentle as possible.

He sniffed, hiding his face and quaking, "They take us. Every day they take some. Slavers o-or guards. They take us and only some come back. Now the work's done, we're their reward for the worst ones! The big ones! Old ones! The Master tells them to pick, and he gives them a time... o-or sometimes he doesn't. Those ones d-don't come back. Don't pick me, don't pick me..."

Shackles' inner circle of slavers. I knew who he meant. I'd seen them enough when he was around, clustered in that slaver meeting long ago. They were the ones he trusted, the ones like him from the time before Red Eye. The worst of the worst. I'd seen them do unspeakable things to ponies during his time controlling the Mall, like they all had some mental disease. It was one I'd long suspected Shackles himself was driven by, as strong as I had been to *being* a slave.

Sometimes I'd wondered about his own dens I hadn't seen. This place brought that thought to light. This stock were the ones kept as *reward* to those slavers by Shackles. To do what they wanted and indulge their psychotic, mentally unstable curiosities. The sick mind of the type of pony Shackles attracted, ones who'd otherwise be known as unhinged raiders out in the wastes, were being given ponies as reward for their services.

It defied belief that this could even exist, even in Filly. I wanted to throw up, to run and scream and scream. *This existed*. I'd been a pet to a master who, despite all this, wanted me with him and not here. He, in all his terrifyingly sick intelligence, knew I was the *type* to be more useful than this.

I felt very small, right about then.

Unity finished the bandage, and was holding a small healing potion to the stallion's lips, gradually earning his trust through her gentle approach.

"Don't let him pick me..." he muttered.

"Who?"

"The Master! If he picks us, then we *never* come back! They all... they all go in there!"

His weary hoof lifted for just a second, pointing to the only exit near the secure office. Rotating metal doors barred it, but they looked long rusted and permanently open.

"They go in there! All the ones he takes, they never come back! Some who came back said they go to a different place if it's him! Deeper! They go down! They go down to where the orbs and the machines are, and they don't come back."

"Murky, Unity." Weathervane's rough voice was close behind us. "Come on, let us work. You've done all you could alone."

Two doctors firmly pushed us out of the cell as they carried their kit and folding stretchers in. Unity and I stepped aside, now witnessing the full effort underway as the slaves were calmed, numbed, and healed until they could at least begin to slowly trot. Mister Peace was snapping chains with his hands, while Protégé was assigning ponies to start guiding them up the difficult slope out of here. Many were carried on backs or slung on the cloth stretchers, bearing whip scars, burns, bruises, and worse. As each cell cleared, I could see a number of shapes left behind, not moving.

We told Protégé and Weathervane what we'd learned, with Coral intently listening in.

"We thought we'd eliminated all of this when Red Eye won the city from Shackles." Protégé spoke, his tone dark, "Now that Red Eye is gone, that monster is already starting it again. Rewarding the psychopaths that follow him like a cult, the kind that Red Eye fought to get rid of."

"You never killed it." Coral narrowed her eyes. "You just put a new facelift on it all and kept trying to pretend they weren't still like that inside, just to get the job done. Now 'great leader' is gone and the only thing stopping Shackles from taking back *his* city is a griffon too distracted fighting a war to see what Shackles has already started down here."

Protégé clenched his teeth, displaying a rare burst of anger in his expression.

"No. The only thing stopping him now is *us*. We're getting them out before it can happen, and I don't imagine you'll get in my way if I want to put a bullet through his skull while we do it, will you?"

"Get in line." Coral snorted, and immediately began to lead the group toward the exit to the prison, deeper into Shackles' private den.

I backed away to let her pass before falling in step. Honestly, she was scaring me. I'd seen her angry many times, but this was different. This looked like frustration welling up inside her and ready to explode.

"You, you, you, come with me!" Weathervane pointed out two doctors and one support nurse, before following her.

As he passed me, I fell in step.

"Did you find your friends?"

"No."

He accelerated toward the same route Coral had gone, bearing a similar intense gait.

All the ponies they'd both looked for had gone in there.

Protégé stepped up beside me, wordlessly nodding for me to join him in going in, to which I followed meekly. Unity elected to remain behind and help with the larger numbers.

Behind us, the stallion Unity had found now gripped one of the soldiers trying to help him onto a stretcher, screaming and wailing.

"Don't take me! Don't take me down there! I... I hear them sometimes!"

"We aren't going to, mate. Calm down!"

"DON'T TAKE ME! They don't come back! Please don't let it be my turn! I hear them!"

Ponies shouldn't make those kinds of noises!"

The metal clanking of the rotating turnstiles sounded deafening down here.

Click-click-clank, the same sound every time one of us passed through them to step into the now-ceramic-tiled floor of the deeper parts of this prison. The lights were minimal, a dull yellow every ten feet revealing what looked like a sporting court with goals either side. Lines of makeshift cots were set up either side and had been hastily overturned and abandoned by the slavers leaving this place in a hurry.

Yet still, I heard distant hooves.

"Protégé? Do you see any ponies on your thingy?" I asked quietly.

"Only behind us. Why?" He leaned down beside me, as we squatted at the exit to the sports hall. Through the next open cage door, I could see a canteen of thin metal tables and benches.

"I hear hooves. Protégé, they never showed up on your eyepiece before."

After a momentary pause, he turned to me with a look of horror before slowly drawing his weapon again. We both knew what we were referring to now.

"You don't think..." His voice was shaky.

"The other slavers must have come this way so, no, it probably isn't." I took solace in realising that, before Protégé let out his own breath.

"Yes, that's true. It's very empty now. Sound likely carries further than my E.F.S. can detect life signs. All the same, keep your ears up, Murky. Let's take a look."

The two of us, as the smallest and quietest ponies, took the lead. Coral was furious, but not beyond realising that we shouldn't rush in down here. For all we knew, Shackles and fifty slavers could be waiting somewhere, or any sort of escape-proof trap could be waiting. Exiting the sports hall (or 'Yard' as Protégé kindly pointed out to me), we moved through the canteen and into what I guessed were the transit corridors. Huge security doors were held open by bricks with a dozen small rooms behind them bearing only two chairs and a table, all locked to the floor. Sometimes, they only had a single chair sitting ominously in the centre of the room.

We hadn't gone terribly far. This facility clearly wasn't massive. Past the canteen, we found the corridors quickly looped back to enter the 'Yard' again from another entrance. Sighing, we doubled back to try another corridor.

Then Protégé stopped me as we travelled down it.

"Life signs. Only a few hostile. All cramped together in small groups."

"Slaves? The foals? Which way?"

He pointed right, a new corridor. Taller than the others, opening onto a higher ceiling, it had much smaller tiles, more of a mosaic style flooring in places that led past rows of discarded wheelchairs with restraints on them. As we trotted down it, I began to feel a heat in the air. A stuffy, foul warmth that hit my nose as though I'd just sniffed deeply on mouldy food.

"Great Equestria, what is that? Urgh..."

"That smell!"

Behind me, everyone with us other than Weathervane and Mister Peace retched and held a hoof to their face.

On the floor, I began to see the dark stains appearing.

Then I began to hear the sounds. Like the cells before, the shuffling and the low moaning. Only this one grew, became more distinct, and raised and fell. The sound of ponies, of lots of ponies, in grief. As we turned each corridor, beginning to trot down every empty prison hall and passed through workrooms and lecture theatres, it only got louder. Everywhere we went, the chains followed. Everywhere slaves might stop, they existed. There was no free movement. Locked chairs, collars, and restraining wheelchairs filled this area.

As I scouted ahead, I found a larger and abandoned workroom. It held numerous pushcarts, wagons, and mining tools. I could recognise somewhere that slaves had been kept to sleep at their workplace. Briefly, I poked my head into the one office beside it.

Inside was a grungy, scattered mess. All except the desk and the walls. They were neat, precise, and straight. On the floor, I could see a dogbowl with an open collar beside it.

I immediately stumbled back out.

That was *his* office. I recognised that collar. I recognised the bowl. I recognised the organisation of the tools on the walls and the documents on the desk. Every requirement was etched into my mind. I felt nauseous to even realise I had that much awareness from my time spent laying it all out, knowing that if anything were one inch out of line and he would—

"Come away from there."

Protégé's hoof gently fell around my shoulders and pulled me away.

"I... I..."

"It's not you anymore."

Shivering, I gulped down the fear and quickly moved on. A trail on the floor led us, a foul mark upon the ground from the passing of those being taken this route again and again. As we came to a series of visiting chambers, the volume picked up until every pony in our group was sweating and shivering from the morbid anticipation. I could feel his presence over everything. The cobblestones to keep ponies in, the conditions, the office, the horrified look in every slave's face as they referred to *'him'*. The low ceilings, deadened sound, dark corridors, and thick stuffiness that choked my throat all made me feel restrained and moulded into feeling small. My hooves couldn't move without having to step around chains or bump against them.

It felt as though I were walking through a world of how it felt to be a slave. The worst part was how familiar it was.

The smell only got worse, while the sound got louder. It wasn't just moaning. I could hear blubbering and high-pitched whines. There was a lot of anguished sobbing. Infected throats were gurgling.

Then we found the source.

A large room, held up with carved columns and better-lit with generator-powered floodlights. Immediately, I could see it was the prison's main area, an old processing and interview centre. Cages stood tall in the centre of it, while temporary sealed cells were dotted around the edges. Long defunct monitors hung from the ceiling above dozens of ramshackle desk areas, all of it dominated by a single massive screen on one wall that lay blank and smashed.

The cages and cells were full. My stomach turned as I saw slaves lying upon slaves in the impossibly small areas they'd been squeezed into. Some at the bottom of the heaps weren't moving at all, clearly dead. Those on top writhed and moaned, crying and struggling to move. Every cell, every cage. They hung from the ceiling from makeshift pulleys looped over rafters, with each containment marked by crude signs and symbols. Others were tiny, barely large enough to hold a foal, with the slave's limbs being forced through the bars to fit. Like the slaves before, they were bare and withered. Some were chained to the walls, their front legs held unable to rest on the ground. Others lay in rows facing the walls. They were injured, sick, and starving, but that wasn't what stood out to me.

They were broken. I'd sometimes seen it in slaves, every so often you got one when a slaver went too far. Yet here, it was almost all of them.

Many of them were performing strange and repetitive movements with their heads or clumsily toying with things with their hooves. I could see many staring into nothing, their eyes wide and their bodies utterly still. They cried out about things they knew, counting endlessly or saying their name over and over. Others lay in a heap, terrified and crying as those around them didn't act, well, normal. The noise filled the room and bounced from wall to wall, and I had to hold my hooves over my ears as I glimpsed into the depth of Shackles' madness in the darkness below the city.

It was only to get worse.

On the right side, I saw racks of memory machines torn from the asylum and placed here to run off of crude generators. Machines designed to let non-unicorns view memories, intended for good, now stood like horrifying monoliths. Adapted with restraints and locks on their helmets, they had racks of memory orbs surrounding them and casting an eerie glow across the entire room of various diluted colours. Many of them were damaged, flickering or faint. Some of the machines still had those ones loaded and ready. Some still had ponies strapped in and currently viewing orbs, quivering with spasms, making mewling whimpers or straining with mindless rage on already broken limbs. Every one of them was built inside a cage, the reasons for why left only to my imagination on why they would need them with an already restrained pony in the crude, bulky, and bulbous machines. Even as I watched, one pony made a great spasm and opened his mouth to scream, but it didn't sound like any pony I knew, as though his vocal chords were trying to make sounds they were never healthily supposed to be able to.

Behind them lay enclosed wagons, with one open and ready to make it clear what was inside. Those who had been 'tested' and failed. Near to it, I could see ceramic operating tables, medical tools, and canisters of liquid and gas marked with chemical symbols and warnings all under much brighter spotlights.

Behind them, from a side corridor, four slavers emerged carrying utensils.

"Who the—hey!"

On seeing us, they immediately reached for weapons. Mister Peace screeched on the enamel flooring and drove at speed toward them, his heavy weaponry bristling.

"Rules are you stand still, traitors. Move and you will be spanked and then shot. Move toward Miss Fluttershy and you will be shot. And then spanked."

"Y-Yessir!" All four dropped any weapons they had, crowding together with hooves in the air. The rest of us couldn't help but simply trot in stunned silence. Even Coral Eve's drive had faltered and she stood with wide and horrified eyes. My stomach turned as I heard the frantic whispers of a slave chained to the floor nearby, its back torn and lashed from whips.

"Master... the Master... Master... the Master... always the Master... always call him Master."

Protégé fell into step beside me, and without knowing when it exactly happened, I found us both walking so that our sides were slightly pressed against the other. I could feel him shivering.

This was, even compared to my own slavery, a nightmare. A telling of what dark secrets could lie under a Fillydelphia with Shackles' exclusive rule. We were both from the same start, he must have felt the same.

No one quite knew what to do.

"Break the spell and start figuring out how we help, staff." Weathervane pushed us roughly to the side, "Get to work. Save these unfortunate souls."

"By the barrels of all the lovely guns, this is not right. Ma'am, we should inform the Ministry of Peace for a repatriation detail, and lodge a formal complaint to the Ministry of Morale for the state of their prison."

"I don't think anypony would see it, Peace." I muttered, as the horrified doctors with us examined the slaves, the machines, or the operating area, their faces wrapped in scarves. The slavers had been forced to help disconnect ponies from the machines, deactivating them all. Not every one of them had survived the transition, and those ones orbs had been shattered with a heavy rock afterward. One of them had launched at us like a feral beast, snarling and biting until Coral had knocked him out. Their eyes had been bloodshot, and a nurse had reported they'd bitten their own tongue off.

"Hey! Hey can I get some help over here?"

One of the doctors had gone inside the cages in the centre. Slaves had fallen out and lay on the ground or retreated to the corners of the cage, but one was now frantically panicking and shuffling, before grabbing the doctor and hugging him tightly.

"Get me out! Get me out, please!"

"We will! Just hold still—"

"I saw them!" The mare was crying, making small streaks down her blackened and dirty coat. "I saw what they did! Th-they strap us into those machines and... oh Equestria..."

Protégé shifted in quickly and helped the doctor support her. She was given some Med-X for a massive bruise on her underside in the shape of a huge hoof. Its size was too familiar for coincidence.

"What did they do?" Protégé couldn't hide his determination to get answers.

"I don't even knooow..." Her voice wailed and died, before coughing and clinging to Protégé's hoof. "They put us in them a-and we would never be the same. They force me to forget things all the time, recording how my mind reacted to it. They'd show others horrible things! Orbs taken from dying people, or from Wildcard's raiders. They tried to reprogram them, 'teach' them with memory o-or see how they'd react to it! See how many memories a pony could take, or how little they could have! They replaced memories with an animal's, o-or a feral ghouls! They made them into living ferals! O-or worse!"

She burst into tears, relief flooding from her at our help.

"I was smart, once. I think. I heard Grindstone say it. They wanted to change instincts, he called it 'core level memory', using magic to change who ponies are at the very bottom

level of what it means to even be a living thing! Doctors did things. Operations. Brain surgery o-or trying to see how we worked inside with memories, or something w-without a pony's anatomy. The Master kept talking about making the perfect slave forget how to be free, but the ones they put in forgot how to be *anything*. Forgot their lives. Forgot how to speak. Forgot how to *breathe*."

She hunched over, crying openly.

"They gave the leftover survivors to the bad ones! Oh help me, I heard what they did to them in the back! I heard the begging after they'd been strong before! Please, get me out!"

"We will." Doctor Weathervane marched in and took Protégé's place in helping her, his magic holding two of her legs steady while he examined her.

"I don't remember who I used to be!" She cried, delirious. "They kept taking memories. I don't know how long I was here! I don't want to become one of those things! I want to remember who I am, something disappears every time I go into one of those things! I know I was really smart, but I can't remember in what! Please!"

"Murky, come away."

My eyes were locked on hers. She was crying so hard, so scared and relieved and—

"Murky!"

I felt hooves pull my head away to find the red eyes of Protégé instead, and only then realised I'd been visibly upset by merely looking at her as I felt damp trails rolling down my cheeks. Protégé patted the side of my head with a hoof.

"We've saved her now. Okay?"

"Okay..."

"There's no foals here. We can still get them before this happens." Protégé paused, looked over my shoulder, and sighed. "Aurora Star told us how memory magic could do things to ponies, that all the good of implanting worthwhile knowledge could be abused by a fanatic. I just never thought for one second it was this bad. Take a second to recover, I'll ask those slavers some questions. We could end this *right now* with a bit of luck."

"Thank you." I took a deep breath and nodded a second time. "Thanks."

He smiled, before standing up and returning to the slavers. At least, his mouth had tried to give an encouraging turn up at the edges. His eyes simply looked sad.

I began to walk in circles, really. I was restless. We hadn't found the foals, or Weathervane's friends. We were seeing yet another nightmarish result of Shackles' insane quest to control ponies. It felt like every time I thought I had seen the limits he was capable of, he'd move them all over again. I knew his endgame, but seeing the experimentation he'd used to get there, to figure out how to affect ponies best.

To figure out what kind of memories he'd have to give me so he could extract them as a template for the perfect slave and force them into ponies with Aurora's memory nexus in the station.

The one silver lining was knowing I had gotten Sunny out of this before they were taken in here. I was glad she wasn't here to see this.

My wandering brought me close to the rooms at the opposite side of the prison's processing centre. Poking my head into them revealed mostly the filthy belongings of slavers living in close proximity to one another. I saw their beds near to one another, no doubt for warmth against the damp cold in the floors, even if the air itself felt stuffy from being so far below the surface. I could barely even hear the war, only the faint quakes it was causing that juddered through us like some giant were stepping on the city.

The doctors were carrying out the survivors of memory experimentation they'd found from their cages, lying them near me to be far from the machines. They had shrieked in panic if they were moved even an inch closer. Perhaps thirty or forty had lived. They didn't waste time in stretchering or carrying them away.

I'd seen a lot of horrors in Fillydelphia. But this somehow felt more insidious. Worse than the gore of the raiders, worse than the brutal hours and poisoned air of slavery. This was, in its own warped way, subtle, despite the hellish conditions. I hadn't seen any of it, but my mind was filling with the horrors of what that mare had seen, of what it would be like to go through this for weeks. How did a mind even work with all that happening? How far could memory magic go to change, or ruin, a pony?

Lost in thought, I found myself heading down the next short line of side rooms, this time barred by thicker doors that were only half open. I had to get away from it.

Curious, I stepped away from the main centre and went into what turned out to be a side corridor. The stink got worse again. Rotten meat. I felt a shiver as I realised I was trying to identify smells as a survival mechanism down in the dark underbelly of Fillydelphia now. We had to be on the same level as the asylum by now. The same thick brickwork supported this place. A makeshift desk sat in the corridor, like some sort of area to sign in.

Easing myself along, instinctively falling into silent creeping, I encountered a whole new row of cells.

With one sniff, I found it overpowering and had to pull my fleece up over my nose. My eyes watered. My hooves felt fragile to step forward. Rusted bars and darkly stained floors were on either side of me. There were tables in the common area, small rooms with single chairs or tables. The tables had tools. Industrial, medical, slaver-styled, and memory orbs. On the walls, I could see rows of photographs, all of singular slaves in the same cells I'd once inhabited. Some were scored out. Ten, then twenty, then more. I recognised the collar with eerie awareness. It was the same one Shackles had once put me in when he'd had me as his 'pet'.

Then my memory struck a chord. Long ago, during the Mall riot from Barb, I'd found Shackles' register of his personal slaves, filled with copies of the same photos.

It occurred to me that I'd never found out what happened to them before me.

Curtains hung over areas, like this whole place was a run down private club. It occurred to me what Protégé had said, about the worst slavers, the old and mentally sick psychotic ones attracted to Shackles' style being gifted otherwise 'useless' slaves as payment.

I heard movement from either side and froze. Groans. I saw only shapes in those cells, though. Then in the rooms. And on the tables. Or hung from the ceiling.

Organic... shapes.

I saw eyes open.

Then I screamed.

I saw Protégé look up as I came galloping in tears out of the private area and cannonballed into him, grabbing him around the neck, and wailing.

"Don't let him take me!"

"Murky, what is—"

"Don't let him ever take me!"

“There truly are no words.”

Protégé spoke quietly as two of Weathervane’s team threw up in the corridor.

I stood back near the corner, trembling and wiping my cheeks dry, trying to forget. Trying so hard to not think about what I had seen.

Doctor Weathervane emerged from one of the cells, looking shaken. He growled lowly, his eyes with a far away look in them. His whole body quivered as he fought to suppress something. Anger, sadness, I didn’t know what. Those signs were worrying me.

“Bloodbank, give me the Med-X. All of it.”

The younger medical worker hoofed over the bag to Weathervane’s telekinesis after wiping his mouth.

“Why? Doctor, they won’t help on their own. Don’t you need the dres—”

“Son, sometimes this world can shock even an old fuck like me. I’m not in the mood for you pissing around trying to tell me my fucking job at a time like this. I know what I’m doing.”

Protégé turned his head slightly. “So what *are* you going to do, Doctor?”

Weathervane took the bag of Med-X, and began to trot back toward the area I’d found. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, before pulling aside the curtain to go back inside.

“The last duty of care any doctor can possibly give.”

Protégé caught one of the slavers by the collar of his shirt and yanked him in close to his face.

“You’ve experimented on ponies, and you’ve given their broken minds and bodies to those sick psychotics that follow Shackles; just for their sadistic amusement! Fillydelphia was a brutal solution, but this *would* make even Red Eye turn to fury. I cannot even bring myself to the words to describe *any* of you who have aided in this. Have you done this to any of the foals?”

The slaver shook his head rapidly.

“NO! No, we haven’t!”

Coral Eve trotted alongside Protégé, “Then where are they?”

The slavers looked at one another, before gulping, “We didn’t do anything to them, I promise! Grindstone said they were protected! M-more valuable for other stuff, they said! They left a-about an hour ago, they came to pick them up to take them down that hallway into the cave we mined there, into the Outer Metro. To Ministry Stat—”

Coral Eve’s magic tore the entire cage containing the slavers off the ground, catapulting every bar and every slaver twenty feet across the filthy concrete floor. Everyone in the area ducked as the surge of telekinetic power blasted through the underground chamber, looking around warily as the sound of falling metal and groaning slavers filled the air.

She stood with her hooves thickly spread, her body heaving with deep breathes born out of a complete fury. That one place name had set her off. He’d given her a location, a time, everything she wanted, and then dropped the bombshell.

Chainlink Shackles and Grindstone were taking them directly to the station.

Glimmer had once told me that much like how a pony can lift more than they ever believed and run faster than ever before if it were to save a trapped friend, a unicorn's magic could work much the same way. It could be amplified by that core loving emotion we all had towards those we cared for.

Coral Eve had been powerful before, but driven by her emotion and her lack of fine magic control, she had become a walking hurricane of magical force. I could feel my mane tingling with the feeling of magic in the air.

Immediately, she turned and galloped toward the indicated corridor.

"Weathervane, get the survivors back to the others!" Protégé shouted as he took off after them.

My mind couldn't stop picturing Chirpy Sum, Lilac Rose, or Starshine Melody like these poor prisoners.

I felt *angry*. This had to end.

"Hey! Hey doc, we found another group of them!"

Another door was finally forced open behind us. From within, the doctors were bringing out a small cluster of ponies.

They were ghouls. Ghouls I barely recognised until I saw the body shapes.

"*Them!*" Weathervane was already moving, galloping over the room. "*Get them topside, now!*"

The four ghouls were placed onto stretchers. They were slowly moving, but their bodies were a ruin. Limbs hung limp or even loose. Huge swathes of them seemed infected. Muscles were thin and their whole structure looked fragile even as their heads moved around, barely understanding what was happening.

Weathervane went alongside them as the group started to move those who couldn't walk, and lead those who could, forcing the slavers to help out.

"Don't you fucking look at me with those defeated eyes! Bedlay, Splint, Baton, Windtail. Just hold on! Hold the bloody fuck on, you hear me!? We'll get you back, I'll fix this! I'll fix this!" He leaned over each of the stretchers, rushing between them in horror and panic. "Come on, all of you move! We need them back to the aid station to help all this! Hurry your lazy lead-lined arses! HURRY! *I can still save them!*"

"Doc, I really don't know if they'll—"

Weathervane snarled in a vastly more bestial way than anyone seemed to expect, turning and brutally punching the doctor across the cheek.

"*Obeys my fucking commands you little shit-stain new-blood!* I can save them! If I say I can save them, then I can *fucking save them!*"

The doctor, bleeding from his nose, nodded in shock.

Yet as they all began to leave the experimentation chambers, I saw the look passed between the struck doctor and Bloodbank. I saw the slight shake of their heads.

Yet I could also hear Coral and Protégé getting ahead of me, I couldn't delay.

"**Come, Miss Fluttershy. I will guard you against the horrors we face in defence of this land in war. Alley-ooop!**"

Being lifted by the machine, as he protectively held onto me, we sped after the pair.

There were only the four of us left to go deeper.

From now, it was becoming a race against time in my mind. We galloped through the empty and falling apart corridors of the prison. I hopped off Mister Peace and ran for myself after we caught up with Protégé and Coral. It only led one obvious way, and we could see the hoof-prints in the dust upon the ground. Maybe it was just my imagination, but they *did* seem to be smaller hoofprints. Archway after archway gave rise to higher ceilings and old portraits of Ministry of Morale staff on the walls, punctuated by the occasional grinning face of Pinkie Pie on hung banners.

In the distance, I could hear soft voices and hooves again, wafting through the prison. The voices were light, too high-pitched to be slavers!

"I hear foals!" I shouted, and everyone instinctively sped up. Coral was hammering her hooves off the ground, powering ahead of Protégé and myself with her longer legs.

"There, up ahead!" Protégé shouted and pointed. A whole wall had been mined through. As we approached, we could see through it to the front end of the prison.

That front end took the form of a metro station.

Barred passages were formed up against where an old passenger train still sat dormant, its red décor faded and rusted away. Prisoners no doubt exited to go right into the barred areas that would keep them under control and separate from guards until they were inside.

Yet far to the left, at the end of the platform, was a white marble passageway with an embossed Ministry of Arcane Science logo upon it.

Below it, I could see the cog-like shape of an enormous Stable door lying half open. Thick steel plates connected it to the concrete walls either side, crudely welded into place and held up by massive metal supports. It clearly wasn't something that had been originally placed there. This was a wasteland addition.

"Chirpy! Lilac!"

Coral's voice cut into the quiet air. Quickly, my eyes refocused, looking through that colossal door instead of looking at it.

Behind it, in the well-lit entrance of the Ministry Station, the foals were sitting in small groups on and around the benches by the next platform on the other side of the door. They were all chained to one another, bereft of clothing and with shaved heads. In front of them, two soldiers looked up quickly and waved behind them.

"They've made it to the door! Close it! Close it!"

"Don't you dare!" Protégé skidded to a halt, took careful aim and lit the shadows of the metro with a fiery blast from his revolver. The closest soldier was thrown backwards with a cry, before the second lit his horn and aimed a gleaming new shotgun at us.

Crying out, I tried to dive to the side, looking for cover on the mostly empty platform.

"For duty, medals, and celebratory cake!"

With a crash, Peace dropped his whole chassis onto its side in front of me, the shotgun's pellets reflecting off his armour. Lifting an arm, the robot sprayed the Stable door with small, careful bursts. His reluctance to truly unleash with the foals right behind it gave the soldier a chance to duck away again into cover. He was screaming for help, and to close the door.

"Keep moving, you three!" Coral drove past us and ran headlong toward the door. She veered, as a bullet from deeper within whizzed over a screaming foal's head and missed her. Ducking back the other way, she grit her teeth and kept running directly into gunfire. Through the door, I could see the familiar little shape of Chirpy looking up from a group, beside the two ghoul fillies.

“Mom! MOM!”

Lilac waved her hooves, “Cor—mom! Here!”

The foals were scattering, running deeper in to get away from the fighting. As I ran out from behind a self-righting Mister Peace, I could see slavers picking them up and driving them in. Grindstone was among them, staring out at us with frustration and anger.

With an ear-splitting wail, a klaxon sounded the powering up of the door. Ahead of us, it began to close.

“NO! Don’t you—” Coral never finished her sentence. She leapt a platform bench, propelled a rubbish bin out of the way with her magic, and sprinted directly for the doorway. Rounds sparked off the concrete or past her. Her mane whipped from one passing near. Protégé was right behind her, then myself.

Behind the door, I saw Chirpy throw himself at the soldier and knock his aim off. Lilac and Starshine joined him, distracting the one shooting at Coral, letting her get closer and closer as the door’s gap got smaller and smaller.

Mister Peace surged past us all. Bench in hand, he drove his way to the doorway and threw it. The metal seats wedged into the doorway, slowing its closing as the Stable-Tec machinery ground and began to bend the thick steel bench apart.

Sweat dripping from me, I tried my best to get over there, maybe I could still slip through! Coral was only thirty feet away, twenty feet, ten! She could—

At the last moment, I saw a grenade drop out of the remaining width.

“Coral, watch—”

She saw it, right at her hooves.

There was an explosion. Then a second one. I fell backwards, curling myself into a ball before metallic arms grabbed me and turned me away from it all.

Then, as my ears kept ringing, I heard the thundering clank of Stable door locks slamming home. Coughing, feeling my teeth rattle and my chest thump hard, I looked out from behind Mister Peace.

Coral was on her side in front of the doorway, slowly getting to her hooves. Everything around her had been blasted away, and I could see the grenade’s blast mark against the metro tunnel’s wall, fifteen feet away over the lip of the platform edge. She’d blasted the grenade away with her magic at the last moment.

Slumping, I finally let in the first breath to my burning lungs.

“No.”

Coral’s voice wasn’t sad. It wasn’t breathy or distant. It was solid, unyielding in its statement.

“No. No, no. NO!”

With that last scream, I felt the pressure of the air in the entire station rise up as she confronted that doorway. Coming to all four hooves, her horn sparked and glimmered with power. Her mane fluttered out behind her as she grit her teeth and screamed in pain at the raw, faulty use of her magic. The ground below us quivered and the trains on their rails shook back and forth. Protégé grabbed hold of a ticket machine to steady himself as I held onto Mister Peace.

The door itself began to glow. I had only rarely seen an actual telekinetic field from Coral’s magic, and only briefly as she focused on something in particular. A faint white twinkle, not even coloured like I assumed her magic once was, that surrounded the circular blast door.

Then, with an almighty cry, she jerked her head and unleashed her magic. An enormous concussive shock thudded against my ribcage. Then another, and another, each punctuated by a cry of rage, of utter frustration, and for one insane moment, I thought she was going to pull the entire door out of its socket.

Stable-Tec, however, had built their doorways to withstand far greater than this. With almost insultingly underwhelmed ease, it remained utterly solid, even as Coral sweated and cried and tore at it with all her might.

Walking as close as I dared, I watched her futile assault. Months of frustration at being separated from her son, other than a brief and teasing reunion on a mountain, were all bubbling over for her. Her face was soaked with tears, as the emotion finally got the better of her. As she realised that we had failed. Shackles and Grindstone had planned things well to defend themselves down here.

The revelation of just how close we'd been, and the slow realisation that we'd missed then, was now reflected in Coral Eve, as her magic grew less and less powerful. The tugs got smaller. Before long, her horn flashed and then went dead. Defeated, she slumped to the ground and struck the door with her hoof. Unwilling to stop, openly weeping, she banged her hoof time and again, before resting her forehead upon it and slowly sliding down the immense metal construction.

"I... I saw them." Her voice was simply a mutter as I finally found the courage to approach.

"I know." I didn't know what else to say. "I'm sorry."

Protégé was looking over the control station for the door, before shaking his head and slamming the panel shut. "It's not even connected any more out here. *Maybe* if Glimmer was here and *maybe* if we had spare parts, but we don't. I'm so sorry, Coral."

Behind us, a second group emerged from our raiding party. The other parents, mostly, who had started to follow our route after word of where the foals were had passed back to the other search parties. Seeing the door, they swore and groaned, quickly guessing what had happened.

For a second, I thought my PipBuck was playing another message. A small sound of static in the air began to pick up.

"Fffzzzzzz—ought you might have tried, but I didn't realise you knew of this way in."

Grindstone's hollow old voice played through a set of speakers above the Stable door. Beside them, a hung terminal flickered and displayed a video feed. Almost entirely shaded green and with half the screen playing a few seconds behind the other, it pictured the elderly donkey with a hard stare.

"They are quite outwith your reach now, you traitors and slaves. They have a higher purpose than being your fawns. Fillydelphia has a war to recover from, and Chainlink Shackles must ascend to bring us all back to the power we once had in this city."

"You're trying to justify indoctrinating children to be slaves!" Protégé snarled.

"Justify? You imply I am trying to be—" He stammered and coughed, a sickly popping coming from his throat. "—trying to be like your old master, young colt. I don't justify. I simply do. I had power once in this city. I want it back before my end and Shackles offered me that power. Red Eye did not. See, I don't try to pretend what I'm doing is for everyone's benefit and that I'm following someone with good intentions, unlike a certain pony I'm speaking to."

Protégé couldn't hold Grindstone's eyes, even on a monitor.

"Workers, slaves, it's all the same in the wasteland. The strong and the smart use the weak and the naïve. That is survival. Now—"

"I will get them back."

Coral interrupted him. She wasn't even looking directly at him, but the tone in her voice cut into the conversation with ease.

"I hardly think you are in any position to threaten me, slave." Grindstone rolled his eyes.

"You would be wrong, because *you* are keeping my foals from me, Grindstone. I have hunted, striven, suffered, and killed to find them. I have been to the nightmarish depths and the *barren heights* trying to find them! I gave my word to protect them both, to their faces, that as their mother I would never, ever let them come to more harm."

Her face twisted into a vicious snarl in a way I'd never imagined her even possible of.

"You made a mother break her promise to her child."

Her horn lit once more.

"You sit behind that door and act as the one separating me from them."

I could feel the air-pressure increasing again, as everypony began to back away from her quickly.

"Now you tell me to give up. I. Will. NOT!"

Grindstone sneered on the screen, "You promise that? Like you promised they wouldn't be taken again?"

I had just enough time to get the hell away from her.

Her eyes flared and her horn exploded into being once more, as I heard a deep *boom* of rushing air pressure and massive telekinetic force as she unleashed her magic once more on the door. It barely moved, but the surrounding concrete rocked at least a few inches back as she sent an echoing shock wave into the wall itself. On the monitors, I saw Grindstone briefly fall out of shot, a look of astonishment on his face. Coral walked up to the inlaid camera to the door system.

"I am metres from finally getting them back, and *you* are the one taunting me. *You specifically*. You'll regret ever coming near my children. I'm going to find them. I'm going to find *you*."

She met his gaze on the monitor directly.

"You had better begin wishing that you'll keel over from old age before that happens."

Grindstone remained silent, his eyes tellingly wide.

"Well then..." he began, trying to restore some authority, "I suppose it's good for me that you won't be leaving the Outer Metro this time."

He reached to the side, pressing something. Immediately afterwards, I heard the klaxon wail a second time. The sound of moving metal came to my ears, as his words began to slam home. The hot adrenaline in my body stopped dead and was replaced by a cold sweat.

My eyes travelled to the side and found the metro line ten feet away from us on the platform. At either end of it, the shutters were beginning to move up.

"The Outer Metro." Protégé breathed sharply. "An abandoned prison and asylum, connected to the station no longer used to bring in those the Ministry took. Of course."

"Correct." Grindstone intoned from the monitor. "I always knew I was close to finding this old hub down here, just had to find the right wall to knock down. Now it's no longer needed. I have shut the doors in the prison. It will mean we cannot recover the remainder but... well, since you put it so passionately, Coral Eve, I suppose you've forced my hoof, haven't you?"

The shutters slammed up, and beyond them, I could see only the dark brickwork of the Outer Metro. The klaxon's wails continued, sending jolts of pain through my skull and reverberating and echoing down the tunnels, like a signal.

"Goodbye, Protégé. I had once thought you might be malleable enough to work with us, but I see you never fully matured. I shall let the Outer Metro reclaim you all for how you sought to stop us using its secrets. Yes, goodbye."

The monitor clicked off as the klaxon wound down as one by one the lights began to cut. With a thick snap of strip lights failing, we were plunged into darkness. The last echoes of the siren travelled down those tunnels, moving rapidly further and further away. Behind us in the prison, I could hear the sounds of slamming gates and cages, along with other doorways opening. Very quickly, I lost sight of the others in the failing light.

Already my heart was racing. I could feel the panic setting in, a sense of being vulnerable, of being trapped in the open. That was the *Outer Metro* open to us, the klaxon's sound continuing to warp and echo down every tunnel. My eyes felt like they had grown to twice the size in fear as I stared into the mouth of that tunnel, just a vague shape to my adjusting eyes.

Then everything fell deathly quiet.

Behind us, the parents who had come in late seemed confused. They didn't know. But Protégé and I met each other's glances as we stumbled closer.

Then, in the darkness, I saw his eyepiece light up with a single little red line on it that quickly stuttered and failed. His eye behind it widened with terror.

"Run." He muttered, turning his head to face the tunnels, "Run! *Everybody RUN!*"

Distantly, from deep within the tunnels, past the winding labyrinth of silent darkness and forgotten tunnels, there came a deep and unarticulated howl. A desperate, keening, and low wail that pitched and grew and grew with no end.

Like an unseen wind of nauseating force, the tunnel disgorged the smell of rotten mint.

And we *ran*.

There wasn't any order or direction. In pitch darkness we fled for where we thought the exit back to the prison was. Two ponies ran into me and knocked me clean from my hooves as they themselves collided. I could only see vague shapes as my eyes fought to adjust to see in the dark. A hoof landed sharply on my front left leg and I shrieked in pain.

"Miss Fluttershy!"

Attracted by my voice, the huge robot swiftly got me back to my hooves. I could see his glowing screen displaying a gruff-looking bodyguard with sunglasses.

"We have to get off this platform!" I yelled, holding my hoof and praying it wasn't sprained. "Can you see in the dark?"

"Affirmative!"

"Then get us out of here! Now! NOW!"

He grabbed me just as I relit my PipBuck's light, and I held up my leg to act as a signal. I could hear the others around us at the exit from the platform scrambling and panicking. Someone had already sprinted off and I was certain they'd gone the wrong way.

"Follow Mister Peace!" I screamed again and again. "Follow my light!"

Waving my PipBuck frantically, I saw Protégé's magic light up. He was yanking another

pony to their hooves, and pushing them to follow my voice.

Wind rushed over my face as we turned corner after corner, while behind us that sound only grew and began to filter down every corridor. I heard another one from another direction, a supernatural scream from inside the prison. More than one way to the Outer Metro must have opened.

Mister Peace suddenly halted.

“An obstruction! Hold on!”

He set me down almost too hard. Even the *robot* was moving with desperate speed in everything he did. With my PipBuck's light, I saw that a cage door had descended to block the way back into the main experiments room.

“OPEN IT!” I screamed.

He leaned down, bending those strong mechanical arms around the bottom and strained. Even with his enormous strength, it lifted slowly. Frantically, I went to my belly and crawled under.

“Run, Miss Fluttershy! I shall be able to locate you!”

“But—”

“Go! Equestria needs its most important mare!”

The chilling seriousness of his normally bombastic voice hit hard. Ponies began to arrive up behind us, diving under the gap as Mister Peace kept lifting to allow his larger size through. I grabbed Protégé's hoof and back-pedalled hard to drag him through after me, then we both did the same for Coral. There came a crash from back the way we came and I heard the voice of the one I'd seen go the wrong way.

“Where are you all!? Where are you? Oh... oh no! No! No! What is that!? WHAT IS—”

The voice was cut off in the most horrific of ways, with a stallion shrieking until his voice broke like that of a filly. It took altogether too long to stop.

“Murky!” Protégé pushed me ahead of him as the others ran ahead of us. Leaving Mister Peace raising the door, we galloped madly for the operations room we'd left the others in. It was in darkness, lit by a dozen horns and flashlights. Slaves were crying out in fear and screaming. Weathervane was still cursing and forcing some order into the situation, trying to get them to keep moving the slaves out. Some ponies were running back and forth in panic. Broken slaves still waiting to be helped continued to bob and mutter in strained and fearful ways, as they sensed the horrors emerging. Doctors, parents, and everyone who'd come with us were carrying ponies on their backs, dragging improvised sledges, and one even had the old corpse wagon emptied to pull more.

“Get back to the metro! Go, go, go!” Weathervane slapped the rump of a nurse to get him going. “Protégé, what in the name of fuck is going on? What did you—”

An eerie roar, punctuated with liquid sounding gurgles rolled through the chamber from the way we were about to go. Weathervane stopped short and looked immediately terrified as a pinging beeping began to get louder.

“The warnings... no! They were all sealed away years ago in this city! Oh Equestria, what have they done down here.”

He was old. He'd been here before Red Eye. *He knew.*

“Where do we go? They're all around us!” A doctor looked hesitant to leave the room after that sound.

“There's only one way out!” Protégé ran past him. “We don't have a choice, just go!”

He went for the door out, stopping to lift a slave onto his shoulders. I did the same,

hooking the hooves of what turned out to be the mare before around my neck. I saw Mister Peace start to enter from the door we'd come through and shouted to him to grab as many as he could. The machine saluted and scooped up numerous slaves in his arms. Many shrieked over and over, with one still nodding his head relentlessly, blank eyes staring into darkness.

"Murky, tell me you know the way! Tell me you know the way back!" Protégé shouted back at me as we stumbled and half-ran with slaves around our bodies into the corridors back towards the—

The—

I panicked. What was the way again? What had we passed?

Cells. Canteen. Yard. What order? Which ways?

Then it hit me, the place had looped! Go for the looped corridor and keep moving whichever way those things *weren't*.

"Follow me!" I screamed, my voice high-pitched and fragile. Speeding up, I pushed past the others, before the horrifying sound of the cage gate we'd passed being struck again and again caught my ears. I heard metal bend with frightening ease.

We left the operations room and its horrors in a ramshackle convoy, with me at the lead. Everything seemed to be spinning in the darkness with only small light sources from everyone around me that never stayed still and messed up my night vision. I saw doorways and ceilings, obstacles of wheelchairs and fallen radiators in the way that I had to weave around. We kept tripping on chains that rattled and seemed to leap out at us from the dark, either hanging from the roof or winding on the floor.

Rotten mint stank in the air, growing until I felt myself wanting to throw up and sneeze at the same time from the sickly stench in my throat and nose. The mare's groans of pain from being moved so harshly melded with the screams of the terrified and the cutting sounds of the Outer Metro's worst nightmares beginning to flood into this newly granted area. I could hear them smashing through adjoining rooms, as I dearly hoped their doors were locked.

"This—ARGH! ARGH!"

The door beside me buckled hard, a sharp indent slamming out toward me. I heard frantic scratching behind the thick cell door, and it reverberated again as I steeled myself and ran past. After a second, the pain in my lungs grew, before I realised I'd stopped breathing and started to suck in air again.

We rounded onto the long corridor that looped the Yard. After a moment of hesitation, I went right. We weren't moving fast. I saw the doorway to the canteen approaching, but it seemed to take us far too long to get there with all the slaves we were trying to carry out of this hell. We slammed every door behind us and barricaded them with filing cabinets and old brooms. It wouldn't do anything. I'd seen them break through reinforced metal doors before. Grindstone had no *idea* of what he'd properly unleashed if he thought those cages would contain them.

"This way!" I stopped at the doorway to the canteen and bucked open the door. Rushing into the room, I found almost all the tables overturned and broken in ha—

They hadn't been broken like that before.

I felt others crash into the back of me as I screeched to a halt.

"Turn around." I dared not do more than whisper.

"Murky, what are you—" Weathervane came rushing up behind me.

“Turn. Around.” I hissed, knocking them with my hooves, not wanting to turn my back as I trotted into them and tried to push. “Turn. Now! Now, please! Go back!”

Through the canteen, I could see the kitchens through a security door that now lay open, connected to the wires in the ceiling. A blinking red light announced it had just opened. It had certainly been closed before.

Behind it, I saw the old laundry machines for the prison. Their solid bulks were heavy industrial units, blocking much of my—

Two of them erupted up into the air, thrown to either side. Their torn metal flew through the air like shrapnel. Through the carnage, *I saw movement*. A disturbance in the air, as something moved between the two demolished machines.

“RUN!” My cheeks were staining with tears from sheer fear, and the brief slip of my hooves on something gooey on the ground made it feel like years for me to get running again.

Protégé reached out with his magic and slammed the security door shut, cutting off sight as something unreal had been advancing. A warped, indistinct silhouette hung in the air, lit by a crimson warning light behind it. No sooner had the door closed and our vision been cut, did the entrance blocking its way cave in, two of its hinges blasting off, the rest clearly about to break.

Then we were gone, moving back down the way we’d come. I saw the exit to the way to the operations room pass us again and didn’t dare to look down it.

The moment I passed it, however, a shriek of desperate and ferocious *need* came up it. Briefly, I saw that the door from earlier had broken. I could hear something ripping through the air down there. I wasn’t sure if those thumps were from it hitting the ground, or something else.

Eyes wet, hearing more and more sounds filling this horrid place, I put my head down and sprinted. Any guilt about not watching out for others and how close they were went second to pure survival. Electronic beeping, the ‘warnings’ that Weathervane had mentioned, combined with bestial howls and haunting high-pitched wails around us. The sound of the security door being smashed behind us rippled down the corridor. With one scarce turn around, I felt my eyes burn as for one horrific moment, I saw something emerge right behind us in the darkness. Indistinct, moving with violent surges in ways that defied logic, with two burning white lights like vicious eyes that made my mind reel to see.

I turned away, before someone from the back of the column screamed. The yell turned to one of agony within seconds. They’d caught up with the ones who couldn’t move fast enough. My heart dropped, but I didn’t want to turn around. There was no saving them. Then I heard a second being grabbed, then another, as our convoy was being torn up, back to front. I heard six ponies die, their screams passing into the darkness as whatever grabbed them delayed to deal with their catch.

Suddenly, my hooves were on a sports-flooring. I’d come out into the yard.

Panting, trying to not feel bad about the mare’s horrible pain and wounds as I lifted and carried her along, I found myself falling behind as the others out-paced me. They recognised the way out now.

Behind us, I heard a pony scream, then another, and another. They were further back, probably having fallen or gotten lost in the darkness. A wet ripping sound, like splitting a melon, sent those screams into squeals, before they fell silent.

Ponies ahead of me escaped back through the Yard toward the cells. I could already hear

them. I was shouting for everyone to get out of there. Protégé and I were lagging behind, being the two with the shortest legs of the group. I could hear myself whimpering as I felt like I was in their sights now. Crossing the sports hall they called a yard, I saw slaves fighting with the massive riot gate on the yard's exit to the cells to try and lower it. They would be right behind us any second now, we had to get through!

Mister Peace rolled under it and dropped off the slaves, before he turned immediately to come back for us.

In their panic, the doctor's at the controls got it lowering on its chains before Peace could come through.

"NO! NO! PLEASE!" I shouted, trying to pull the mare's dead weight with me. She'd passed out and hung limply off me, slowing me down further. Protégé looked back and used his magic to pull me with him, giving me an extra little boost as he stumbled, fell, and eventually leapt beneath the dropping gateway. Dropping the slave on the other side, he slid back under and ran back to get me.

I could hear something approaching behind me. Sounds of clicking bones or metal mixed with a haunting low drone found their way into the hall.

Between us, Protégé and I lifted the mare and sped for the rapidly closing exit. Throwing her under, we both lay down and crawled frantically to beat the door without being trapped. Going through head first, I heard something running up behind us. The drone turned to a deafening howl, so close that my ears started ringing. I felt other slaves grabbing me to pull me through the thin gap remaining.

Then I felt myself stop dead and cry out in shock as a pressure landed hard upon my back. A nightmare come real dawned; my hips had gotten stuck in the gap as the door came down on me, trapping my lower body in the Yard.

It hadn't hurt or injured me, but I *screamed*. I screamed like a horrified foal. I was trapped and I could feel a warmth in the air growing on my lower body as something approached. Something unnatural, howling and gurgling at the same time, came surging across the floor of the sports hall as the shriek grew and grew. *What the hell were they!?* My hooves reached out as I grabbed every pony I could, crying to be pulled in with tears in my eyes. Protégé held around my upper body, straining to tug me in.

"Robot! Lift it! Lift it!" I heard Unity's voice.

"No, don't let him! They'll get in!" A soldier's voice.

The ponies argued, but Peace thrust them aside, reached down, and grasped the doorway. His enormous power lifted it by two inches. One of the two soldiers with us reached down and put his hoof through to grab my back.

I felt something step beside my body from the yard side.

The soldier was pulled screaming through, what had been grasping for my back instead grabbing his hoof. His body hit me and pulled me back under the door. I had never in my life heard myself make such a terrified scream. My head hit the lip of the door as the soldier cried out in horror sharply from behind me before a wet snap echoed in the Yard. I felt warm liquid pour over me, some hitting my face and forcing my eyes shut. Their noises were all around me.

Kicking and lashing out, blinded and dizzy, I felt myself grabbed and pulled hard across the floor as I heard the door slam shut. My hope went out, I had mere seconds. Please make it quick!

"NO! NO!" I fought and struck out. I hit something fleshy, making it fall back with a

cry.

“MURKY! IT’S OKAY!”

My limbs were held down as I tugged and tugged, before something soft wiped my eyes to clear the blood. Through blurry vision, I saw red eyes and a black coat staring down at me.

I hardly wanted to pretend what I was seeing was real. I was on the side with my friends.

Slowly, through my terror, I began to realise that the last pull had been them grabbing me, the soldier’s death giving them the few seconds they needed. Shaking terribly, I stopped fighting as Protégé became clear before my eyes. After a few long seconds, my limbs eventually stopped feeling so tense, but all I could do was shake and whimper.

Behind me, I could hear them through the riot door. More than one prowling and making their strange noises. The cells reeked of rotten mint, after having been so close, and I could see the streak of blood from where I’d been pulled in. My body was coated with it.

“Get away from the door!” Somepony snapped at us.

“C’mon, help him up.” Protégé lifted my under one shoulder, as Unity got the other one. Between the two of them, I was carried away from the riot door. Protégé pulled his eyepiece up and rubbed the side of his face with a wince.

“Are you hurt?” I had to choke the words out through my rough throat.

“You’ve got a mean little strike on those hooves.” There was no true humour in his voice.

Oh. Of course. I’d lashed out and hit something while I had been panicking. If I wasn’t so beat, I might have found it oddly funny, but right now my stomach was churning as my mind tried to believe that I had somehow gotten out alive from that.

A good ten or so had not. They hadn’t had a friend to pull them through at the last second, not to mention any slave’s we’d somehow missed in there.

Around us, the survivors of Shackles and Grindstone’s madness were being evacuated up the slope to the Inner Metro. It was slow going, with the thick and slippery cobblestones playing havoc with their weakened legs and uncertain balance. Stretchers had to be laboriously carried or dragged. Many times, ponies fell or slid back down. Shackles had chosen this place well to keep them from escaping rapidly. Weathervane was desperately moving between four cloth stretchers, trying to stabilise his four ghoul friends before moving them further.

I might have dared to think we’d escaped again.

Clearly, like Grindstone, I had underestimated the Outer Metro.

The riot door buckled.

Across the cell chambers, I saw the thick slab of metal that was supposed to contain any rebellious prisoners bend inwards. A sound like a huge gong reverberated around the low ceilings of the cells, and everyone in them stopped where they were to turn in fright.

After a few seconds, that bulge formed from the first impact was struck again, and the entire door shook on its mountings. Dust began to fall from the connections to the brickwork around it.

“No, that’s impossible.” Bloodbank muttered to himself. “That’s inches of steel, not even Brutus could have—”

Then a third strike, and a small gap began to form at the top of the doorway, enough that the sound began to filter through. A savage noise, not one any beast or pony could make. After that, the smell began to trickle through and turn stomachs with its sweet rot.

Ponies had stopped and stared out of fright, but now the spell was broken, and they

turned to a panic. Slaves who'd come with us and slaves from the prison both began to flee for the slope. Stretchers overturned. Ponies screamed. Hooves cracked and fell as the slimy gradient and angled cobblestones tripped them. Both my front hooves were pulled by Protégé and Unity alike as my hind legs furiously tried to keep my balance. I heard Weathervane swearing himself dry to control his team and get the immobile out first. A stampede of the fearful, all trying to crowd into a low sloping tunnel that couldn't possibly fit them all in one go.

What resulted was a catastrophic and slow-moving mess. I lost Unity in the crowd, our hooves being torn apart from one another. I fell into Protégé and almost had to lift him onto my back as a larger pony crushed into him from the other side. My hooves left the ground as the squeeze between filthy and sick bodies lifted me up, before I was sent clattering back down the slope. Curling to not be crushed to death beneath their hooves, I felt a metallic hand grab my sweater and lift me free.

"Proper evacuation is judged impossible, Ma'am!"

Mister Peace put me down by the entrance to the slope. I'd fallen a good ten feet back down it. I could see ponies slipping and limping, barely moving at all, with so many crushed in that no one could move at all. Behind me, another great crash signalled the riot door being knocked clean away from one of the corners. The chains that lifted or closed it rattled between each growing and falling howl from behind it. It wouldn't last.

"The bot's fucking right!" Weathervane was beside me, staunchly ensuring others got out first. "This slope is a mad slaver's wet dream! It's going to take us a lot longer to get up it with everyone. Even if the crush gets sorted out, they can't move fast enough up those cobblestones with hooves."

"What do we even do?" One of his doctors was staring at the door as dust began to blow through the gaps. "Even if we lowered the cage door on the slope, it won't hold them!"

I began to pace from hoof to hoof, biting my lip. Behind me, the slow movement of the crowd was barely even a third of the way up the slope toward the Inner Metro. I could feel myself hyperventilating. I felt trapped. All this way and we were going to be torn apart like those ponies back there just because of some stupid cobblestones and because Shackles just *knew* how to do the little things to stop escape from his dens! The ponies he'd hurt wouldn't get out. We wouldn't get out!

The riot door rattled inwards on its hinges, before rocking back into place by dint of the chains alone holding it. Coral Eve was suddenly beside me, horn charged, ready to give one last blast before the end. I felt her hoof creep around my neck, holding me to her side.

I genuinely, utterly, had no idea what to do.

Mister Peace did.

The huge robot lunged forward, returning to the cell room's floor. I shouted after him, but he spun and pushed me and anyone else back into the raised slope leading out of here. Reaching up with one metallic arm, he yanked at the cage door above us. With a hiss of hydraulics, he pulled again and again before the whole thing came free of its housings and clattered down like a castle's portcullis in front of us, separating Mister Peace from everyone. He remained in the prison cell area, putting himself and a cage door between us on the ramp out of here and those things on the other side of the riot door.

"Fear not, Miss Fluttershy and her dear little friends! For I shall hold fast the tide of horrors sprung forth by the evil zebra nation until you can make best distance to safety! Depart now, my joyful mare of love! Weep not for your staunch defender, for my circuits

glow with excitement to carry out one's duty in such a manner to defend the mares of the Ministries!"

If I had any lack of knowledge on his intentions, that made it all too obvious. My heart leapt into my mouth, as I rushed forward to the cage door and pushed my hooves through it to grab his arm.

"No! No, no! We'll think of some other—"

His cracked monitor turned to me, the grim sergeant replaced by the image of a more innocent-looking young guard.

"You must flee, my shy pony of fluttering grace. This is what I was built for. To finish my duty in a heroic last stand is a most fitting way to say goodbye."

A rush of guilt flooded through me. I'd always found it weird or sometimes even briefly amusing that the robot genuinely thought I was the Ministry Mare, Fluttershy. Others joked about it to me, but every so often I'd worried I was using him. Now he was declaring that he would have himself destroyed in my defence. No, in *her* defence.

It was too much. I could have sat down and explained it so many times, but he'd kept fighting for us, defending us all, and yet at the core, it was just because of a mistake!

"NO!" I screamed and slammed a hoof on the bars. "I won't let you! I won't let you destroy yourself believing a lie!"

The robot turned away slightly, as that riot door began to falter and slowly be bent in by some inexorable force.

"Miss Fluttershy? Whatever do you mean?"

His voice had softened, as much as it ever could.

My eyes were running, making my vision blurry. I shook as I brought myself to admit it, realising for the first time the real guilt of never having told him before and what it had led him to do.

"You made a mistake when you met me! I'm not the pony you think I am, Mister Peace. I never told you and-and I really should have but I... *I'm not Fluttersh—*"

One of his fingers pressed hard against my lips, stopping me dead.

His glowing monitor displayed a youthful, energetic soldier, staring directly down to me. Then slowly, between two slides, he winked.

I could find no words. Hooves grasped me, as Coral and Weathervane pulled me away from the cage. My hooves bumped over the cobblestones as I was dragged up the ramp, limp and disbelieving.

Below me, behind that cage, I saw Mister Peace spin on his axis. Every weapon door and mounting came to life. Missile racks whirled open. Magical energy weapons glowed. Bullets clacked as they fed into their chambers.

Then, just as I lost sight of the cage door in the darkness, I heard the riot door broken, and the blood chilling howls and cries of the Outer Metro's worst nightmares belch forth into the prison areas.

"Come on, ya pansies! TALLY HO!"

His last word echoed again and again as every weapon he owned blasted forth to be met with unnatural roars of lust and fierce savagery. The tunnels shook and flickered from beneath as Mister Peace did his duty, to hold the line. As we slowly limped and slipped our way up the cobblestone slope and out into the Inner Metro, his maniacal laughter met their howls for a long time.

Eventually, just as we passed back to the metro line itself, his laugh finally fell silent, the

slowly fading echoes of his voice in the tunnels replaced with only the eerie keening wails of whatever was following us. With the ground bought for us by Mister Peace, we fled out of the metro altogether, back to the surface, and immediately got as far as we could from the metro station. For block after block, we carried, stumbled, and dragged every slave we'd liberated from Shackles' deepest dungeons.

Behind us, the metro station entrance emanated a singular and terrifying roar of desperate frustration, like the sound a demonic foal would make if held away from what it wanted that grew deeper and more ferocious. It carried into the air, like some horrific announcement to the city. That they were no longer contained below ground.

Hundreds of metres away now, I couldn't see the entrance itself. But upon hearing that sound, I used my grapplehook to lift myself to the top of the nearest building and stare back.

The view was hazy, but twice I saw blurry and indistinct shapes through the smoke coming out of the metro, white flickers from two sources made my head hurt behind my eyes for all the half second I had witnessed them. In the streets surrounding the metro station, they had now burst forth to the surface once again. Already I heard the screams and saw Enclave troopers fleeing to the sky from the area.

Fire and war had returned to Fillydelphia. Now too returned the terrors that lurked in the dark as the city continued its steady fall back into the hell it had once been.

Feeling cold, despite the burning buildings around me, I turned away and glided back to the ground to follow the others home. We'd lost allies along the way here to help those most in need. My stomach felt hollow as I landed beside Unity. We'd saved so many, yet I couldn't help but feel empty.

I noticed she'd stopped, and paused myself. Until her hoof touched my cheek I hadn't even realised I'd been still crying over the loss of a staunch ally through so much of this. A few seconds later, I felt her hooves around me as I fell into her shoulder and let it all out.

Fluttershy may not have found his presence likeable, but somehow as I saw the lines of the most hurt and vulnerable slaves in the city being rescued around us, I just knew that she would have been proud of him.

A duty fulfilled, even two hundred years later.

Crossing the city took a lot longer than it had the first time. The pace was slow with so many of the sick and injured from Shackles' den amongst us. It felt strange to be considered 'healthy' by comparison in that I could still trot and help support another young colt as he limped along on stiff joints, his back a horrid mess of bandages and lash wounds.

Twice, we'd had to get everyone inside a hall or old gym to cower behind treadmills and racks of weights as Stern's griffons moved through the streets, too tired to fly after so many hours of fighting.

We managed to commandeer a small cart from a burning home, the slavers who had once inhabited it lying dead with energy wounds or in piles of ash, before using it to carry more of the slaves who simply could not go further on their own hooves. Not a single pony wasn't helping someone else. Coral set herself to pulling the cart, the strain and physical effort giving her an outlet for the growing frustration I could sense in her. Every one of her limbs shook when she stopped, and I could feel the air prickle around her at times.

That mare seemed ready to explode. Even now, this close, she had been denied *again*. If she found them now, there would be hell to pay.

Weathervane hadn't stopped his role since we started moving. He went from pony to pony, healing, anaesthetising, and giving his own unique brand of moral support. Yet he was getting snappy and shockingly physical. Twice I had seen him strike his doctors for questioning him. His eyes carried a wild look that was getting his team to mutter behind his back. I could hear him muttering over and over that they would live. Unity and Protégé carried two mares upon their backs, walking tiredly but doggedly on the last stretch toward the Mall. The journey and the rescue was wearing our diminishing stamina down, while war and an ever-present tension was sapping our mental strength. Now, I was beginning to worry about us lasting until the escape. I needed to sleep, but I couldn't find the calmness to ever consider doing so. I needed to eat, but I felt sick. I wanted to sprint and fight and dig and claw for every inch for my freedom, but my body was feeling sluggish and heavy.

Could we even last?

Ahead, I heard hooves on tarmac. Stopping dead, I heard weapons drawn behind me.

Through billowing dust in the wake of the great winds sweeping across the city, a mare emerged and quickly lifted her weapon, before dropping it.

"Hey! I found them! Everyone, help them in!"

Sunny Days slung her rifle and galloped forward. Her coat was stained black with what looked like charcoal stains, and her wound from the defence of the Mall was still taped up tightly, but she pushed herself among us to take some of the weight. Behind her, a dozen others came out to meet us from the Mall, lending their rested strength to help bring us all home together.

An hour later, as we found our way back into the near wreck of the Mall, most of us collapsed in the bullet hole ridden entranceway to gasp for breath and drink some of the offered water.

Coral Eve unhooked her wagon and rounded on us all. I caught her eye, but after a fierce look, she simply turned and stomped off into the Mall. Nopony dared try to stop her. I knew what she would be doing, she would be going to plan and think. She wouldn't leave this city before she had them. I could see the disappointment on the faces of many I recognised as parents. Many were crying. I felt like doing so too, for more than just losing the foals.

I couldn't believe he had done that to save us.

Doctor Weathervane waved the injured in, encouraging their helpers with fierce curses and stinging insults.

"Bloodbank, take the stable ones up to the storage hall and find them bedding! Hurry your fat arse!"

"Yes, Doctor!"

"You! Get that stretcher! And you, stop lying down you lazy shit and pick up those fucking supplies for the aid station! Caduceus, prep Baton Round for surgery first!"

There was a brief pause. Coral and I exchanged looks as the old ghoul stared at those looking back at him in anger.

"What are you lot gawking at? You think I'm about to perform a magical fairy Canterlot

circus act?"

Bloodbank gulped, as he helped an unconscious and withered slave up onto a stretcher, "Sir... Caduceus isn't with us."

Weathervane twitched, as though not comprehending what the other pony had just said.

"Don't... don't you think I fucking know that? You... err... you..." He pointed at another pony in a nurse's garb, one I knew he'd called by name before. "Get them. Get them up and ready. Fuck me, if only he *was* here he'd be showing all you rookies up!"

As we brought the dozens we had rescued into our fold, I watched him canter alongside his four old friends. I felt sick to look at them. Their horribly savaged bodies that drew my imagination to unthinkable ideas on what the slavers did to them to have them end up like this.

"Get them anything radioactive!" Weathervane screamed and swung a hoof at the rest of us, all of us. "Anything that makes a rad-counter scream like a first timer who got more than he bargained for gets brought to me right now! No doctor gets to rest! *I will save these ponies!*"

They were stirred into action as Weathervane passed to the stairs and began the process of carefully lifting the stretchers up them.

"You hear me? They will not die! Fuck everything! Fuck every slaver and every year since those bombs, fuck what you say! I will not lose them!"

Bloodbank gulped, "Doctor, look at them, I don't know if we can—"

"Shut up, Caduceus! The afterlife can fuck off! *I will deny it!*"

Within the aid station, the seemingly hopeless task began.

Unity and I watched from the outskirts of the aid station through a hole in its wall from the battle with Big Brutus.

We watched the surgery, as we saw an entire team of doctors in the city led by possibly the single best medical professional in the entire Wasteland fight to save just four lives.

Ponies came running in with radioactive metal they'd found outside or in storage. Some even began seriously organising a trip to the crater, arguing over whether there would be time. Others squeezed what water remained in the devastated rooftop tanks out to pour and use. The doctors scurried and rushed from table to table, sharing their expertise and what skills each knew.

At the centre of it, I saw a frantic, desperate, and very clearly frightened Doctor Weathervane barking orders and trying to do the work of four.

"Get Windtail a splint to reset that before radiotherapy!" He screamed while injecting some form of yellow mixture into what remained of muscle on Baton Round's right front leg. "Who here knows a coagulation spell? She needs a fucking stop on that fluid! Come on you arseholes, they're my... just... get to work!"

I felt myself trembling, before Unity's hoof found mine.

Weathervane rounded quickly, ripping a scalpel from another slave nurse's own magical grip from having been cleaning it and going right to work on Bedlay Bloom, trying to cut away what seemed to be seared clothing to find the flesh. The difference between it and skin was small.

Through my sensitive ears, I heard him muttering to himself.

"Come on, Bedlay, fucking live. You four are all I've got left of back then."

"Doctor, we're not seeing any—"

"SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP!" His hoof came down hard on a work tray. "You will obey, and you will help me save these ponies!"

His face rounded on them with a furious snarl, giving me a look into his eyes.

I hadn't been aware ghouls as old as him could still cry.

The grip between Unity and I became closer, as we leaned against one another and held tightly.

After forty minutes, Bedlay Bloom died.

There was no immediate downturn, no sudden rush. The horrors done to her simply could not be fixed. With almost insulting lack of event, Bloodbank pronounced that any sign of life in the ghoul had ceased to be.

After a long silence, Weathervane held his head down to the table beside Bedlay's and shivered.

I hadn't really known his friends. Having met them only briefly a long time ago, they weren't immediately close to me, but it was their connection to a pony I respected so highly that hurt me deeply. I could see the wave of anguish that shot through Weathervane.

I thought how I would have felt if that had been Glimmer or Unity there on the table. Emotion grew inside me in a horrible way as the mental picture played out, and then I knew how he felt. I hiccuped and sobbed, gripping Unity tighter.

Weathervane drew himself up, looking pale and tired, before raking his threadbare mane back and turning back to the others.

"Take her to the back of the station and cover her. We still have work to do. We're not done."

No one in the medical team dared to contradict him now, but I saw their wary glances to one another.

"Come on! *Come on!* Just give me a damn sign that it's working!"

Weathervane held Windtail gently in his hooves as he kept his horn close to the 'youngest' ghoul's skull to apply subtle healing magic directly to the brain.

"It's swollen! Someone get me a surgical cutter, we need to drain the fluid gathering in there! Prep him for ventriculostomy, have the Fillydelphia General Hospital on the line and ready, we'll need their IC unit after this!"

Bloodbank looked up, concerned. "Sir, Filly-General was destroyed two hundred years ago..."

"It... what?" Weathervane looked up, disbelieving, before shaking his head, "Stop... stop fucking telling me what I know!"

"Sir, we don't have the tools for a ventri—"

"Then fucking find some! Now get over and help me, deal with his spine!"

Bloodbank waved to a nurse, and took one look before just shaking his head. He genuinely had no idea what to do with ghoul biology. Weathervane shoved him out of the

way and started trying to apply something to the badly twisted back of the lithe ghoul.

It was all for naught. Five minutes later, any indication of life ceased, and Windtail passed away.

Doctor Weathervane could only step back from the table and sit down, his front legs resting on his head and clawing down his cheeks. His eyes were turning a more milky hue than normal, tinged with red at the edges.

“No... no...”

One of the doctors looked up from Splint and seemed apprehensive.

“I... I think we’ve lost her too.”

The old ghoul surged across the aid station, grabbing a dozen tools in his magic at once to descend upon the body. His magic sparked, closing around Splint’s torso as he sent pulses of healing spells through her. A warm feeling tinged with hair-raising static charge became notable in the air. He surrounded her in enough radiation that the others had to back off.

None of it was to any avail.

“Come on! LIVE! Splint, please! Please, come on! COME THE FUCK ON! ARGH!”

He lashed out, sending a trolley of medical tool scattering across the floor. Letting out an incoherent and raspy cry of rage and anguish, he sank to his haunches with his forehead on the edge of Splint’s bed. His breathing was ragged and bestial.

Cautiously, Bloodbank, the most senior of his doctors, approached.

“Doctor...?”

Weathervane didn’t look at him, but moved his head by inches to see Splint’s lifeless face. His voice was quiet and broken.

“Centuries ago, I delivered her into this world...”

Bloodbank had no idea what to say.

If he was desperate and hostile before, he became downright fanatical with only Baton Round left. The strong stallion who had once been his hospital’s security guard was still moving, but only barely. How, I hadn’t a clue, but who knew how ghouls worked?

As a testament to their duty of care, and to my utmost admiration, the other doctors downed anti-radiation pills, setup drinks of RadAway and worked even as the radioactive metal surrounded them on the operating table to help stabilise the ghoul. It only seemed to empower Weathervane, who moved with a speed and dexterity I’d rarely seen in his old frame.

Yet it was his speech and his eyes that terrified me. His commands were becoming growled, his tone more fera—

My heart skipped. I didn’t like even thinking that word.

He was fighting to save the last pony he knew from before the balefire. The one living remnant of his life then and who had become his anchor to prevent the fall of his own sanity. Long ago, he’d told me he had been falling toward turning, but hearing these four were alive seemed to have given him a reason to keep holding on.

He was fighting for his own mind.

Shouted commands perked me up to look and see. The same static charge spell was being used around Baton’s body, the doctor’s moving backward to allow it every time, before continuing to try and stitch, splint, tie off, and heal the endless problems they were

presented with on a body that wasn't truly alive in the way we knew it anyway.

Yet, he was fading.

I didn't want to see him hurt. He had given me back my wings. He'd saved my life more than once. He'd told me how to help stave off the sickness in my lungs from slowly killing me. My friends too owed him their lives.

Yet now I watched him unable to save the ones he cared about, after two hundred years of doing it for everyone else.

My cheeks were wet and my eyes were sore, yet I couldn't help but sob.

It was a cruel sight. An immortal trying to save something that would also have been everliving, had it not been for Chainlink Shackles, this city, and its sick inhabitants.

Then they stopped. My heart felt like it did too. Any second, I expected the fatal announcement.

"I think we have him..." Bloodbank spoke quietly, finally taking a breath. His clothes were stained with rotten colours. "He's stabilising."

Weathervane stepped back, shivering and growling lowly. His old eyes were locked on the motionless ghoul upon the table, before his shoulders finally sank in what seemed to be relief.

"Doctor, what's our next move?"

The old ghoul didn't move, but his eyes stared endlessly from pony to pony. He squinted, as though not recognising them.

"I'm..." he began, "I'm going to get something to keep my magic going strong and to help him long term. Watch him, he should be stable."

Weathervane turned and slowly trotted past the others toward the door. His legs moved jerkily and without any real pattern. Ponies backed away from him as he neared, his teeth baring behind the breaks in his skin.

Gently standing up, I told Unity I'd be back in a second, just as the nurses called her in to help with some of the others they were bringing in for treatment. I moved out into the corridor after Weathervane.

He didn't deserve to be alone now.

"We're all here for you, you know?"

Weathervane spun from the cabinet in the storage hall of the Mall. His eyes sought me out with a worrying look of hunger, before something prevailed inside and he settled. All the same, I'd still hopped back a few steps.

"Murk." He fought the word out, like he was talking through a mouth that wasn't sure how to work right.

Swallowing my fear, I approached him.

"I just wanted to say, we're all here too. We care for you."

He didn't reply, but turned back to the cabinet to take out various small bottles. I moved up beside him and wordlessly started to help him, picking them out based on the ones he was already picking up.

After a few minutes, I gulped and spoke again, not looking at him.

"A lot of us haven't really got much to go back to out there. I don't even know if my mother's alive, I don't have a home or any other family. There's no friends waiting for me out

there. They're all the ones I met in here, not before."

The doctor paused briefly, before resuming his work, sniffing the contents of one vial.

"Did I ever tell you, Murk, that you remind me of him?"

My heart skipped a beat as I looked up to him. The ghoul tilted his head enough for one eye to stare down at me.

"Really?" I gasped as the meaning of that really drove home. "I'm sorry."

He slowly shook his head, looking wistful. "Don't be. Every father wants his children to be a better example than they ever were. That day you first hold them in your hooves and all you can think about is the mistakes you made before this moment, and how you want to ensure they don't do the same. You want to help them not suffer what you did, you want them to do better, help them make their own mark, so that when you die, you leave behind a fine child. Then all this happened."

He closed his eyes, shaking lightly.

"That's why you remind me of him. This world never gave either of you a chance to be the pony you wanted to be. The war forced him to make weapons and survive to accomplish a total of jack shit in some underground bunker leaving behind a mare I knew damn well he loved. It's kept me going that I thought I was doing the right thing but... fuck... if it's not tainted. Murk, I hope the same thing he went through never has to happen to you."

He took the last of his vials, before swigging down one of them and testing his horn on a nearby box with telekinesis. He finally stopped and looked at me. For a moment, I dared to think he was coming back to normal.

"You've got his eyes."

I felt distinctly out of my depth on how to respond to that, other than to eventually utter "Thank you."

The old ghoul nodded and moved for the door to return to the aid station.

"Will he be okay, now?" I asked quietly, trotting alongside him. "I mean, Baton Round?"

"He's stable now. We will have to see. There was an old rule, never work on family or friends. The loss can kill you too. Height of grand fucking irony for it to be me now. No choice here."

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

He stopped and clenched his eyes shut. I saw that same shudder I'd seen on other ghouls before, that slight raising of the back and lowering of the head. I had to fight the urge to back away.

"I... no. It isn't right that a doctor should imagine death upon even those that committed this. I have work to do to help him. He's all I have left now, Murk. He saved my life once, then I saved his from what he suffered to do it. That bonds you, our lives are linked. Maybe together, we can—hmm?"

He twisted his head about the same time I did. Galloping hooves approached, as an exhausted Bloodbank came to the storage hall doors and leaned on the door to get his breath.

I saw the look in his eyes.

Then I heard what he had to say about what had just happened.

With those words, my heart shattered; just as Weathervane recoiled, screamed, dropped every vial, and ran for the aid station.

By the time Bloodbank and I caught up with the frantic ghoul, we found a scene of chaos. Stretchers were being wheeled out of the aid station ahead of screaming slaves. I saw Glimmer pull a young mare out with her, before crying out in pain and collapsing from her injured back. Slaves with guns were trying to get near, fighting with nurses and shouting at one another in frantic angry tones.

Finally, I saw Brimstone reach over everyone else and slam the door to the aid station shut. I hid against the wall as ponies stampeded past me. I heard the same word over and over.

Feral.

The medical team were in tears. They huddled near the door, blocking ponies trying to shout about the danger, about how it 'had to be done' as they brandished rifles and shotguns. Inside, I could hear things crashing and being thrown or smashed inside. Horrid snarls and howls emerged. They sounded agonised as much as furied and beast-like.

Dropping alongside Glimmer, I helped get her out of the way of the others.

"What happened!?"

"He—argh!" She steadied herself. Her voice sounded disbelieving. "He snapped. It was like a switch, he saw the body and then just... just started shaking his head more and more and screaming and then just..."

She shivered, trying to help the young mare calm down with a hug.

"I managed to pin him against the wall with a stretcher in my magic till we got out. He was snarling and drooling. It wasn't Weathervane."

I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it.

Bloodbank paced in circles, tears streaming from his eyes.

"Baton just left us. We thought he was stable but he just, well, I don't know. Something we missed, some unseen complication I... I... I don't know. The doc is just... I don't know."

I heard that term a lot in those few minutes. 'I don't know.'

Slowly, I approached the doorway and pressed a hoof against it. Those wanting to take him out were backing down for now, after seeing that he'd been contained.

Every time I'd been happy to see him passed through my mind. The comfort there was in knowing he was around. How he'd snort and treat you with a sharp tongue, but you always knew that if anything happened you were safe with him.

From my lungs, to my wings, my neck, and chest to stab wounds. My body was a visual history of what he'd done for me. Now I heard the sounds of a feral ghoul behind that door and my mind simply couldn't imagine it as him.

We couldn't just lose him like this. We couldn't! It was so unexpected! After Mister Peace had carried out one of the most heroic things I had ever seen, and saved us all with his sacrifice, this was just horrible and unfair to witness. Weathervane was greater than this. He deserved more for everything he'd done for probably hundreds of ponies over his long life. Not to become just another feral.

I wasn't going to give up. He cared for me as a patient. I'd care for him as a friend.

Glimmer spotted me looking at the door handle and started to move over. She knew the signs when I was contemplating something by now.

"Murky, don't. I saw him. I'm sorry, but he's—"

"No, he's not!" I spun my head around. "It-it can't be that instant! Something has to take time, right? There's gotta still be something! He said I have his son's eyes and, he once

mistook me for him so maybe he'll... he'll think? I don't know, I just need something to spark his memo—”

I stopped my thinking aloud, as I looked down to my PipBuck.

My sister saw clearly what I was looking at.

“Murky, you know what he believes about Sundial.” Glimmerlight whispered to me, leaning down to my level. “You’d be telling the truth that his son never made it.”

Sniffing, I shook my head, “We already lost one friend today who I never told the truth to, until right at the end.”

Desperately, I toyed through the recordings I’d heard from Sundial. I knew what I was after. Squinting, struggling to read the controls, I finally clicked it onto one. Then I looked up into Glimmer’s eyes. The thought of Mister Peace was still too fresh.

“I may not have time to explain before he’s too far gone. Please. We all would be dead by now without him.”

Her face turned stern, before she bit her lip and sighed.

Behind the door, the snarling had gone quiet.

Everyone else had left the corridor. All that remained as I stood at the door were my friends and the medical team. Glimmer and Protégé had their weapons ready to burst in if they heard me scream.

My heart in my mouth, I slowly opened the door.

The aid station was dark. Someone had knocked over the lights on their way out. With everything cast in an unusually dark blue from the sole remaining lamp on a medical tray, I could barely see into many of the shadows.

Shivering, I closed the door and took a step further in, mentally rehearsing every motion to reach the PipBuck in a split second. Every movement of a hoof felt daring and nerve-racking. Every instinct said to turn around. Memories of the ghoul janitor were still clear.

I could see the operating table where Baton Round’s body lay covered in a sheet. Around it, everything was torn apart. I had to step over sharp tools and move around overturned beds. In the dark hue, the stained sheets of empty beds and long used tools almost seemed indicative of the world he had existed in for centuries.

Slowly, as I neared the body at the centre, I began to adjust to the dark and spotted the hunched form at the opposite end, facing the corner. A cold shiver shot right through me, as I saw the distinctive periodic spasms and sharp growls of an idle feral.

“D-Doctor...?”

I came around the bed, holding onto it with a hoof to try and propel myself for the door if anything happened.

The head shot around. Milky white eyes stared at me, as his back arched up and let his half-ruined doctor’s coat slip away. A throat rumble started to pick up, a bass level noise that shot a spike of fear right to my core.

Now. Now Murky. Do it now. I willed myself over and over, as I tried to move my frozen hooves to the PipBuck. The ghoul’s hooves shifted forward, jerky and unnatural. He made a horrible shriek.

My hoof fumbled, hitting the wrong button and toggling the light on and off. Whimpering, I couldn’t take my eyes off him as I tried again and again. He got closer, as I

finally hit the play button.

Beep.

I took a sudden breath as I realised that it still had to play through the beeps before the voice would cut in.

The ghoul began to prowl forward, picking up speed. I backed away on instinct, too scared to find the breath to scream. My hooves found slippery floors and tools as I fell to my rump and then rolled onto my back. I felt paralysed.

Beep!

Scream or wait? Scream or wait? If I screamed they'd shoot him!

The ghoul surged forward. He leapt up onto a bed before diving toward me.

Click.

It took all the willpower I had, all the trust I had in him. If I had learned anything about trusting ponies through my short time since I'd learned to think for myself, I had to believe in it now. I held the scream in, closed my eyes, and held out the PipBuck, biting hard enough on my lip that I felt my own blood enter my mouth. My entire body tensed harshly as I felt four hooves descend on all side of my body and rear up.

"Hey! Hey! Wait up!"

Shivering in a ball, there was a few seconds where I didn't know if it was just pausing, waiting or if anything had worked.

"Phew... Aurora runs faster than I do. We've stopped, though she's gone ahead to check something. I don't even know why I'm turning this on now, but I worry it might be the last chance I get."

As seconds ticked through, I felt something nudge my PipBuck. Daring to open an eye, I saw the ghoul's hoof prodding at it, as its head tilted and stared. Its eyes were wide, seemingly caught unaware.

"It's crazy. I barely even understand it all. I just... I just wanted to work hard and get a Stable ticket for Skydancer. That's all I wanted! Just some peace of mind, but I just kept falling deeper and deeper—"

In that moment, I knew that I was right. Shifting slowly, I backed away against the wall, my PipBuck held out in front of me as he followed it, listening closely. He looked confused, shaking his head and knocking at his own skull with his hooves. Once, I could have sworn I saw him holding his head.

He was still in there. I wanted to shout out, to encourage him, but I feared anything would break this spell as Sundial's voice filled the room, explaining all that had happened with the Zebras and Aurora Star, meeting the ears of his father for the first time in two hundred years. Glimmer had once told me that a parent would never forget their child and how to recognise them. Coral had reaffirmed that that was true.

Now I knew, as the message from Sundial earlier on in the metro played out, that they were right.

"But I... I want to do this. Look, I can't explain this but just... it's right. Equestria's in danger, or at least Filly is. I've been given a road to help it. To stop ponies from being hurt. My mother always used to tell me about Twilight Sparkle and her friends. They weren't born to save others, they just did. Now I know what she meant when she told me those stories of the Ministry Mares in their young days. I'm just your average pony who got a chance to help like they did and I... I want to. I want to help stop this. I'm a part of it. I'm involved. I'm... going to save ponies."

The ghou's face softened, as those cream eyes widened again. I saw muscles relax as he stared at the PipBuck endlessly, like a lost foal.

"Dad always told me he wished I'd gone into medicine instead of helping build weapons to make money. I argued, I knew why I'd done it. It paid more. But I'd always felt like I disappointed him. Now I'm realising I'm probably never going to see him again and I feel... I just..."

A hoof landed on my leg as the ghou brought itself closer to the PipBuck, leaning his forehead against it. I could see tears forming, slow and coloured, but tears all the same.

"Dad... I wish I could just talk to you now. I only ever took that job to help save a pony I love, and I'm still trying to save her now. I was going to propose to her, you know? You inspired me. You always did. Now that I'm about to go do something so dangerous and try to save so many lives that I just... I just wish you were here to give me your advice and so I could let you see that I really am trying to be as good a stallion as you are."

They were flowing, as the spasms I saw were not that of a feral, but that of a sobbing, nostalgic, and emotional stallion.

"I'm going to save everypony down there, Dad. Do what you do. I'll make you proud. If I don't come back, then please don't worry if you hear this. I'll be with mom, okay? I'll —"

"Sundial? Sundial, we have to go."

"Okay... okay. This is it. Goodbye. If anypony finds this, please let my family know what's happened. Hopefully this isn't my last entry."

"Sundial, come on! I can feel that it's powered up, we have to go, now!"

"Coming!"

Click.

As it ended, I was left alone with him. The oldest pony I knew held onto the PipBuck like a lost foal, as two centuries of pain and emotion passed through him.

"Rrr... Murk?"

I could only gasp as I heard him speak.

"Weathervane?"

"My son... died in the balefire, didn't he?"

Worrying of another slip into the feral side, I could only tell the truth. To deny it now would only be worse. Gulping, I nodded.

"Yes." I paused, giving the old stallion a moment. "I found him, when I found this. But he died doing something incredible, and we know he succeeded. He saved so many ponies with what he did. So many."

Weathervane pulled himself up. He looked horrifically frail, his expression twitching as though he had gone through a stroke, or was still riding the knife-edge of falling to the feral side.

"Somehow I always knew, after I found the stable. It was empty. The ponies inside had left it years before I got there. I didn't find anything of his. But I knew he had the ticket so I... I needed something to hold onto, but now I know what he did."

I tried to get to my hooves, moving cautiously and carefully as I spoke.

"I've heard it all over the past months. Sundial was a good pony. He saved me a few times too."

Weathervane only nodded, before gently reaching over with his now sleeve-covered leg to gently wrap it around me.

“He would have liked you. I would have been proud to welcome you into our home. Fillydelphia always was my home, Murky. I grew up here. I raised a family here. I died here too. Only now...”

He glanced around, seeing the rows upon rows of stained beds, the hopeless unending struggle to heal slaves in a hell city, the bodies of those unfairly treated, and the darkness of a half-ruined building. He paused as his eyes found Baton Round, before sighing.

“Baton, my dear friend, be at peace at last. With all this, I believe I have found some measure of closure. My old life is finally over.”

He let go of me when the door opened, and the others began to creep in and see us together. They had disbelieving eyes. Staring at them, Weathervane turned back to me, and leaned down.

“So I ask, kindly, if you would please allow me to join you all in a new one.”

I stood with Protégé at the window overlooking the war torn city in his office. He hadn’t spoken much after I’d entered and found him alone. I’d just trotted over and stood alongside to watch the skyships passing by, and the enormous pillars of smoke from entire blocks burning.

A few more minutes ticked by. We saw the trails of artillery shells soaring through the smog and blinked as bright sparks of energy lanced from the sky. I followed the dives and spins of Enclave troopers as they flew rooftop to rooftop in the distance. No one seemed to be bothering with the shelled-out Mall any more.

Protégé removed his eyepiece, sitting it on the windowsill.

“You know it seems silly, Murky. But I miss our talks we used to have in here.”

Turning my head, I lowered one eyebrow, a little confused.

“Really? But we were—”

“Master and slave? I suppose you are right. Only that’s not how I remembered it from my side. To me, I was trying to see if you would be like me. Someone who wanted better, even if we had different perceptions of it.”

My head already hurt from today, and the adrenaline leaving me was giving me a hard crash of energy levels. I wasn’t sure how well I could keep up with this.

“I suppose there was something about them, you were nice to me. Sometimes.”

Protégé winced, clearly remembering the ‘other’ times. “I was just thinking after seeing you with Weathervane. What is it about you that seems to stir this willpower in others?”

“I don’t do it on purpose...” I muttered, looking away.

He briefly chuckled, “So you have noticed it.”

I believe I may have blushed. He smiled and sat down on his old chair. It creaked before one of the arms fell off it entirely.

“Those talks we had made me realise something of the same, even as far back as then. I saw it again with you and so many others since. I believe I’ve finally identified what it is. Forgive me for saying Murky, but you’re small, you aren’t muscular, you can’t aim a gun, can only read basic words...”

“Hey!” I rounded on him, to see him wave a hoof in apology.

“But you shine with an inner strength. I’ve read a lot of books, some of them talk about how strength isn’t in doing, but doing in spite of. I think many of us may have become

attached to that, possibly even inspired by it. You don't lead us, Murky, but you represent the heart of what we are doing."

He got up and returned to the window. "And now we've all, together, accomplished this. We inspired ponies to help everyone escape, defended innocent lives, rescued the most mistreated slaves in the city from Shackles' own den, and now we sit atop a plan to escape, possibly in the next few hours. And yet here I stand missing our talks."

He laughed tersely and shook his head. "When the sky returns. Fitting, isn't it?"

"Mhm." I muttered. "It's weird. I feel a little bit uncomfortable. We're about to go for it but I just feel... I don't know, like it's—"

"Sluggish around the hooves?" He finished.

"Sick in the stomach?" I added.

"Homesick?" We both spoke at the same time.

Protégé put a hoof on my shoulder, "It's a strange feeling. To feel nervous about leaving the place that's hurt you. I feel it too."

I gulped. "The only friends I ever had, I met here. It's weird to say but Filly was the first place my life started. Really started, when I got out of the Pit and saw her escape. Or even before that when Unity and I... it's hard to explain."

Protégé nodded, "Like in some weird way, it's home. I found the father figure I'd lacked and a purpose I never expected to have from a life of servitude. Filly gave me meaning. It gave me... yes, you said it right. A life."

He sighed, "Now we're looking at the unknown."

"The fear that we'll get dragged back in again."

Protégé shook his head on that one, but then he had always been more confident about plans, and hadn't been through the same failures I had.

Then he stopped before saying anything further. I saw him lean forward and quickly push his face near the glass remaining in the window.

"What is..."

I shuffled up beside him and saw it.

Across the sky, amongst the black shapes of the Enclave ships and between the cascade of projectiles and energy beams above the fire, I saw the light.

Like when I had first escaped the Mall and saw an enormous Balefire Phoenix, I felt the same sense of scale kicking in. Like something was about to happen, something larger than what I thought I knew.

A green flare, streaking across the sky. It curved slowly, glittering as it went and leaving a long trail that wafted and slowly broke apart seconds after the flare's passing. It was moving fast, so very fast, coming in from the mountain ranges as it entered the city limits and streaked upwards in a rapid climb.

Protégé was silent, as I heard shouting from around the Mall begin to pick up.

With a cloud-clearing thump, it shot through the cloud barrier from below. Then, for almost half a minute, I began to feel like I'd just imagined it, if it weren't for Protégé being there.

"What was tha—"

All voice. All sound was cut off.

It returned, travelling faster than anything I had ever seen. Seconds after coming down in a vertical dive from the clouds, the sound hit me like a sledgehammer. A colossal BOOM, overriding everything else in the city making noise. It drowned out a war as my eyes felt like

they burned on witnessing a star's light that expanded and grew and grew.

Then my mind realised what I was seeing. The radioactive green, the speed, the explosion. It was a Balefire Missile, it had to be!

The ground began shaking. I saw all the fighting cease, as I saw dust and smoke being blown aside by the approach of the shock wave. We barely had time to dive away from the window before it hit the Mall with a force not felt since the Enclave ship had strafed it. Yelling aloud, I felt myself tossed up as the floor shifted and rocked. Smog and smoke blasted in through the open window as it was forced away from the explosion, forcing us both to squeeze tightly together into the shelter provided by the desk's gap for the chair. I held my ears down as the wind howled and whistled. I saw glass on the floor. My bones were shaking. I screamed over and over, expecting the surging flames to come crawling through the window any second.

Clasping tightly in a ball, I waited for it to be over.

And yet, before I could even imagine it would continue, I felt it begin to die down.

There were no green flames. No horrid burning.

Slowly, I untangled myself from Protégé and the pair of us crawled back into the office. I turned my eyes to the window before crying out in pain as something burned my eyes.

A searing light struck me, as I felt my skin grow warm. Were there flames yet to come? Did they come later?

"Murky... look..."

Protégé was slack-jawed beside me as I squinted my eyes back open. Held in a sharp ray of bright light that made the office glitter and showed me how bright the colours in the office really were, we approached the window. My own coat felt like it was gleaming. Protégé shone as his eyepiece reflected light. Book covers of all a rainbow of colours stood out on the floors under this beautiful glow.

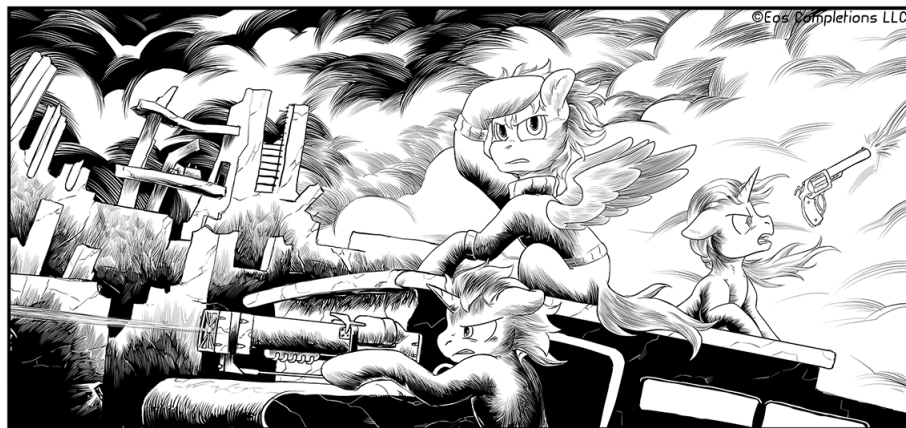
Outside, skyships fell. Some lay in heaps upon the ground, others limped away. There was so little sound. The war had ceased in wonder.

In the skies above, there was a hole. A great hole, larger than could be imagined. It cast light upon this blighted city, chasing away the red darkness and fighting with the lingering smoke and smog that slowly begun to raise again. Several fires had been blown out entirely. Shining beams of light cascaded down, more fragile and strong than anything I had ever sketched in my wildest dreams.

Yet I didn't care. I barely even thought about them. Both Protégé and I made noises, the starts of words, but neither of us could find a way to end them or continue. The awe ran too deep. Xenith hadn't been lying or using a metaphor. It was time.

Above us, I could see the sky. The clear sky.

The clear sky... and the sun.

They Will Remember

“You saw the sonic radboom with your own eyes? Incredible! How did that feel to finally see the sun at its fullest, shining down upon you all?”

Crying wasn’t an entirely unusual thing for me. Usually though, it was to vent emotion when I couldn’t let it out any other way, or because of sheer relieved joy. This time however, it was from beauty and from being in utter awe. The endless blue, and the searing orange and white of the sun itself, were like colours I had never seen in my life. Totally unstained by the filth and dirt of the nightmare on the surface, it just made me regret never learning how to colour drawings. It reminded me what colour could be.

But it spoke to me deeper than that. I’m a pegasus. I’d never seen the proper daytime sky. Now that I could sort-of fly, I saw the great sky-ocean that I had been born to be in. It made me feel stronger inside, knowing that we were closer to the end. Like if we got out, then I could start training to someday soar around it on my own, no matter what Weathervane said about my chances to ever fly properly.

That one moment gave me more hope, it brought a smile and laughter to my face as I imagined all the possibilities. It looked like how I’d always imagined freedom from chains would be.

“Quite the signal that Xenith was referring to. I suppose it would make perfect sense, both the slavers and the Enclave would be distracted and dizzied. What better time to escape? Only... I guess it’s not as simple as that, is it?”

No.

We had failed to get the foals. It was almost insultingly crushing; we had planned everything around getting them in time, but they’d predicted we’d do that and moved them ahead of time. Chainlink Shackles was brutal, but he was also one of the smartest slavers in the city. He was cunning and patient; you’d always find the simplest and most tiny things he

did meant more than you perhaps realised. It was like he was always a few steps ahead of us, and we were struggling just to keep up and find our way through everything he threw in our path. The ambush when we'd tried to get Aurora's orb back, the siege of the Mall, the Bloodletters and the raid on the metro had cost us in time and lives. We were being steadily worn down from the strength we'd gained. We couldn't afford another big fight. We didn't have the time to go after everything any more.

This was the time when we'd have to make choices and compromises, the very thing Shackles wanted us to do. He wanted to force our hooves, control our actions. The same thing he always wanted. Control. I'd never imagined he could do it from so far away, and yet the whole time we thought we were evading him, we could have been running right into what he wanted while he was on the sidelines growing in power endlessly. He was now first in line to rule Fillydelphia. He had Aurora's orb. He had the foals. He'd released monsters and raiders that over time had killed Mister Peace and took Glimmer and Brimstone out of the fight.

I hadn't even met him face to face since the mountaintop, and yet he was crushing my efforts again. We were running out of momentum. Now the signal had come and we were behind schedule.

"You couldn't give up... not now. After everything you all did together in that Mall, there's no way you could..."

We wouldn't. We never would. I never would. I never *will*.

Only now we had to do what I said. Compromise. We had to go for the Wall or we'd miss our opening, but if we went right there, we'd be leaving the foals behind.

"And I am willing to bet that Coral Eve would never allow that."

Not her, and not any of the other parents with us. Not Protégé either.

He was in the worst position of all of us. The responsibility on his shoulders was crushing, but these were the days when I was finally seeing him be the pony he should be. The one who could rise up in such an incredible way. Yes, I feared for our chances. But I trusted *him* to lead us through it.

Somehow, we would claw our way, I knew. We always had before, we would again. It all began now. The final plunge.

"So... this was it, huh?"

Yeah. This was it.

This was when the slaves of Fillydelphia made their attempt to break through the wall.

This was the beginning of everything we had been fighting for. The escape.

"After all this time... all the building up. Wow..."

Once we left the Mall, there would be no turning back. But Fillydelphia wasn't ready to let go of us quite yet.

And like I said, it was as though Shackles was always thinking a few steps ahead of us...

The sun and sky.

Bathed in its warm light, I stood upon the cracked ceramic of the Mall's outer balconies and stared into the sparkling blue above the city. As the clouds coiled and faded from the edges, driven back by whatever enormous force had punched this gap into the unspoiled beauty above, I stood and let the sun's light wash over me with its gentle radiance.

So gentle and comforting. So natural. For a moment, even with my hearing, I let everything drown out into the distance as my headache faded away.

If ever I had needed a reminder that brighter days could lie ahead, this was it.

Fillydelphia was at a pause. Both the slavers and the Enclave had faltered in their attacks on one another after the massive explosion had torn through the sky. An unusual sense of stillness came over the city.

It wouldn't last. Of course it wouldn't. Already I'd heard a few spats of combat emerging from some area of the city I couldn't see. Slowly, the war was rebuilding its momentum. All the same, it had given us a window.

I felt a hoof rest on my shoulder, and found Protégé trotting up beside me. He took his eyepiece off and stared up into the sky, just like I had. He took a long breath and slowly let it out.

"It really gives you context, doesn't it? What the world before could be under the light of that."

He slowly drew out his photograph of a tree house in a quaint little village, a library symbol on a sign near the door. Vibrant greens and polished decoration lit up on the film-paper as true sunlight struck it.

It made everything come to life.

"It's what I always believed we could make the world be like again, Murky. That all it took was enough effort, enough ponies believing in it. Enough sacrifice..."

His voice faltered, and his hoof dropped back to the ground again.

"It could again," I began, and tried to smile.

To my surprise, he smiled back. "Go on."

Oh, great. He thought I had more to actually say. I'd just been saying that to sound optimistic but now, oh dear. Think!

"Well... well... I mean all this in the city was wrong, and led by a bunch of disgusting and horrible ponies—"

"Thanks." He deadpanned.

"I didn't mean it like that!" I faltered and, to my surprise, found myself laughing briefly. "I just meant that, well, Fillydelphia wasn't the right way. But that doesn't mean there isn't a way out there. Somewhere. I mean..."

I waved my hoof around the massive hole.

"If something, or somepony out there could do this? Who knows? Maybe it's possible."

Protégé smiled and nodded. "If we had but a whole world who thought like you and I, Murky. The things we could do, or could have done had we not met as we did. I so heavily regret the way I treated you, because of how I was—"

He stopped, before looking away and quickly speaking again.

"Unfortunately, as much as I wish we could enjoy this view for however long it lasts... we're just putting this off."

Behind us, I could hear the Mall beginning to pick up in noise as the events that had just occurred filtered through to everyone within it.

"Yeah, I know... and I know it wasn't your fault." I spoke quietly, I didn't want to let him go away without hearing it.

Protégé let his smile slip as he nodded. I wasn't sure if I entirely convinced him. I didn't blame him, really! He'd been a slave as much as I. If only I had a good hour to sit down and talk to him about it.

As we both returned to the inside of the Mall, I caught him stopping to once more look back at the sun, then to his photograph, and very carefully tuck it away.

"A new world is coming for us in here. No more slaves and masters to define us. Let's make this happen, Murky. As equals."

"What are we even going to do? That's the signal! That means now!"

"Calm down!" Protégé had to raise his voice to let the panicking stallion hear him over the growing ambience of the Mall. Ponies were shouting to one another and rushing back and forth.

The message that they'd be leaving any time now had struck hard. Up until now, ponies had crowded back to the windows, staring in wonder at the sky. The light in their eyes had twinkled, and just for a second they looked more like ponies should, less like withered slaves. It had almost been like a brief silence of respect, as loved ones held one another and those faltering from the hardship found new strength in the sight.

Now, however, there was a panic to pack everything up that hadn't been ready. To prepare weapons and stuff every bit of remaining food into pockets and bags. Ponies were working out who would carry what, which group would be responsible for which wounded or sick metro slaves, and trying desperately to get some kind of organisation amongst themselves. They didn't just have to plan for the escape, they had to plan for the dozens of miles of hostile wasteland before reaching anywhere for help.

I saw ponies drawing the hoof-sewn tents we'd been making through the corridor beside us and heard calls for 'anyone still needing a group to join' go out again and again. Ammo was being given out equally and maps copied from one another on paper were flying off their piles. A great movement of ponykind was getting ready to make their last journey. The slaves from the metro were protected at the centre of it all, ringed by medical staff who would stay with them. No one yet knew what would be done with them outside, but they would be coming one way or another. Many of them had no idea what was even happening. One I saw crying in terror as a nurse hugged her gently and rocked back and forth while stroking their mane, trying to tell her that 'the Master' wasn't going to come back for her this time.

Sunny Days, Blunderbuck, and Weathervane had joined us, the latter looking thin and haggard. To my surprise, Glimmer, Brim, and somehow even List Seeker had limped out to hear what was being planned. They had earned a sour glance from Weathervane, but after all he'd been through, he simply didn't have the energy to muster a scathing complaint at them leaving their beds. I felt a pang of disappointment that Unity wasn't here, but last I'd heard, she'd been trying to find Coral.

Protégé glanced to the door before starting, anyone who would be here was here.

"This is our window of opportunity. There is no debate about it, we must go for the wall and we must do it now. Crossing the city is going to be perilous enough with the slavers and Enclave being so jumpy and itching for a spark to reignite this entire thing. If we try to do it once the war starts again, then we'll stand no chance. We're not able to fight them like we could before anymore. Blunderbuck, is the bomb ready?"

The excitable young stallion nodded about a dozen times too many. He had bags under his eyes, completely at odds with his physical expression of energy and bright speech. He'd

been working on it for a long time now.

"She's ready to blow like Sparkle Cola and Party-Time Mintals! But uh... we got a problem! See, she might be very boomy, but she's not exactly pony-portable, if you catch my drift?"

Weathervane took a deep breath, before speaking. His voice was lower, more rasped and thin. "A similar problem exists for us with the struggling ones. It took us hours to cross the city last time with just the metro survivors. With the wounded as well, and the slow pace that some of these poor souls can only manage after what they've been through, well, we would be a limping target."

Sunny Days took the opportunity to add on to this, "And do we even know where we're going for the wall anyway? We don't wanna run through them to get there. There's only a baker's dozen unwounded fighters left, and that's me being very generous with the definition of 'unwounded' right there, along with maybe a small group of healthy types that aren't fighters. There's four ponies sick, injured, or broken in the head for every one of the ones we can count on."

She flexed her own bandaged shoulder as emphasis. "Point is, we can't move quick, we've got too much to carry for the journey that we can't leave behind, and we can't fight our way through."

Protégé sat down at his office table and drew a hoof through his mane, staring at the map in front of him.

"Based on what you all say, we need transport. That's just another thing to add on to our list of delays. This window won't stay open forever. Anyone got ideas? The couple of carts we have aren't going to cut it."

There was a pregnant silence. I could hear Glimmerlight muttering beside me about various ideas, as she thought out loud. Catching me looking, she offered a tired wink and smile. I tried to return it as best I could. To be perfectly honest, I hated these planning sessions. I always felt so useless during them, because I wasn't some great planner or thinker. I didn't know how to lead ponies or what things had to be considered, so I ended up as the perpetual fly on the wall. In some ways it reminded me of Shackles' slaver meeting in the Ministry of Wartime Technology. All those plans flying across a table, beyond my reach to really grab and join with. They—

Wait.

I hopped my front hooves up on the table and raised my voice to speak. Unfortunately, all that emerged was a strangled noise as my nerves caused my voice to break.

Well, at the very least it got their attention.

"I know!" I began, before figuring they maybe wanted a bit more detail than that, "Transport! I know where we can get some!"

Unable to reach across the table (curse my short legs forever!) I got onto a chair and leaned my forelegs on the table more properly before tapping the Wartime Ministry.

"That place! It has all these rows and rows of big armoured wagons outside it! Stuff the Equestrian Army was to use I... I think? If we got the bomb and the slaves into them, the healthier ones could all tow it across the city and they could protect us!"

Protégé's face lit up and he rapped his hoof on the table. I yelped at the sharp noise right beside me, slipping before Glimmer's magic caught me and helped me sit back, furiously blushing.

"Murky's right! The old Ministry has an arms depot outside it. Red Eye used to take some

when we ever needed protected transport, but the remainder have been virtually forgotten about. Given how large they are, we could probably fit everyone on board, hmm, a dozen? They would only have to squeeze in for a brief time.”

“In that case, we need them.” Sunny stared at the map and traced the route with a hoof. “We could have a group there and back in an hour. Think you could have everyone organised and waiting for us by then? We’d have to arrive, load, and go right away, because somehow I don’t think those bastards will let a big convoy of armoured wagons pass without issues.”

“That would deal with our transport issues, but again, where we going? Where am I meant to blow up?” Blunderbuck was peering around my shoulder to see the map.

Any reply was cut off.

“I think there’s a rather more important *issue* you’re not talking about.”

Coral Eve’s voice cut into the meeting like a cold spear. From the entrance to the office, she stormed inside with furious eyes. A very nervous Unity meekly approached behind her.

I couldn’t help but notice that everyone present parted ways for her, veteran or not. Protégé looked up to greet her.

“Coral Eve, we—”

“Enough with the crap. When and how do we get them?”

She stood at the edge of the table, her eyes locked on his.

“You’ve been planning on how to get all of us to the wall, but that sounds an awful lot like we’re just accepting that we failed. So I’ll ask again. How. Do. We. Get them?”

Everyone else was stunned to silence. I could see Blunderbuck hiding behind Glimmer, with my sister looking distinctly unsettled. It occurred to me that she knew very well what Coral was capable of in these moods.

And there was a truly dark look in her eyes.

“They’re being held in that Ministry Station. We’ve all seen what happens down there. What it does to ponies! What do you think it’ll do to foals? We saw *adults* fall into madness from whatever the hell it is down there!”

“We will get them somehow, Coral!” Protégé cut to the precise line he knew he needed to avoid a catastrophe. “The problem is, we don’t know how to get in, and the convoy to the wall cannot wait. Listen, if we can’t get that wall down in time, we won’t have anywhere *to* go after this. It’s all or nothing. Without an escape route out of the city prepared, we’ll just get rounded up. If we’re delayed, we’ll get surrounded and bogged down. It all needs to happen at once. The key is...”

He took a deep breath.

“We need to split up.”

There was a powerful rise in noise. Everyone present made their own thoughts very clear. It was suicide! We’d fail both parts! Two of the soldiers gave some very colourful terms on what would happen to us if we tried it.

“We don’t have a choice!” Protégé shouted, “Coral Eve is right, we can’t leave the foals! Listen, we brought back some of the slavers from the metro with us, remember? We find out from *them* if there’s any other way inside. Once we know where the entrance is, we pick a point on the wall that we can get a wagon up to which is nearby wherever it is!”

Protégé glanced around each of them and clasped his hooves together.

“We park up the majority of the wagons at a middle point between them, go for the wall and at the same time, go for the foals. By the time the walls are down, hopefully we’ll have

enough time to help those rescuing the children get through after the rest.”

A soldier spat. “Suicide.”

Coral Eve glanced briefly at the mark on the carpet the soldier had left, before looking up at him. I couldn’t help but feel slightly amused by the way he immediately took two full steps backwards.

“Like Protégé said...” Her voice was stern. “We have no choice.”

Slowly, with a deathly glare to any of the doubters, she turned and left the room.

After a few seconds, Protégé wiped his brow and sat down again.

“Sunny?”

“Wagon duty. I’m on it. We’ll be back in an hour. *Be ready.*”

“Weathervane?”

“We’ll have the wounded ready at the doors.”

“Blunderbuck?”

“Francesca’s ready for her performance.”

The roll-call was briefly broken as Protégé looked up at him, as did the rest of us. Glimmer snorted in laughter.

“You named the *bomb*?”

Blunderbuck held out his hooves to my sister, looking affronted. “Listen, me and that thing got *very* attached to one another while I was spending a good day or so building it while all that nonsense happened in the Mall with soldiers and raiders and air strikes and giant green sky-clearing explosions!”

An ice-breaker of a chuckle passed around the room.

“Let’s do it then!” Glimmer shouted out. “Come on!”

As ponies began to filter out, Protégé got up and walked around the map. Only he and my friends remained with me now.

“We need that information from the slavers we captured, everyone. Without it, this rescue’s going nowhere, and I don’t want to imagine what Coral might do if it becomes... well...”

“Impossible,” Brimstone finished for him, the first word he’d said all meeting.

“I’m trying not to think of it. Now, I suppose I have some slavers to question...”

The overseer laughed and rolled his eyes. Stretching against his bonds that held him tightly to the cage door of a slave pen, he wiped the sweaty mane from his eyes and spat on the ground before Protégé.

“And just what do you think I know, huh? I got nuthin’ to say to you! You’re just a little rebel waiting for Shackles to come and claim you!”

He settled back and looked away, fidgeting against the chains that held him in place to scratch at his thick grey coat.

Protégé stood in the cell with him, while I waited at the door. He was being patient, standing and watching the slaver, but I knew it was all an act. We needed that information as fast as possible. Sunny and a dozen ponies had already left to get the wagons, and when they came back, we would have scant minutes to get aboard and get going. Already, slaves were being directed toward the front halls of the Mall, and the wounded loaded into makeshift stretchers. Behind me, ponies were pulling bags of tins and carrying boxes full of

food to last the trip. There was an intensity in the air, as the Mall was stripped of anything valuable to take with us.

"You don't owe Chainlink Shackles anything," Protégé spoke quietly. "I've seen him turn on his own more than once already, you have to know how merciless he is."

"Well, duh, but what else you gonna do? He paid us better and if you were valuable, you didn't get tossed out. Survival of the fit, right? We got more per day than Red Eye gave us, he got the better houses, we got our own slaves to start buildin' our own little dens, and if you were with him, you got respect. Few years with him, you could make it up the chain with him backing you."

The red maned unicorn before him narrowed his eyes. "I've seen enough to know where his chain leads. Always back to himself."

"And the fuck else you going to do when he rolls up to your lodgings and offers it? Turn him down? Oh sure, I'd have survived much longer by telling *him* to get lost, wouldn't I? You don't know the half of it, upstart!"

"So you did it out of fear." Protégé narrowed his eyes and leaned closer. "Obey him for your own 'benefit' or have him as an enemy. You know there's a chance to escape him now, a better start..."

The slaver hesitated, before shaking his head.

"No way, man! No way! I ain't turning my back on him! He finds you if you do. It's a contract! A deal! You don't go breaking it! He got eyes everywhere, he even got some amongst you, remember? With the orb? Haha... yeah, fuck betraying him!"

I could see in his eyes the same look that slaves often held. He was terrified, but not of us.

"Cos you lot aren't getting out, and when you're brought back it'll be him! It'll be him in control soon, you all know it's true! What happens then? You're going to fail, and I'd be left to what he does to traitors! No, I'm gonna wait and prove that I didn't do anything against him!"

I knew Protégé was getting desperate, this had gone on for half an hour already. Briefly, he walked back to me and sighed, whispering.

"This isn't working. I *know* he knows things, he's too highly ranked not to. He's an overseer, one step down from Grindstone and his ilk."

"He's scared of him." I replied with my mouth covered. "When I did what Shackles said, it's because I was scared of him too, until I had something more important or scarier to have to do, I-like when he was going to—"

Protégé's hoof waved, cutting me off. "Don't go into it, for your own sake. But you're right. I've tried to appeal to hope, but maybe that isn't the approach... overseer?"

His voice rose on the last word, catching the slaver's attention.

"We're trying to ask you here, how else do we get into Ministry Station? The Outer Metro is not possible, the old prison is closed off now, how do we do it? Where is the way in? You're very right, we're on a short schedule and we have little chance."

He trotted closer and almost pressed his face to the slaver's.

"I've got the lives of foals and slaves on my shoulders, overseer. I've got their hopes and dreams riding behind me, and you're the wall blocking me from getting them home. You're right... if you don't tell us then we'll fail."

The overseer cackled.

"I. Know. And it's brilliant."

Protégé didn't move.

"Then don't force me to take this in a direction that I'll regret having to do later in life."

That made the stallion pause. He leaned back in shock. "What are you... no, you ain't the type."

The cell door swung open and the deep gravelly voice rumbled into the dark cell.

"On the other hoof, I am."

A monolithic shadow fell across the floor from the giant form of Brimstone Blitz entering the room. He had to duck to come under the door, his shoulders barely squeezing through. Every step held a weighty thump on the ground as his one-eyed and scarred visage glared with murderous intent.

The slaver jerked back, sweating almost immediately.

"You... you..."

"Me." Brimstone snorted, blowing mist from his nostrils in the cold air of the cell.

Protégé and I slowly stepped aside to let him enter as the overseer trembled and looked up.

"You... no! He wouldn't let you! There isn't shit you can do! What? Y-you gonna try to just hurt me? Kill me? Then k-kill me! You ain't got shit if I die! You can't hurt me, he'd hurt me worse! There's nothing you can do that's worse than what Shackles would do to me! I've seen it! You haven't got the *time* to make it worse than he would! You don't scare me! You wouldn't go that far now, *ex-warlord*! You're not gonna get anything from me!"

Brimstone stood and listened, before shrugging.

"I'm not the one coming to ask."

The slaver blinked, "H-huh?"

The huge earth pony slowly stepped aside, and a blue magical light flared into being, lighting up the doorway.

Behind him was Coral Eve, with a face that could end worlds.

The overseer's eyes shot so wide I thought they'd come off.

"The Ministry!" The slaver shrieked, pulling back so hard he fell over from his chains catching and tugging his legs. He pulled again and again, pushing for the back of the room. "Arcane Science! The Ministry! There's a hidden elevator in Aurora's personal lab store cupboard! W-we found it only when we came up it! It's there!"

Coral took two steps forward, eyes boring into the overseer's.

"Where. Are. They?"

His hooves were weaving frantically, pleading visually. "In the same holding cells we put you lot in down there! Beside the old zebra portal! I swear!"

She stared at him as he quivered and turned away, unable to match her withering gaze. I could see tears in his eyes, his entire body reacting in sheer terror.

Then she turned and stormed away, marching toward a set of saddlebags in the corridor, throwing them over her back. With one last glance of hatred, she strode off toward the front of the Mall. The slaver collapsed, his cheeks wet and his whole body a quivering mess.

Brimstone watched her go with a small grin.

He looked impressed.

"Come on... come on... there we go!"

I stumbled back and forth under the weight of Glimmer's saddlebags on top of my own.

My hooves skittered and searched for balance as I swung to the side, before her magic caught me and held me upright.

Together, we limped and struggled downstairs into the madness beginning to form around the giant entranceway of the Mall. I'd elected to help her given she couldn't carry her own bags on her injured back.

"Thanks, lil'bro. What are siblings for if not a pack mule, huh?" She nudged my side, making me grin, before her voice turned more serious. "Listen, Murky, when those wagons arrive, make sure you're in the same one as me, okay? I wanna try to get all of us into one cart."

"Sure..." I gulped, knowing the reason why. If any of the wagons got taken out, to have to watch an individual friend who was in it left behind would be horrific. In an effort to lighten the mood, I decided to say something I'd overheard from a convoy guard once. "I call shotgun though."

I tried to giggle with it, before her face lit up at even my attempt to lighten the mood as well.

"You're full of surprises, since when did you know caravan lingo? Yeah, well I'll call my rifle any day. Sure thing." She ruffled my mane, before settling onto a rug by the edge of the entranceway with a thankful sigh, rubbing the bandages still wrapped around her entire torso. "Now, c'mon, others need your help. I'll be fine here."

Seeing her settled, I made a move to get in amongst it all. I had lost track of the numbers, but we easily had over a hundred slaves in here now, possibly two hundred. They were so thick and moving that I couldn't even count. Those who had come first and fought to turn the Mall into a safe place mixed with the latecomers and the evacuees from the metro. The old and young rubbed shoulders, the former sharing wasteland survival tips and the latter using their more able bodies to lift and carry. The sick and wounded were lined up along the far edge of the entrance halls, many covered from tail to neck in thin sheets to protect against dust and pebbles and keep their wounds infection-free.

I did my best to offer help. Some of the shell-shocked types scorned it, nervously packing their own bags. Others I helped drag and lift supplies for. I helped Weathervane to escort and support the limping ones down to the entrance. I shared a moment with List Seeker as he apologised profusely for the past, and then we hoofed out bread together to those readying their packs.

These ponies were ready, and it scared them. We waited in this one hall, as minutes passed like hours, awaiting the call from outside that the wagons were here, and it would all begin. There was nothing to do but plan and wait. The fear of what was to come surged through me, but I could feel that thrill in me, much like I had upon gearing up for my first attempt to escape. I was in better shape than many of these ponies, I felt responsible, a feeling I'd never much been used to my entire life.

Soon, everything was going to explode when we left the Mall, and it would either be over forever, or it would be the failure that would break us all. It had cost so much to get this far.

As I weaved and ducked my way through the crush, I saw comforting hugs and last-minute kisses for luck. I saw tears of worry mixed in with tightly knit groups trying to banter and cheer the tension away.

As I passed near to the wall, something on the flat surface facing the main doors caught my eye on it for a moment.

Strewn all over it were papers and pictures alongside scrawled messages in hasty and

crowded groups. Written notes stuck to the wall mixed with sketches or even occasional photos. I struggled to read a few of the simpler passages from various different notes.

"He got us this far."

"She wanted it more than anypony."

"You took that one for me, Peachy."

"We'll never forget you."

"Thank you."

Below it all was a pile of collars and chains, dumped at the base of the wall. In the middle of them all, around the trinkets and notes, were a few small words, with a much larger one beneath them.

We will be

FREE

There was no way I couldn't. I took out my charcoal stick and leaned closer to the wall. I didn't know what to write, words weren't my thing.

Instead, I let my charcoal touch and drag in smooth shapes and curves. I had to hop up on my hind legs to reach where I wanted, as I added my own touch to it all. Lots of little lines, all swift and light, gradually coming together into something bigger, becoming thicker and stronger as they joined and became one. Then I let my stick sweep, drawing all of it into one long journey of the charcoal from the bottom to the top and around all of those who had left their messages. I drew them together, connecting them.

As I stepped back, I looked upon my work with pride, as others near me spotted it and clapped me on the back. To my amazement, slaves began to come over and view it.

"Woah..."

"Did he do that? That's amazing!"

I blushed, in shock as more and more slaves gathered to look at what had become of their memorial. The chattering grew as they called others.

In the centre, I felt my sore body shaken by excited ponies.

"Thank you! It's just what they needed."

"They deserve it for all they did."

On the wall, every note and image was now connected. Lines flowed between and around them, around or inside the memorial, always moving to the next in one ongoing pattern. A pattern of broken chains from them all. Along their lines, I had added my own details. A cutie mark bearing the symbol of healing, a Talon's claw and an Equestrian Army Robotics badge, or at least how I imagined it would look, if I had designed it.

Beside me, I saw some ponies crying as they touched the notes and traced the lines with their hooves.

They were remembering everyone who had made this possible, and those who hadn't made it this far.

As their emotions poured forth and I felt hooves wrap around me from strangers, I gazed at the three symbols and joined them in their memories.

The fire of creativity had been lit in me.

I found a little hidden spot for myself, tucked away into one of the old employee store cupboards on the ground floor. I had friends, but with ears like mine, I always was the sort

to want a little quiet time. I'd tried the radio, but everything was being jammed in the area. Sitting on top of old paper rolls, I settled my journal down and shifted to my ongoing piece.

My friends.

Those who had come all this way with me, it was only missing a couple more. I aimed to correct that.

This one would go behind us, alongside Brimstone. Their size didn't leave much choice. For this it would be strong and straight lines. Not curves, but rigid lines as tough as their belief in doing what they felt was their duty. My charcoal broke its tip twice as I leaned hard to stop my trembling from ruining them. Sharp corners and changes of direction, more digital and precise than the shapes and lines that created the feeling of life in my other friends. I felt myself drawn into the moment, becoming robotic and straightforward, before finally coming to the centre where I let it all flow into the living heart of the piece and my lines returned to how I knew them. To create the friend, to create the personality at the centre of cold metal. Lines into curves, winding around the harsh limits, becoming shapes that injected life to a cold framework.

Making Mister Peace more than he was ever conceived to have been.

Just as he had been.

No matter what happened, he would live forever with the rest of us on here.

Sounds outside began to pick up, making my ears twitch and lift. Looking up, I twisted to stare at the door I'd closed to draw by the light of my PipBuck alone, charcoal drooping in my mouth.

Through it all, I heard Protégé's voice, the tone he used when declaring things.

They were deciding where to send the bomb, the time had to be close.

Closing my journal, I took the time to have one last flick through the pictures, before opening the door with a hind leg to leave my hiding spot.

Briefly, I stopped as the pages came to how I believed my mother looked. Beautiful and kind, the way I always wanted to believe and remember, no matter what the truth may be out there. I could still see the scrawl of charcoal on the page from where I'd been pulled away while drawing. I felt my wings droop by my side, before I forced them back up. I had to look confident for her.

"See you soon."

I threw the journal back in my saddlebag, before pushing the door open again to leave.

Amongst the crowds, Protégé had his map out, speaking to Blunderbuck and a number of the strongest ponies we had. They were the ones assigned to pull the wagons, with another group ready to take over if any of them went down. A grim, but necessary role.

"The Ministry is here." He pointed with a hoof to the obsidian-like building, marked in black on the map. "The nearest point of the wall is up here, about a ten minute gallop. We're quite lucky, it all matches up."

Blunderbuck rubbed his chin. "Wall won't come down anywhere though, right? Isn't there an old generator near there attached to the wall to help power all the searchlights and stuff? It'll probably be down, but the wall's a bit thinner there. Whole thing is built from scrap and readymix concrete after all, s'not like they were making it with precision or anything. Francesca can take that, I'm sure!"

"And the generator gives us somewhere to hide it. The wall has a killing ground near it, so using the generator's site means we might have even a bit of cover when we reach the base."

I shivered, that was all too familiar. My first ill-fated attempt had gotten me shot down in such an empty ground before reaching it.

"More importantly," Protégé continued, "it's near to the Ministry. We can stop here."

He pointed to a market square just short of the killing ground's limits (or 'deadzone' as many slaves called it), near some old refineries.

"Then split for the Ministry and the wall. Once the wall is down, we'll help the Ministry team and then get everyone back to the hole while slaves flood out. How are we doing for loading?"

One of the ex-soldiers shrugged, "So long as we're not bothered we should be able to do it. Sunny took all the damn shotguns with her, in case they had to clear the wagon fields, but we should still be getting ignored..."

"Then get everyone lined up to the doors now, they could come back any minute. If you're a wagon puller, then memorise the map, we'll try to take the main thoroughfare, but keep an eye on the side streets; with the war out there, anything could be broken down or blocked. Anyone with a gun, stay ready to watch the skies. This won't go unnoticed."

I moved along, not joining in the more detailed talks. Instead, I headed deeper into the Mall, down the entrance halls to try and find my friends. If this all hit off, I wanted to be able to help them out. After not too long, I found Coral Eve sitting beside Glimmerlight, speaking quietly. She was idly toying with a foal-sized sweater in her hooves, bearing the same hallmarks of the knitting I knew she filled her spare time with.

"Those missing their foals have all agreed to come on the Ministry job." She spoke to Glimmer as she laid down the sweater. "There's not a huge amount, but we got some help. Two soldiers said they'd come along, and one of Weathervane's doctors."

"You don't know what you'll find down there, Coral..." Glimmerlight looked up from toying with her rifle, before smiling to me as I sat before them.

"Yes I do. I'll find Chirpy and Lilac. Alive. Unharmmed." Coral's tone was terse.

I bit my lip, before speaking up. "Once the wall's down, we'll be back to help you all. Then we can all leave together. Just... just find them, and we'll help with the rescue. We'll get them this time."

The two mares both looked up at me, making me recoil slightly with a blush. To my surprise, Coral actually smiled for the first time in a long while.

"Glimmer isn't the only one who grew up a bit, is she?"

Oh come on, Coral. Now I just felt embarrassed. Looking away, trying to laugh it off, I lightly waved a wing dismissively. It was getting easier, less painful the more I did it. To hell with what Weathervane said, I was going to keep working at them no matter what.

"Come on, Murky." Coral got up. "Let's go help get up to the doors."

Coral supported Glimmer, bringing my sister to her hooves as I took her bags. As we pushed into the crowd, trying to get Glimmer near the front as one of the injured, I could see my other friends doing much the same. Unity was once again with Weathervane's team, helping them with what she could, despite not having any real training to do any medical work. I was beginning to suspect she was just more at ease with the quieter patients than the louder, more boisterous slaves sometimes. She saw me looking and waved. I blushed and nodded back. If there was one real happy ending to look forward to, it was what it would be like to help get her back to her parents who clearly thought her gone forever.

"Hey, careful there!"

"Oh! S-sorry!" I stumbled and veered away from a slave pulling a little cart of ammo and shells, having to brace my hooves against the floor. He was heading deeper into the Mall, a shotgun lying ready in his sling.

I turned to move on, but something struck me as odd.

Why were they taking ammunition *away* from the front of the Mall? The supplies had to go first with the wounded. Ponies hopped on last.

Shrugging, I turned away to catch up with Coral and Glimmer. Yet something kept nagging at me. A feeling like I'd missed something, before I stopped sharply and turned again to stare at the stallion disappearing into the crowd, weaving his shotgun away from the others.

Sunny took all the shotguns.

I downed Glimmer's bags where they were, ignoring the cries of those it then blocked. I began to push around ponies to move after this slave. He was right at the edge of my vision, as my small stature kept me from seeing over all the standing figures. I cantered forward, ducked between someone's legs and shoved someone else clean out the way.

Ahead of me, the slave began to move faster. I could see him moving toward a group of others emerging from a side room.

"Protégé! PROTÉGÉ!" I shouted, seeing the black unicorn perk up from nearby. He saw where I was now galloping.

So many were in my way, I screamed at them, to get down or to move out the way. I rushed, sprinting and leaping over a wounded pony as others began to notice me. Brimstone Blitz turned his head. I could see the slave ahead of me hear the commotion.

And then I saw the shotgun rise, it was aimed toward the waiting and nervous slaves. A line of armed ponies were forming at the back of the entranceway.

Cold blood running in my veins, I whipped out my saddle's trigger and bit *hard*.

The grapple hook propelled out, knocking me on my backside from the odd angle I was running at. It whirled out, before striking the barrel of the shotgun just as it fired.

In the cramped and echo-inducing entrance hall of such a large shopping mall, the weapon's retort was like the cough of a dragon as it blasted a hole in the plaster and concrete roof.

All hell broke loose.

Hundreds of frightened slaves in a small and cramped area panicked. No one knew where it had come from, other than 'behind,' and before I knew it, a stampede of unarmed and vulnerable ponies was forming within the area.

What I now knew as a team of slavers lined themselves up behind the entire waiting convoy and advanced, weapons high. Slaves surged away from them, falling over one another. At the far end of the corridor, the Mall's doors burst open as the crowds fled the Mall, with the main entrance being the only escape route away from these ponies. I saw them aim and fire, again and again. I heard wails as ponies went down. I could see blood trails as wounded slaves pulled their friends or limped in tears. Bodies fell and didn't move.

I was almost swept away, stopped only as I slammed into the solid side of Brimstone. Injured, he still managed to grab a nearby crate of firewood and bodily hurl it at the slavers. Their line split as the heavy box crashed down amongst them, throwing off their fire and forcing them to take cover at either side of the hall. I could see Protégé behind a pillar at the far side, trying to get a shot. Coral Eve was directing ponies, unable to use her magic with so

many around us. Between the slavers and us, fearful slaves rushed to get away from the coming gunfight.

Then their fire resumed. Targeting Protégé and ourselves, I had to skid and dive behind a bag full of tents left lying. As the horrible whip-crack of rounds stung off the floor around me, I was sent screaming away as the bags failed to do anything to stop the bullets tearing through them. The noises echoed and gathered into one ongoing crackle of fire and anger inside the hall. After four heart-stopping seconds, I dove into the same cupboard I'd been drawing in, landing atop a crying pony.

"Infiltrators, keep everyone away from them!" Protégé shouted from outside, as he snapped off one careful shot. I heard a cry of pain from further down, before Protégé had to stop and curl up on the spot as fire smashed into the pillar, tearing chunks off and forcing him to lie down, his hooves around his head as fire flew above him.

Daring to peek out, I saw the slavers moving up after the running mass of ponies. I had a brief moment of horror as I saw Unity go to run out into the line of fire. She was holding a large metal door in her magic, using it like a shield as she scurried across the floor. She looked terrified, but crawled and pushed on as the door bent and buckled. Finally, I saw what she was going for.

In the middle of the entrance hall, a stallion was clutching his smashed hind leg, wailing for help, his voice lost amongst the echoing roar of weaponry inside. Unity leapt and skidded beside him, her magic trying to hold the door upright to shelter them, before trying to drag him.

Blinking out of my astonishment, I took aim and fired my grapplehook toward them, landing it a foot away from her. Unity looked up and saw me, before hooking it into the larger stallion's belt and signalling to me. Holding onto the door frame, I started to winch him in as Unity rushed over with the door to protect him.

A heavy round slammed into it and knocked the door clean over her head. My heart leapt into my mouth.

Slavers had spotted her. They fired from one side, making Unity yell and drop to the floor. I could see others moving up the other side. One of them took aim, before he was sent head over hooves from a heavy shot railing into his skull.

Turning, I saw Glimmer lying immobile at the edge of the hall, magic bracing Diamond's rifle against her saddlebags.

The four remaining slavers paused, and Protégé took the opportunity. Joined by the rest of the slaves that had finally broken through the escaping stampede, a volley of fire showered upon the slavers. Grabbing their wounded friend from earlier, they fell back behind the marble pillars short of the plaza junction. Nearing me, Unity dropped her makeshift shield and pulled him into the cupboard where the crying pony, one of Weathervane's team, sucked up her tears and went to work. Unity lay back against the wall and mopped her brow, pulling her stringy mane from her face, a hoof on her no doubt thudding heart.

"Thanks for the... the line..." She panted, tapping the hook, as her magic fed it back into the launcher.

"You're crazy!" I gasped, looking at her disbelievingly. "Leaping onto sky wagons, yanking us down a hole, now this?"

"You're one to talk." She weakly chuckled, before leaning over to help the nurse with the bandaging.

None of this attack made any sense. The slavers were outnumbered, even by our depleted

group. Why did they do this?

Before my eyes, as Protégé got back into the fight with his exceptionally good eye for accuracy, they retreated out of sight. I heard one of them shouting, "It's done, go!"

We stood on the spot, aimed after them, but I could only hear them galloping further and further away. I shouted that they were gone to the rest, as doctors began to run to the wounded.

"What were they doing?" I asked to Protégé as he surveyed the scene.

He didn't reply, deep in thought as he looked from where they'd come to the direction the slaves had went. It was almost like that was all they'd wanted, to get the slaves moving. To get them—

Outside.

I had a horrible thought.

After that, I heard the gunfire start.

Outside, well over a hundred slaves now fled and crawled for the smallest scraps of cover they could find, not counting all the others who ran back to the Mall again. The cratered and shattered pavement and garden of the Mall short of the road was filled with individuals curled up in the small holes or behind fences. From across the road, muzzle flares sparked amongst the far buildings. Screaming filled the air, a panic was forming but no one knew what to do. Some still closer to the doors or windows tried to run and get back into harder cover. Not all of them made it.

As we crouched at the doorway of the Mall, I began to realise what had happened. Unable to assault the Mall head on, they instead had taken advantage of us about to leave to force the defenceless ones outside by starting a panic. I could feel Shackles at work behind it; with the eerie timing and the understanding of what we'd be doing. He probably even had seen that we sent some away to fetch something else for when to make his move.

Ponies who may not even be coming back now. If we'd been ambushed, they could be, too.

This was a horrible, horrible spot. We were open and vulnerable. Many of the slaves couldn't move quick enough to get back inside and we didn't have nearly enough fighters left to take this head on. We—

I shrieked. A shot whipped off the edge of the stone near my head, making me back down as a half dozen more followed it, chasing me as I hid behind it and spraying me with rock dust. Across the doorway, Protégé leaned out and snapped off four fierce blasts with his revolver, but at this range there wasn't much hope, even with his enviable aim.

"Murky, are you all right!?" He shouted across.

"Y-yeah! But the slaves!"

"I know!" Protégé kept trying to peek out, but it was harder and harder as the shots started to come at us more, chasing after the source of the fire. "Murky, listen! They're gonna shoot at who shoots back, okay?"

"I understand!"

I really did, it only made sense. Protégé wanted to try to distract their fire, get them to shoot at us instead of the cowering wounded and sick out in that awful lack of real cover. Delay them, distract them until, well, until we thought of *something*. To that end, I turned

and ran back into the Mall, before twisting into one of the side corridors, aiming to come out at a far window from Protégé's location. On the way, I grabbed a rifle from the dead slaver in the corridor, I needed something with more punch than *Rarity's Grace* to even get noticed.

Oh, great, I was *wanting* to get noticed and shot at now. Great! Just peachy!

Struggling to carry the rifle in my mouth, I eventually shoved it under my saddle's straps and held on with a wing until coming to the blasted-out windows of the Mall. Outside, I could see Weathervane behind a wall of rusted shopping carts hurling every curse and oath in the known world at our attackers, while trying to staunch the bleeding on one of his nurses. The poor mare looked white in the face.

Setting up the rifle, I angled my head into the trigger and braced it against my shoulder. It was far too big for me, but all I needed was to make an impression. Already I could hear the distinctive sound of Protégé's revolver again. Glimmer's rifle sharply barked. A few rifles opened up from somewhere. Gradually, the puffs of dirt and sparks of impacts shifted away from the slaves in between the two lines of fire as the slavers sensed they were being shot at.

Time to join them. Leaning into the rifle, I bit hard on the trigger. Then wailed out loud as my head split from a sudden and harsh noise that dropped into a ringing tone.

The recoil jarred my shoulder hard enough that I fell backwards as the old hunting rifle's big round shot from the barrel. I felt like my entire skull had been broken in two. I couldn't hear anything. Tears in my eyes, I dropped back and held my ears against my head as gunfire rattled above me and into the far wall of the room. Damn stupid big rifles and their stupid noises with their stupid huge rounds to my stupid stupid hearing! I beat my hoof on the inside of the wall in anger and pain, trying to pull out some rags to push into and around my ears.

"Here! Let me help!"

Unity dropped down beside me, lifting the rifle and using both her hooves to yank back the bolt and load the next round.

"It's loud, careful!" I shouted, tying the rags around my ears tightly.

"Rifles generally are!"

I blinked in shock for a moment. Unity in a dead serious mood was always a surprise.

Gradually, screwing up my face in anticipation of the sound, I lifted the rifle with her and we fired it again together. And again. Squealing every time they shot down at us, I tried to crawl away along the windows as glass and wood splintered and shattered above me, dropping down on my head. Unity dove and scrambled in the other direction, before we tried to crawl around to a new spot.

"Give me some help with this!" she shouted, as the bolt seemed to be getting stiffer to move. I grasped it, my hooves beside her magic, feeling the entire metal top heated up. Eventually, we got it back up and fired again in the vague direction of the slaves.

So long as it kept them safe outside. So long as they weren't shooting at them! They weren't going to win, not now! Not when we were so close to leaving!

But we were going nowhere. We couldn't keep firing forever, and there were more of them. Every so often, someone would get hit in the middle. The doctors couldn't reach them. The ammo was running low. The cover was being broken down slowly. More slavers seemed to be turning up.

We were trapped.

"Give up!" A megaphone voice started to echo around the buildings. "Throw down your

guns and return to your masters, and you will not be harmed!"

Screams began to pick up from outside. Ponies were losing hope. Terror was starting to filter in, the desire to surrender and live starting to approach on the determination to fight and be free.

I could hear a rumbling in the distance. No doubt an army of slavers and soldiers. I fired again, and was surprised when no giant bang happened. I pulled the trigger again and again, but nothing happened. Looking into the top, I saw one bullet at a weird angle. The metal around it was scorching hot.

Completely jammed, and with no hope of fixing it that I knew of.

"What now?" Unity tossed the wrecked rifle down.

"Uh... uh... main hall! They'll need us to help get others to the wagons the moment they're here!"

Instead, I ran back to the entrance hall and found Blunderbuck wheeling his bomb toward the doors with the help of his assistants. Hearing voices approaching from behind, I screamed at them to get moving and helped push it myself. The slavers from the hallways before were returning to try and flank us!

Where even to? We couldn't go out the front! I felt confused, lost, but unwilling to stop moving. As Blunderbuck and I pressed our shoulders together and turned to shove with our backs, I saw figures approaching down the hall, looking to close the trap again.

Bullets whipped past my head and drove them back. Protégé slapped the trolley the bomb was on and shouted at us to keep moving.

"Where to!?"

He didn't have an answer. Instead, we ended up stopping at the entrance, hiding behind a huge bomb made of what looked like soil and liquid with gunfire coming at us. Both Unity and myself squealed at the same time as we saw the bomb take two bullets into the packed containers surrounding it.

"Don't worry, you two!" Blunderbuck shouted, "Bullets won't set it off! It doesn't work like that, we're safe!"

"*You call this safe!?*" Unity cried out, as she scurried around it to hide from the gunfire. "We don't have anywhere to go!"

Blunderbuck gulped and made a half-hearted and fearful shrug, "Comparatively?"

Unfortunately, she was right. Slaves were starting to run out of ammo in a big way. Us with the bomb were pinned down. Those outside couldn't dare move. Everything had ground to a halt.

Then as our places to go ran out, that rumbling suddenly became clear. I heard wheels and the thunder of hooves. A great well of shouting began from the slavers outside as the blast of shotguns and rifles filled the air. Peering out, I saw our salvation.

Twelve armoured wagons came skidding around the corner of the road and began to drive for the Mall. Atop each of them were ponies armed and firing everything they had. Sunny rode on the front one, her rifle snapping off accurate shots at any slaver who dared give his position away by shooting. They were angular vehicles, with giant V-shaped bottoms and thick wheels that crushed small rocks and wood below as they went. Each was pulled by a pony with an intricate metal shield around them that looked about as unwieldy and cumbersome as they likely were.

"Get moving! Get moving! Meet the wagons!" Protégé rushed up to Blunderbuck and me, throwing his strength into the pushing as we left the front doors. His magic kept

shooting his weapon behind us, keeping the slavers inside the Mall back, before pausing to make the complicated reload in mid air with individual floating bullets. How he managed that while pushing, I would never understand. He had always been a true multitasker.

“MOVE!” Brimstone Blitz slammed the Mall’s security door shut behind us as we passed outside. Around us, slaves were starting to encourage one another to get up under the cover of Sunny’s team. Stretchers were being pushed and wounded were limping. Brimstone stopped to lift Glimmer onto his back, the wounded unicorn firing with her rifle the entire time. Coral dragged four large bags of supplies. Unity took one from her and the pair of them pushed ahead to the end of the road.

The wagons circled around and formed a giant half-circle of armoured cover, their thick ramps dropping at the back and their side doors sliding back to drop a small set of steps. Sunny ran down one of them toward us.

“Get on! Get on! We are getting the hell out of here, they’re chasing us from behind too!”

She spun on the spot and let off a wickedly accurate shot that punched a window back into the room it hung beside. The fire from that room stopped.

Ponies began to throw themselves into the wagons. Weathervane and his team led, carried, pulled, or encouraged the broken slaves of the metro to move. They stumbled and cried, not understanding what was going on. Some stared blankly as they were being bodily lifted in. Others panicked and lashed out, having to be held down. With the most unbelievable demonstration of professional care I had ever seen, Weathervane’s ponies of the Hearts and Hooves hospital got every one of those poor souls on board, not one of them getting on until they were done, even while under fire and taking their own wounds.

Coral Eve quite literally catapulted the supplies into the wagon to save time, sending it rocking back on its axles. Blunderbuck and I helped his assistants and Protégé to pull the bomb up into the lead wagon, locking it down with chains on the wooden pallet and trolley he’d brought it on. Behind us, List Seeker shouted and waved to direct ponies to each wagon that still had room. He winced and fell to one side, his bandages leaking red as a wound reopened. Ex-soldiers climbed onto the roofs and opened fire alongside Sunny’s team, as slavers began to emerge from the streets and corners to move in on us. The sound of gunfire hitting the wagons was like an army of possessed blacksmiths hammering with fanatical intent.

Yet slowly, achingly, ponies were loading up. Blunderbuck hopped on with the bomb as Protégé and I got off to help the others.

“Hey boys, we gotta move!” Sunny shouted over at us and she hopped onto one of the wagons near the front. Taking a second to peek, she curled around the side of a wagon and raked off two shots at the slaver who’d just fired at her.

I came across the one that my friends were getting on. Brimstone was lifting ponies aboard while Glimmer helped defend it as best she could, but I could see her stamina running low in her injured state.

Then with a fierce *boom*, an anti-machine rifle barked from somewhere nearby.

The pony inside the armoured shield of the wagon screamed for only a second before passing out. He fell from the straps and out of the protected shield. A hole had been punched clean through it. His shoulders were a mess.

“Shoot! Help him!” Glimmer gasped as she saw it happen.

Brimstone didn’t wait. He grabbed the wounded pony and lifted him carefully aboard. Then he tore the shield off the wagon entirely.

"Brim, what in the hell are you doing?" Glimmer leaned around the door. "You're too hurt to pull this thing!"

"Watch me." Brimstone grunted and slung the straps over himself. I saw him grimace as he bent his still ruined body around it. If there was any pony who you could count on to go that extra mile, it was him.

"Good luck." I gulped, before Unity yanked my saddle from behind to get me on as well.

The last few ponies fled to the wagons as the shout went out to get moving. Even as they began to shuffle and pick up speed, slaves were fleeing from the craters and leaping aboard. Unity and I caught a mare and pulled her on, her speed and desperation so much that she briefly fell atop me. Brimstone's grunting of pain was clear as he towed the vehicle, and with aching slowness, all of the wagons got going and picked up speed. Glimmer, Coral, Protégé, and myself held on to the handles on the wall, all in the same one together along with a panicked group of ponies, including one of the metro slaves who sat almost unknowing in the corner.

"We did it! We actually did it! We got away!" Unity lay back against the wall of the wagon, reaching limply for the hinge to close the armoured door and bumped hooves with me. She looked breathless, as we both stared back behind us.

Slavers swarmed out of the buildings. They were all Shackles' kind. They turned to chase us, but with slaves taking pot-shots off the back of wagons, they were quickly left in our wake. I saw a few on the radio, and others waving away to someone else.

But behind them I saw the Mall.

That giant, old building of heavy concrete and rounded metal, slowly drifting away into the distance. A building I would never forget. Full of memories, pain, and joy. I could see it in my head. The plaza with its hanging flags of the Ministry Mares. The balconies looking upon it. The ventilation ducts I could squeeze into. Protégé's oaken office full of books. Shackles' grim quarters. The armoury and its manic creators. A supply room where we had fought and laughed at different times, from fearful raiders or Glimmer messing around with socks to try and make us smile.

I could remember our cell shop. Remember its strange comfort and thick couch. I could remember that it was where I fought Barb and where Caduceus died. That it was the place of horrors as Shackles' pet, and a place of triumphant bravery against all odds. That building had been a defining place in my life.

It was the place I had met some of my true friends for the first time.

Now we were leaving it forever. I would never again set hoof inside its walls.

As the wagons pulled away, I watched the Mall fade into the smoke, a ruined shell of what I had first known it as, left in my mind as a memorial, bearing our thoughts on its walls. Without really knowing why, I brought up my hoof and waved a little, before blushing as I saw Unity staring at me in confusion.

Yet now my mind had other things to look to.

The wagons powered forward as they turned in a row for the route to the Wall and the Ministry. They set forth, thundering forward into a city at war. Below the bright sky to fill us with hope, we set forth to face whatever was awaiting us.

There was no turning back now. The escape had begun.

"C'mon, help me stop this bleeding!"

Glimmerlight shouted over to the rest of us as she held what rags we had over the poor stallion's shoulders. A terrible tear had opened from where the metal sent flying by the huge round had hit him, and both Coral and Unity rushed over to help hold him down while my sister worked.

The wagon was running at full tilt. Climbing up onto the step that let ponies poke their heads out of the hatch (Protégé had called it a cupola), I could see Brimstone charging ahead after the other wagons. A soldier sat on top of it with us, holding Diamond's old rifle from Glimmer. He'd lost his own in the rush. The entire convoy was rumbling between two sets of brickwork houses at the edges of the Mall district, having turned the sharp corner to head for the main roads. Above, the open sky beamed down upon us, like an ever-present omen that times were changing in this city. Enclave ships were starting to soar again, exchanging fire with ground forces across the city. A nearby building rumbled as a cannon atop it opened up on one of them. Ahead, I saw slaves and slavers scattering out of the way of the thundering convoy. Shouts at our passing went up, but quickly faded into nothing.

We were moving fast enough that I felt like I would fall backward if I let go of the hatch's ring. Wind in my mane, I watched every familiar street go by. I knew the way to the Ministry, we were following the same route.

Up ahead, I saw a scrap-built walkway above the road swaying in the growing wind. On it, four slavers stood around a heavy gun, their gas mask eyes glowing red.

They were on radios.

The easy part was already past. The soldier beside me dove down into more cover of the wagon as we saw the gun light up before its hammering sound drove along the street. Rounds stitched the road either side of the lead wagons, which began to weave and sway, trying to throw off the slaver's aim. Their big armoured tops rocked and threatened to overturn at speed as they bounced through cracked roads and over planks of fallen wood. I could hear screams of ponies as bullets thudded into the armoured roofs and walls, denting and sparking off them.

"Everybody hold on!" Brimstone roared. Our wagon veered to the side, hopping onto two wheels as we hit a pothole. Thrown against the soldier, I gripped the hatch, my eyes beginning to sting from the rushing air around me. The wagon ahead of us slowed down sharply as the pony pulling it tripped and stumbled. With a lurch, we turned and overtook them, the heavy compartment we were in skidding and crashing its side through the wooden supports of the walkway as we zoomed underneath it. The jarring impact knocked me around again, my ribs impacting on the hatch. The wagon we'd passed barely got by as we heard the crack and snap of wood, before the entire thing collapsed behind us in a snapping heap of timber and sheet metal, slavers falling around their gun. Brimstone stumbled and struggled, yanking us back on track to the middle of the road.

I saw utter chaos. Slavers were flooding out onto the rooftops as the warning was sent ahead. A flak cannon on a roof was being traversed down to us, its quad barrels aimed menacingly, before it finally unleashed. The road near us was torn apart, chunks flying into the air and pattering off the wagons. Each vehicle split and took its own route to get past the street. One of them ramped a wheel off a piece of Enclave wreckage and almost tipped. Another two hit side-on as they both tried to evade the cannon's red-lit rounds. Slaves fired back from the roofs of the armoured wagons, but it was impossible to aim properly from these things. Under a tirade of fire, we pushed on and endured. I saw one wagon's wheel go

spiralling off and bizarrely following the wagons for some time, but the wagon's brave puller somehow kept his vehicle moving.

In a flare of sparks, the of our transport bent and studded from gunfire, and I ducked down to avoid incoming shots. Diamond's rifle beside me barked again and again as the soldier tried to do his best, before tossing it down for Glimmer to reload. I twisted to face the other side, firing what I could from *Rarity's Grace* at a wooden post hanging off a building that had three slavers with pistols taking pot-shots. I never saw if they even noticed.

Brim yanked us side to side. The flak cannon's rounds tore past us again, spraying over a wagon ahead of us and tearing the roof off. The ponies atop it somehow managed to get down before it happened. I saw the signpost for the main thoroughfare of Filly ahead of us.

Then the cannon stopped firing. Turning, now that it was behind us, I saw it being cranked to face the sky with a great amount of panic.

Attracted by all the commotion, three Enclave skyships were descending, the same type that had torn the roof off the Mall.

Angular, burning with storm clouds at their fringes, they dove with a keening wail of engines and rocketed toward what to them must have looked like an important convoy of Fillydelphia's forces. Plasma and laser batteries seared, and I had only a brief chance to scream at the others to duck before they hit. The road around us exploded, and I felt heat singe my coat as the magical energy surged and sparkled around the wagons when we drove through the smoke. I felt the wagon turning sharply to the left. Looking out, I saw it was the entrance ramp to the main road. A sharp ninety degree turn was ahead of us, and each wagon tilted as it flowed around it, knocking apart a flimsy wooden barrier that crumbled beneath the wheels.

A rush of wind almost caught my wings to send me flying out the hatch, as the skyships rocketed overhead and began to bank again. On the rear of them, I saw a small turret flare with light. Another—oh crap no!

Laser beams stitched the ground near Brimstone just as he was turning the wagon. We had been climbing up to a level above the nearby houses onto the high road. As he tried desperately to control us, I felt the entire wagon lift up onto two wheels and begin to tilt. Screaming, I saw the edge of the road give way to a massive fall into a scrapyard below, me on top being hung over the lip of it. Brimstone was bellowing with pain and effort to pull us back as the top-heavy vehicle kept shifting.

"We're going over!" The soldier beside me wailed. "Shit!"

Forcing down the fear, I clambered out onto the curved roof and fired my grapple at the nearest wagon. The sudden jolt of it hitting and the nearby wagon's movement almost snapped the saddle straps around me, but I gripped the wagon and held tight, straining every muscle I had that wasn't already injured. I felt like my legs would be pulled from their sockets as I used the other vehicle's motion to pull us back.

It was just enough.

With a groaning of metal, the wagon rocked back onto its wheels and Brimstone pounded his hooves to get us moving again. Everyone inside was tossed to the other side of the compartment as I struggled to get my grapple reeled back without catching anything else. The crunch of the wheels bouncing with the forward momentum tossed everyone around again as we tried to get back into the convoy properly.

The road was a mess of holes, wreckage, and fire. Twice I felt my eyebrows singed as laser

fire rattled near us. The skyships strafed us again and again. At speed, we were harder to hit but they only had to get near us to burn and scar the vehicle. My stomach turned as the bumpy ride threw what little I'd had to eat up and down, my eyes stinging from the wind blowing into them. I hardly even knew why I was up here, but the thought of not seeing anything at all was worse.

"How close we coming, Murky?" Unity shouted up to me, and I peered through the air strikes and laser fire to see that giant obsidian building up ahead. It was down from the road, about ten blocks away. Its tough walls were crumbled and damaged, the tall high-rise flats beside it now collapsed in colossal heaps of concrete.

"I can see the Ministry!"

Below me, Coral's face hardened as she climbed up, pulling the breathless soldier down.

"Then that's where I'll go." She spoke strongly, before casting her eyes up and widening them as a skyship came roaring along the rooftops, so close that its wake tore water reservoirs and fences clean off. I could see the cockpit and the weapons gleaming. Incandescent colours speared forth and turned a whole section of the road ahead of the wagons to slag. They all began to turn to avoid it, passing through a gap in the barrier between either side of the road as a wave of sparkling dust washed over the group and blinded everyone for a few seconds. Coughing, waving it away, we tried to open our eyes again to the cold wind. We were nearly there! Every moment they didn't bother us, we could get another hundred metres closer at this rate! The city was slowly scrolling by as we fled for the Wall in the sun.

"We're not fighting you, ya dumb idiots!" Glimmer yelled up the hatch into the sky as she finished reloading.

"I hardly think they care, Glimmer! They just see targets down here after they got half their fleet thrown out the air!" Coral scowled as she followed the flight path with her head. "If we can get off this road again, we'll be safe!"

Protégé popped his head out of the other hatch at the back and gazed ahead. "There should be a turning off just up here! We should... great Equestria, is that a..."

His voice trailed off as we all gazed to the side at once. Across the war-torn city, now lighting up again with fire in all directions, there came a shape. It had been hidden behind the wall of clouds that the eruption in the sky had forced away, but now it slowly emerged. An enormous shape, so large that it barely even registered as possible. A flying *building*. A cloud fortress. Like what I'd once seen in pictures of Cloudsdale before the end of the world, only filled with metal and bristling with weaponry. It hung outside the city, an impossible shape in the air.

"...a Thunderhead." Protégé sounded disbelieving. "All this time, they still had them. I didn't think it possible!"

"Well it's not near us, far as I care that's all that matters." Coral shouted, trying to stop her braids from slapping into her face from the wind atop the wagon. "Those ones *are*!"

Up ahead, I heard the other wagons scream a warning, before the skyships came twisting around to rush at us again. Flak from atop the Ministry opened up to force one off with a glancing hit on its hull, but the second one kept coming. Fire leapt from its underside, before I saw missiles arcing through the air, coming veering down toward the convoy in a spiral of smoke and flame.

"Brimstone! Speed up!" Coral shouted, as she pulled herself up onto the roof of the wagon and lit her horn.

No, she wasn't going to—

The wagon leapt forward as the big raider threw everything he had into it. We passed by another vehicle, moving closer to the centre of the struggling convoy.

The missiles hurtled right down toward us, and Coral gritted her teeth in response. Crying out, the air pressure around us growing, she let out a sharp yell and unleashed her magic. A wall of force rocketed upwards and met the incoming missiles. I felt Unity grab my belt and pull me back down, just as Glimmer did the same for Coral as her spell impacted on them.

The bright sky became filled with fire and metal as they exploded thirty feet above us. The wagon leapt and slammed into the side of the road barrier. Screeching metal filled my ears as it dragged along it and shrapnel pinged off the roof and walls, until a heavy roadblock hit the side of our wagon. Unity was thrown across the floor as the side door was ripped clean off. I heard her cry as she fell toward the gap, until Protégé caught her hooves. Pulling back, he dragged her back inside, the small mare holding onto him tightly and hyperventilating with wide eyes.

Out that side door, I now had a view of the crater and the other side of the city. Duelling Enclave and griffons were taking the fight back up at the edge of the road, too busy to deal with us, other than missed shots pinging near us. The same skyship came into view, veering off to find its departed wing mate.

“Protégé! Hey, boy!” Brimstone's voice picked up.

Settling Unity down, his hooves on her shoulders, Protégé shifted across to the step and peered over to the earth pony pulling us.

“Road ahead's blocked!” Brim's voice was stoic, but exhausted and pained.

Poking my head around the side door, I saw what he meant. The wagons ahead of us were all slowing down. They were battered, damaged, and lacking armoured panels. The three-wheeled one was barely neck and neck with us, struggling to keep up. Yet ahead of them, the entire road had fallen away just short of the Ministry's turn off.

Protégé glanced from side to side, before grabbing his radio.

“Sunny, take that turning on the left! It goes down into Applevue Avenue, but there's an old side road that'll take us to the market quarter! It's still close enough for the Ministry team!”

The radio crackled, and a pained voice came through, sounding breathless, “Sure... sure thing... we're just holding together up here. Bomb is... bomb is okay...”

Protégé looked shocked, “Sunny? Sunny what's happened? Are you all right?”

“Nothing... nothing big. I think I popped a rib when we collided with Weathervane's wagon back there.”

“Take care up there. Make that turning!” Protégé repeated the request, before nodding down to Brimstone as the big pony looked over his shoulder.

Short of the break in the road, we pulled off to get down to ground level again. Passing through an old toll booth, I briefly noted the outrageous price (If bits equalled caps anyway) before I felt us picking up speed downhill. The clattering of the damaged wheels filled my ears as the roaring air passing by us flooded in through the open door. Red buildings flanked us on either side, tenements by design with apple logos on their corners.

I looked up to their tall roofs, worrying about any more cannons.

Instead I saw the one up ahead explode.

I had no idea what caused it, whether it was a falling bomb, an airstrike, a misfire of a

cannon, but the brickwork shattered and sprayed down into the street ahead of us like a waterfall. Ponies screamed as the wagons passed into the dust cloud and rattled over the individual bricks in the street. What I now knew as Weathervane's wagon slid on locked wheels as a brick got caught in its wheels to clip the edge of a house's fence. The metal tore out the ground before a postbox was demolished ahead of it. Rising on the curb, the entire wagon leapt off the ground.

From the roof, I saw a nurse come dropping to the road. She screamed, before hitting with a thud and rolling over and over.

Brimstone swore loudly and swerved to avoid her. Beside me, I felt Unity look out and gasp.

"Night! Night Dream! Brim! Murky, grab me!"

"Don't miss her, I ain't turning!" Brimstone roared back as he yanked and twisted the wagon to come close to the stricken mare.

I saw Unity lie close to the side door on her belly.

"Murky, grab me, quick!"

"O-okay! Hold on!"

Having needed to be told twice, I didn't hesitate any longer. Wrapping my front legs around her hips, I lay my weight down on her back legs and rested my head on her lower back as Unity crawled forward and lay the front of her body out of the wagon. I felt Glimmer and Coral grab me to stop us falling out.

The mare was struggling on the ground, screaming for help. Unity stretched out with a hoof.

And grabbed her.

We all shrieked as the weight pulled all of us out by a few more inches and tugged us down the door to the very back of it. The mare yelled as her body skidded on the ground, but Unity lit her horn and grabbed with both hoof and magic at once, trying to pull the nurse in. The wagon bounced and weaved to avoid the falling rooftops as explosion after explosion began to ring out above us. Wagons came close and wheels nearly caught Night Dream. Yet with one last pull, Unity and ourselves managed to yank her inside.

Falling in a heap, we all simply tried to catch our breath. Unity hugged the mare tightly, presumably a nurse she'd gotten to know while helping at the aid station.

Behind us, the entire avenue began to collapse as wreckage continued to fall onto it. Before I knew it, the hovering skyship that had been above us began to falter and fail, before dropping like a stone to crumble amongst the old street. Magic energy exploded and rock flew away to bounce off the back of our wagon, before we finally turned the corner.

"Hey, boy!"

Protégé took a deep breath, wiped his brow and got back on the hatch. "I'd appreciate if you wouldn't call me that, Warlord."

Brimstone grunted. "Sure thing... kid. Look up. We're there."

Ahead of us, the convoy was slowing down. Around us I could see shop fronts and abandoned stalls filled with dust that must have once been fruit. Cobblestones and old wooden carts filled the area, along with raggedy banners with words I couldn't read on them, too many letters. But it was clearly the market district. Brimstone unharnessed himself and fell to the side, half collapsing on his side, his eye closed. One big hoof rested over his heavily injured torso. Protégé got out after me.

"Okay, everybody out! We don't have the time, help the wounded! Blunderbuck, we've

got a bomb to deliver!”

Gradually we dropped onto the cobblestones on shaky legs. I'd never been so glad to not be moving. Yet, I found the breath stolen from me as I looked around myself, realising how close I was to two things, here at the end of all things in this city.

On one side of us was the monolithic obsidian tower of the Ministry.

And on the other was the unbreachable barrier to freedom.

The Wall.

Those who could still gallop and shout unlatched the wagons to let the frightened and trembling slaves with us out. As those lines of ponies emerged from the battered metal vehicles, they were directed across the street, through the winding rows of old stalls and fruit carts to a line of shops and three-floor homes that littered the last row of buildings before the wall. Locked doors were bucked until they broke, to find as much cover and security for the slaves as we could. Their dirty faces betrayed a sense of feeling lost and vulnerable. The war had ground them down, sapped all the last wells of courage they'd had to defend the Mall with.

I could relate. I couldn't stand still at all. Instead I just kept leaning and pacing from one hoof to another with frayed nerves. We'd travelled across a quarter of the city, evaded fire and strafing runs to reach here, and now we were isolated and surrounded by war on all sides. We had no enormous and fortified building this time.

Protégé was pointing to windows and open rooftops, encouraging those with weapons that still had ammo left to get on them and prepare to try and defend against whatever came by here. Ponies were trying to sort out what rounds they had left, but it looked dire. We'd had to leave a lot of supplies behind. As I trotted forward, I heard many of them talking about their last magazine or scant few rounds.

We couldn't hold this position, not in a million years.

Blunderbuck's wagon with the bomb was moving toward the buildings, trying to squeeze through an alleyway to reach the other side with the help of half a dozen ponies. Through a gap in the homes, I could see the dull and scrappy face of the wall, out there past a deadzone of nothing but earth and rubble.

That wall had been the limits of my world for far too long.

Moving away from the wagons, I found Glimmerlight lying down on her belly with Weathervane beside her. The ghoul was retying her bandages, ones I saw stained in red. She grimaced as I rushed over.

“A-are you okay?” I grabbed her hoof and held it tightly.

Glimmer winced and looked up at me, “Looks like I'll be skipping this one out again, Murky. It reopened on the—argh... on the way over here. That last toss coming off the high road. Listen, Murky... don't worry about me here, you do what you can to help. Okay?”

“I... I...”

“Murky.” She reached out and grabbed my chin. “You can't stop now. Let that little dynamo of a heart you've got keep you going now. Big sis' needs a rest to let this magic doohickey start working so I can actually make the journey afterwards.”

“There's so few of us left to fight, Glimmer...” I looked around at those remaining and saw a number of them running back from the wagons, shouting for Protégé in a panic.

Something was going on.

"I believe in you, lil'bro. We're gonna bring that wall down, right?"

"Yes!" The answer was automatic.

She just smiled. "Then go make it happen."

Weathervane waved sharply to a nurse, his hooves then moving down to work with his magic in securing the new bandages before helping lift her up. They pulled her away from me, amongst the procession of the wounded.

Suddenly, Protégé and Coral were rushing toward me.

"Murky! Murky!"

Protégé came to an exhausted halt after shouting to me.

"We're being followed."

My grapple shot upwards through the rubble of an old grain tower to dig into the wooden beams above. Tugging it to make sure it would hold, I nodded to Protégé and lifted my hooves to clutch around his upper body, while he held onto my saddle. With a bite of the trigger, we both were pulled sharply upwards. Dangling and swaying around the broken framework of the tower, my winch slowly brought us to the last remaining balcony at the top.

From there we had a bird's eye view of the surrounding area in all its shattered glory. The market district of Fillydelphia must have once been a bustling place of old architecture, cobbled streets, and endless seas of stalls. Its many squares and wide streets were arranged in warped patterns, not ordered and squared like, say, Manehattan. It all came to a solid end about a hundred metres short of the wall, as each building had been demolished to leave the deadzone, or 'killzone' as some called it. A normally flat and barren area with little features to keep ponies from sneaking up to it. However, the area we'd chosen made sense, the deadzone wasn't entirely empty, this section had fences and pylons running out into it that gave a little bit of cover, leading all the way to the wall. It would shelter us below the cables and corrugated roofs above the generators themselves all the way to the wall.

At its bottom, I could see the old generator station, hunched slightly into the wall. The alleyways on the market district leading to it were alive with the sounds of Blunderbuck's team trying to get the wagon through to it.

The top of that huge wall seemed empty, with a giant scar where a cannon might once have been. I supposed there was little point using a wall as a defensive point against a flying enemy.

Yet our interest was to the other side. Looking out in the cauldron of flame and destruction that was the rest of the city, even under the radiant sunlight that clashed in tone with the vista before us, we could see things approaching.

Individuals, or small groups, were rushing forward. Ponies were galloping in the streets toward us in the distance. They weaved and rushed as though in a panic, with shouts carrying across the thick air of the city to my ears. I couldn't tell what they were saying, but it didn't sound calm.

Digging into my saddlebag, I got Old Grizzly's binoculars out to take a closer look. Focusing in on the closest group, I saw three ponies in rags sprinting past the empty remains of an old swimming pool, heading directly for us.

I gasped. "They're slaves."

"What?" Protégé offered a hoof, and I gave the binoculars to him. Holding them up, he panned between every group out there. "It seems as though word got out on what we were doing and where we were going. Look!"

He pointed toward the high road we'd come off. Below it, a much larger group broke out. Hysterical cries began to echo across the rooftops as they fled through alleyways and tried to leap fences. Then a second group, and then a third.

The survivors of the war outside were coming right toward us.

"We can free more, Murky." Protégé smiled, his chest swelling with the thought.

I wasn't convinced.

Taking the binoculars and looking down, I could see the expressions on their faces through the smoke and fiery haze. They didn't look hopeful or eager.

They looked desperate and scared, not of something in general, of something very direct. I saw their heads turning a lot. Many were crying.

Then I saw the shots ring out from the darkness behind them.

From within smoke and down the streets, the orange flare of heavy rounds leapt and stabbed at the fleeing slaves. Screams drifted on the winds, as they ran faster toward the market square we were in.

"Protégé..."

Surrounding us, on all sides but the wall, I saw slavers emerge in rows and upon their own carts and wagons. Cages atop those carts bore slaves within them, as the ones ahead rounded up all they could to throw them back in. Slaves who stopped and held up their hooves were beaten and tossed within. Those who ran too much were gunned down. They were moving inwards in a semicircle toward us, the majority following us from the high road.

Shackles' slavers were coming to take us back.

"We're trapped."

"We're not going to be able to get you to the Ministry." Protégé rubbed his head before slamming his hoof against the tower's wooden door.

Coral looked out across the lines of slaves now beginning to flood into our area. If her anger blamed anyone, it wasn't Protégé for saying it. She just grit her teeth and snorted.

"Then we make this happen here, and when that blasted wall comes down, we use the confusion to get back in for them."

I gulped, "I th-think it would work. I could probably find a way past them if there was that big a diversion of all the slaves running out..."

Protégé nodded, but he seemed very unhappy, to say the least.

"This isn't going how we wanted it... there's always another obstacle. For Equestria's sake, Fillydelphia... just let go already..." He muttered to himself. "Come on, we have to get that wall down, *now!*"

"I'll come with you!" I piped up.

The three of us galloped from the tower, heading back to the others. Behind us, the march of hooves and the squeal of rusted wagon wheels were approaching. Slaves threw themselves upon us or the others. They begged for help, to be let free. The rooms in the

buildings we'd chosen were filling up. The small space we had between the slavers and the deadzone of the wall was starting to become very cramped. As we tried to direct slaves into it and push through the crowds toward the bomb, I saw slaves using old stalls as cover. Others were pulling the armoured wagons in to block sight and hide behind or inside them. There was snarling and crying and begging and anger and spite all around us. The smell of unwashed ponies growing from so many in such a small place began to hit my nostrils amongst the acrid tang of wartime air. Some yelled to the sun, others cowered.

They were trapped, all of them together in one small area, with only a small wish of hope that the wall might disappear.

We had to make it happen. It would be a massacre if we didn't.

Throwing ourselves into the alleyway, I carefully ran over the broken ground with my small hooves to try to catch up. Protégé and Coral threw themselves against the back of the wagon and shoved with all their might.

"Blunderbuck! Get this thing moving! We've got slavers coming up behind us!" Protégé cried out to the gunsmith turned bombmaker.

"I'm pulling, I'm pulling!"

It sounded like Blunderbuck himself was in the front of the wagon with the harness, his two assistants on either side. I rammed my body into the back, between Coral and Protégé. I looked to try and see Brimstone, but from when I'd last seen him he was down and out.

It was up to us.

I honestly didn't know how much I was really helping with my meagre strength, but I shoved for all I was worth. Every few seconds, the entire wagon would lift up on rubble, then clank down on the other side before finding the next chunk it had to go over.

The deadzone ahead looked flatter, if only we could get it there in time!

Slow and aching minutes passed as we moved one wagon for just twenty metres over every fallen wall or collapsed pillar. Coral Eve blasted some of them out of the way, but she couldn't keep using her magic forever. She was losing strength with it after all the events lately.

"They're coming!"

"Where's the hole in the wall? They said there'd be a hole in the wall!"

Shouts of panic were beginning to emerge behind us. I could hear the shouts of slavers coming near as the slaves who had escaped them fled into our midst. Every slave who had survived the bombardment, who had heard the rumour and been able to get free seemed to be coming this way. They looked in a horrible state, making me wonder just how bad it had been for those outside the Mall.

"C'mon! Push! Everyone! PUSH!"

Finally, the wagon bumped free and rolled into the deadzone.

"Go! Go, go, go!"

Blunderbuck strained with all his might and started to pull the wagon. Coral, Protégé, and I pushed from behind, before the pair of them leapt up and yanked me by my front hooves onto the floor of the back end beside the bomb.

We hit the flat rock and earth of the deadzone and began to pick up speed. Blunderbuck's assistants stayed to help with the mass of directionless slaves coming in. Leaving behind the cover of the buildings, we raced toward the wall. To my eyes, it only grew bigger as we approached, looming over me. I clutched a hoof over my breast as I remembered being here last. A round from Ragini had shot me down about now. We—

A bullet rung off the wagon, and I screamed.

"Watch out, off to the side!" Protégé pointed along the wall to where more slavers were approaching us from along the deadzone. They fired ahead of them, moving in and out of the buildings that formed the border of the city against this area. Their rounds hit the pylons or heavy boxes that sheltered conduits for the wires. I could see tents from where they were coming from, a slaver and soldier camp, like the one I'd passed through long ago.

It was all happening again.

Oh no, it was all going to happen again!

Holding my cheeks, I felt my muscles lock up and gunfire began to slam into the wagon or strike the dirt around us. Protégé fired twice back, before lightly cursing and stopping to reload his revolver. He only had a few rounds left.

The wagon bounced and slid to the side on the loose earth as some rocket whooshed overhead and struck the wall. The slavers were closing their net around the slaves from either side now. Those stuck in the buildings fired with what they could, but had to mostly just lie down and take cover. I saw black-armoured soldiers with the slavers, who marched and ran from crater to crater in the deadzone. They stopped far enough out, but they kept shooting at us the whole way. I screamed and closed my eyes, shivering and worrying. All this way and we were going to just—

"Murky, open your eyes, my dear. We can't freeze up now!"

Coral's hooves came down on my shoulders and I felt her hug me closely. My hooves leapt out and squeezed her. My heart felt frozen. I would feel confident, and then it would all just melt away so quickly, like a harsh emotional whiplash.

"I... I can't help it! It's what happened before!" I wailed, feeling rotten, I should be stronger! But my every fear was emerging, my very first attempt was so similar. "Just... just one bullet and... and..."

"This time you aren't alone."

Coral kissed the top of my mane, as those words rung in my ears.

No, I wasn't.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes to see her face.

"Just hold what you want close, Murky. Keep letting it spur you on." She grimaced and looked away after her small pep talk, as the wagon began to pull away from the incoming fire and approached the generators against the wall.

Protégé briefly looked back at me being held by Coral and stuck out a hoof with a smile.

"Come on, Murky. You're one of us."

Trying to force myself to smile, I reached out and struck his hoof with mine, before pushing myself to my hooves.

"We're here!" Blunderbuck screamed as we pulled onto the hard concrete surrounding the boxy generators. "Francesca, your chauffeur has delivered you safe and sound. Time to do your work!"

He unhooked himself and ran around the back as we were leaping off. The bomb was dropped onto its trolley we'd lifted into the wagon while I took a quick look around this place.

The wall was everything. It stretched up and, and to someone as small as me, felt like it stretched into the blue sky above. Around us, inactive power plants lay motionless amongst a series of wires that had long since been cut off from Fillydelphia's power source by the Enclave.

The entire thing was on two levels, with further walkways that went higher on the wall for cable maintenance. An upper level held the tunnel into the wall, where we wanted the bomb to go, alongside a hastily built office made from a shipping container and lines of wooden walkways that ran up further on the wall to maintain the various wires that ran up to the top. There were a lot of small areas I could have hid in here, behind the massive generators or the thick pylons that directed all the power to the wall, not to mention the massive crater right beside it. Nearby, a pylon had pulled a chunk of the inside wall down with it into the deadzone behind us from an Enclave air strike.

We rolled the bomb between all of us onto an elevator at the back, before grabbing the chains with our hooves. Under sheer muscle power alone, we worked to slowly drag it up to the next level where the tunnel in the wall was.

“Come on! Pull!”

We pulled. It moved one foot upwards.

“Pull!”

We *pulled*. It shifted further.

And further.

And up.

And up.

The deadzone was slowly dropping below us. I could see the soldiers forming a cordon around us as the slavers began to move in to attack. Masses of slaves had gathered now in a thick group. More were coming up behind the slavers and trying to sneak or break through. It was like all of Filly was hearing about this rumour, and every slaver wanted to squash it dead.

Briefly, I began to wonder.

“*Pull!*”

Why did they attack us back then at the Mall?

“*Pull!*”

How did they know we’d be at this spot to gather so many?

“*Pull!*”

My tired front legs pulled again and again. Gritting my teeth, the sweat running down my body, I felt the elevator lock into place twenty feet up the wall. Ahead of us lay the indent to the wall itself, a small tunnel in which what I thought was a transformer for the power grid now lay. Welded girders held up the hidey hole for it, and we shoved the bomb directly inside it.

“How long, Blunderbuck?” Protégé crouched against the edge of the tunnel, keeping watch as Coral and I moved to the other side.

“It’s already set! Got the trigger on a wire, we just run back and detonate!”

“Then let’s go!”

We ran out onto the walkways. I was beginning to feel dizzy on my hooves now, as my stamina started to drop. Protégé came up beside me and matched my pace, wordlessly offering support to keep going. We followed Coral, with Blunderbuck running a wire behind us down each ramp and level of the station toward the bottom. After a while, he simply tossed it to the ground, then ran down to pick it up, giving it a more direct route.

As we came to the edge of the power station, we looked out and saw rounds flying every which way in the deadzone, keeping slaves pinned inside those buildings.

“No choice but to just run for it.” Protégé grimaced. “Use the wagon!”

Turning it around, we hopped inside again, as Coral this time hooked herself into the protected reigns and began to pull us. We entered the deadzone, returning to the buildings. The moment we exited the power station, however, shots began to ring off the sides. I saw indents appearing and dropped to the floor beside the others, hooves over my head.

All I could hear were screams, dull thumps, and the crack of distant gunfire. Then an almighty roar broke out in the distance.

The slavers had begun their attack on the one lone bastion of slaves left.

"Blunderbuck, can we blow it?" Protégé screamed across the floor of the wagon.

"Not yet! We're far too close! We have to be in the buildings or the whole thing might collapse on us! I'm not exactly sure which way it's gonna go!" The young stallion was running the wire out a crack in the wagon's side door behind us. "It should go as soon as we hit the button and—"

There was a ferocious explosion right beside us that sent my ears into a ringing tone and thumped my ribcage. The wagon halted on the spot strong enough that it sent all three of us whipping forward into the far wall of the inside. My scream was cut short as I felt the metal rattle off my head and a splitting pain shot down my back. Clutching the back of my neck, I rolled over and almost slid out the door.

Opening my eyes, I could see we were at an angle.

Then Coral Eve was at the door, one side of her face bloody as she held an ear that seemed to be bleeding with a long cut on her foreleg. She was staggering, looking concussed and unsteady.

"Bomb... missile... hit..." She muttered, before slumping against the side of the wagon.

Blunderbuck groaned, trying to get out. Following him, as I dropped to the ground on my belly, the entire world seemed to be slowing down. Shots whined over the building tops in a crawl. Skyships above drifted lazily. The gap between breaths felt like minutes.

Then my hearing gradually returned. My ears ached dully, yet I turned to look at the wagon and saw it almost on its side into a crater. Coral lay against it, and I began to dig my head under her shoulder to try to lift her. Protégé rolled out and helped me, as Blunderbuck checked the wire.

Together, Protégé and I carried her back, Blunderbuck trailing behind us.

"Just keep moving, Murky!" Protégé hissed, as gunfire whipped near us, forcing us to duck and crawl with her.

"I'm... I'm trying!" I whined, finding my body start to shiver again, the age-old fear creeping back in, of a time when our wagon had been blasted apart on another failed escape. I'd been here before too. "Protégé I... I think I'm..."

"No! No you are not!" He snarled over Coral's shoulders as we pushed and pushed back to the buildings. "You've not got an ounce of giving up in your body, Murky! Seeing you doing this is what's kept me from giving up! I'm not going to watch you do that now! Come on! Dig down, find something!"

"M-me?" I gasped, and then gritted my teeth to throw myself those last few feet toward the buildings. "But I didn't—"

His eyes found mine. There were no lies in them.

"You made me see what was possible, Murky. Now be the pony I've believed in this whole time, since we very first met... and don't give up now."

I felt a swell of something. I wanted to cry, and I wasn't sure why.

But I knew I had to live up to that. For him. For all my friends.

And so I lifted Coral again, and forced my tired limbs to push on. As unseen as we could be, we ducked and crawled away from any gunshots and stuck to the lower crater for cover. Minutes of tense waiting and moving later, we finally, finally, found our way back out of that hideously open area.

Sunny was lying against one of the windowsills near us as we got into hard cover.

“You holiday-makers are back, huh? I’ve been running dry trying to keep them off your backs out there! Hurry up!”

Below her, we pushed into the building, and I saw the horror of the situation.

Ahead of us, the slavers were breaking through. Those with guns on our side were doing their best, but there were just too few. The slavers and soldiers were firing and gunning down those who resisted, and trying to push forward to capture the others. Their wagons acted as shields to approach us. Wounded were being carried back in dozens. Slaves still kept seeming to find their way through to us. There was no cover. The slavers were unrelenting and less than fifty metres away.

Sunny screamed from upstairs, “We can’t hold them here! It’s now or never!”

Weathervane was shouting somewhere, that he needed *anyone* who had so much as put a bandage on before to get up and help them. Glimmer lay against a pillar, someone else using her rifle as she held her side, half unconscious as she kept drinking another healing potion to stop the bleeding from before. Brimstone held a massive slab of metal against a window, trying to cover more slaves, but he couldn’t get out to fight.

We had only time left, and not much of it. We got Coral to the doctors just as she was coming to, and a bandage was tied around the cut in her leg while Weathervane frantically lit his magic around her skull. Even as we did, someone cried out about the slavers getting too close.

Blunderbuck wound the wire around an old alarm clock innards, below a button.

“It’s ready!”

His hoof rested over it. Then Protégé’s rested above his. He glanced at me briefly, before I shifted forward and put mine atop both of theirs. Seeing us both, Blunderbuck grinned and took his away.

“You two do it. The two born slaves, huh? It’s too ‘right’ not to do...”

Amongst this hell, with slavers about to overrun us, after the war and fighting to get here, this mattered. Even if we still had the foals to get, this one long-sought moment mattered.

Protégé and I looked at one another and allowed a smile to creep onto both our faces. He nodded briefly, and I returned the gesture. Both our hooves did it at once.

Together, we pressed the button to end this nightmare.

And nothing happened.

“Wh-what’s happening!?” I hit the button again and again. I was feeling that old panic start to rise again inside. Behind me, there was a scream as someone was hit and fell away from the window. Megaphones of slavers were demanding surrender.

Blunderbuck took the device from me and checked the wiring. He pressed it. Nothing. He changed the wires and rebound it. He pressed it again. Nothing.

Nothing. Nothing. *Nothing.*

Protégé wiped his hooves over his face, shaking as he tried to contain the heartbreak and

stress.

“Blunderbuck...”

“I don’t know!” The young stallion wailed, twisting more wires together. “Everything’s good out here! It must be on the bomb’s end! I... I know I did it right! I think? Oh sweet Equestria I... I just... I...”

I heard Sunny cry out from upstairs.

“Get everyone back from the wagons! Get them all inside!”

Another voice came after, “There’s nowhere to go inside!”

“We only have to hold for a few more minutes, just keep your head down! *Survive!*”

List Seeker followed her shouts.

“If anyone has a gun left, get over to the right, they’re trying to round up some trapped workers! We’re already over time! They’re catching slaves stuck outside!”

An explosion rang out from the left hand side. Soldiers began to flood into the next building, I could see them through an old hole.

Every side was crying out for help. I could see one of Red Eye’s ex-soldiers lying wounded, another firing from in front of him, guarding his comrade. Outside, through the front of the row of shops, slavers were moving forward piece by piece. We were being overrun. We were already out of time.

“I’m so sorry, I thought I did it right!” Blunderbuck covered his face. He was crying.

Protégé held the button in his magic, then turned to look at me. He looked desperate, but there was a resolve in his eyes. He slowly turned to look back to the power station against the wall, where the bomb lay.

“Murky, we can do this, can’t we?”

Gulping, I nodded.

“We have to.”

Side by side, we ran back out into the deadzone.

Sprinting around the wreck of the wagon, we galloped for the wall once again. I kept an eye to the ground, looking for any break in the wire, but it all seemed fine. I was exhausted, running on nothing but adrenaline, desperation, and rapidly diminishing levels of sheer hope. My head thudded with every step of my hoof on the packed earth below us. The spotlights of the wall that had begun to shine down upon the slave’s last position glared into my eyes and the sounds of hell from behind me stung my ears with guilt and worry. My friends were fighting for their lives, almost all wounded or faltering. This great mass of slaves that had gathered together was being crushed and attacked on all sides, trapped against this damned wall.

Protégé ran ahead of me, his longer legs carrying him faster. The earth whipped up around him before the rushing air and crack of shots whined out and I saw him dive to the side. Scrambling, trying to move in anything but a straight line, he got back up. The shots were coming from behind us. I yelled as some started coming nearer to me, with one coming so close I could have sworn it almost brushed me. My saddle’s grapple dug into my side on every single stride, and I kept thinking it was the thud of a bullet. The pylons gave some cover, but we were horribly exposed out here in the deadzone.

Up ahead, I could see the ramps and walkways of the station itself. They got closer with

every gallop, but always felt far off. I weaved and ran to the sides, stopped, and skidded back in the other direction. The ground shattered with a burst right ahead of me, and I screamed as I swerved to run the other way. Another burst came up beside me and I felt one go beneath my legs on the ricochet.

Protégé reached the station first, and swung around behind its torso-height wall to fire a few accurate shots behind us. He would never hit at this range, but the fire made someone rethink sticking their head out. With that brief gap, under cover of the snapping ‘blams’ of his revolver, I ran in beside him.

“Quickly, up to the bomb!” He slapped my shoulder and ran past again. “It has to have snapped loose, I know he wouldn’t have made a mistake like this!”

“You sure? I don’t know how to fix a bomb!” I squeaked, rather embarrassingly, as I felt the stress make my throat tighten up.

“Neither do I... but we just have to hope.”

The wooden boards clattered below our hooves as we raced up them, veering around the elevator to find the tunnel. Fiery embers blew past us as the wind of the open sky blew down into the city and threw fire against the walls. As we climbed each level, I felt it begin to blow at my mane and ears. I’d never been so close to the wall like this until today. I felt as though I were climbing the side of my own cage, looking back into the pit I’d come out of. The sun had dulled as smoke began to rise in front of it, casting a blood red haze across this entire section of the wall that coiled and flowed like water on the inside surface.

Ahead, we saw the bomb. Sitting beside two small pylons, just where we’d left it.

Protégé and I skidded to a halt, as we saw what was wrong.

The wire had been pulled out.

“What in Equestria...?” Protégé breathed as he picked it up.

That wire had been coiled around a metal rod. I’d seen it myself. It wouldn’t have just come loose and it hadn’t been cut. Someone had untied it.

Why had they forced us out early?

Why had they known where we were going?

I ran back outside and looked down below us, but the place was still empty. I looked above, and saw nothing below the top of the wall.

Then I heard Protégé cry out.

Spinning, I saw a dark shadow launch itself from a hidden little pocket of the tunnel and crash into him. A mouth-held club swung and swung, hitting the floor around him and chipping the wood.

Pushing my hooves into motion, I screamed out and rammed the side of the slaver with all I could muster, sending her back with a grunt. Protégé didn’t waste time, as he stood, pointed and shot her.

My ears twitched as the shipping container office burst open. Two more slavers came barrelling out. One had a shotgun, and fell as Protégé quickly re-aimed and fired a second time. The third hesitated, before Protégé’s revolver clicked empty.

“Oh I know that sound! C’mon!”

From the other side, coming down from above, another two burly slavers came barrelling down the walkways holding a shock stick and a whip. They had chains and nets on their sides.

I felt Protégé’s hoof on my neck, shoving me behind him. He was frantically trying to reload.

“Murky, get the bomb wired again!”

Resisting every urge to freeze up, my lips quivering, I rushed for the wire and grabbed it in my mouth. My hooves were deft from sewing enough to do it, but I kept dropping the wire from nerves. Sweating, my eyes wet, I tried to wind it the way I remembered seeing it before.

Behind me, Protégé never finished reloading in time. By the time he closed the drum on his revolver, a club smacked into it and knocked the weapon into the tunnel wall. At the entrance, he dropped low and bucked behind him into the chest of the slaver with the shock stick. The two others barged into him, dropping the unicorn to the ground. Twisting, snarling, fighting as dirty as any slave ever could, he twisted his head and jabbed his horn for their necks, he bit, he spat for their eyes and used his magic to shove the shock stick into their sides.

“You! Stop that!”

A slaver ran for me. I screamed and kept twisting the wire, before Protégé grabbed his hind legs and dropped him down.

“Keep working, Murky!”

The wire twisted around again, I hoped I was doing this right!

A club thudded against the back of Protégé’s armour, just missing his head after he swung out the way. I heard him cry in pain, before his back hoof caught a knee joint and he knocked that slaver into another. A hoof cracked into his head. The shock stick missed by inches.

Finally, I thought I had the last twist needed.

“It’s done!”

Behind me, Protégé struck one slaver with a loose plank of wood. He was bleeding from the nose and lip. Taking the brief chance, his magic grabbed his revolver and swung it up as the other two barrelled atop him. Shoving the barrel against them, the single heavy round tore through both slavers from point blank range. Their screams as they fell off filled the tunnel.

Battered and bloody, Protégé pulled himself from the ground, holding the last slaver at gunpoint.

“Murky, get the detonat—”

A heavy shot rang out across the wall.

It tore through Protégé’s armour, and slammed him into the wall, his body knocked clean from his hooves. I saw his eyes widen beneath his mane flying out from the impact, and his mouth open in shock.

With a clatter, his revolver dropped to the floor at the same time he did, collapsing into a curled up heap.

I stood in horror.

Then I screamed.

The heavy stomping of hooves began to flex the walkways and clump into my ears. The rattle of chains began to fill the air as he approached. Trotting down the walkways from above, Chainlink Shackles joined the remaining slaver, another two of the foul ‘old school’ slavers flanking him.

In his grip, he held a stubby but heavy-looking rifle that he let swing onto a saddle. The malice and glee in that smile made me feel ill as I ran to Protégé’s side, the unicorn hissing and shaking on the ground from the long tear on his side. I looked back up and felt my

blood turn cold as their weapons pointed at me as well. Shackles turned his beady and bloodshot eyes to me, his smile only increasing as he saw me. His armour looked battered, clad around his bulky frame from the war, yet he filled the walkway with bloated menace as he steadily came closer.

“Well, Number Seven, it’s good to see you again.”

I tried to move backwards, dragging the wounded Protégé with me. I’d forgotten everything. The bomb, the slaves below, the wall, freedom, the war. Everything except Protégé and myself being so close to that monster. Protégé grunted and tried to move his hooves, managing to unsteadily push himself back with me as we moved away from the tunnel.

Shackles glanced into it, before smirking.

“This would be the third time you’ve failed, Number Seven, and your first, upstart. How fitting to share it together, eh? Two little colts thinking they can pull off something like this around me.”

He looked back at us, before moving forward. His every step flexed the boards of the walkways, as he tapped the side of his clothing. I gasped to see what was hanging there, the reason they’d ambushed us.

The E.F.S. Blocker I’d once stolen to use myself.

“This is my city, runts!” He snarled, waving a hoof over the burning Fillydelphia to our left. “Even if flying rats are besieging it, nopony escapes from their chains under my watch. You thought you could send them all away, did you, eh?”

“You...” Protégé coughed. “You can’t hold back these ponies forever, they won’t stop fighting every chance they get for it.”

“Soon enough, that won’t even matter, as I’m sure you’re aware. After all, you did fail to get my ‘first generation’ back, didn’t you?”

His rotten teeth were on full display as he grinned at the look of hatred that Protégé gave him.

“And now you’ve delivered all the rest right to me...”

I gulped, my heart thudding faster than any war had ever done to me.

“W-what do you mean?”

Chainlink Shackles waved to his slavers, as they moved forward and grabbed both of us. I struggled, but the strong hooves clamped around me, holding me upright as Shackles closed in. I felt nauseous, as his massive hoof stroked along my jawline almost tenderly, his face on a level with mine, before gripping the back of my head and holding me forehead to forehead. I was whimpering, I knew I was, but I couldn’t take my eyes off his.

“You are all too predictable and simple. Save this, rescue that. You would never give up the foals, would you?” He turned to look at Protégé, who struggled before gasping in pain from his wound, being held still. We were both held where we could see the city, and more particularly the Ministry and the market square as the sounds of horror began to reach my ears. Screams of pain and panic. Of hopeless desperation and failure. A tragedy before our eyes. I saw slavers piling in through windows. I saw fighting in the streets as slaves were being pulled out. Slaves coming up behind the slavers trying to reach the wall were pinned down.

“It’s not as though I don’t know the only other way to Ministry Station, Number Seven.

And it's not as though I don't know you all would never attempt this foolish rush without a plan to get the foals. It isn't exactly difficult to know where you'd have to go once you figured it out."

He licked his lips sloppily, stroking my mane like a pet's. I felt sick to my stomach, an old feeling of terror returning as he stroked along that old scar on my forehead, much like his own. Yet it was his eyes that scared me, he was a foul and monstrous slaver, but he was sharp and penetrating whenever he looked at me.

"All it took was forcing your hooves to get you moving, and we knew where you'd go... now you've led them all to a hopeless position, ready to be reclaimed all at once, pulling all the other potential rebels with you as rumours got spread... by ourselves, of course. The wall is down... the wall is going to explode... hurry hurry! All those who went into hiding during the war drawn out at once by a false promise. Your promise. A large task for us to reclaim them all made simple."

I felt hollow, holding myself up by my hooves so the grip from the slaver wouldn't choke me. Shackles lifted Protégé's head by the chin.

"Or did you really think you were the ones pulling the strings in this city now? That you were the masters of your own fates at last? There's only one master of these ponies, upstart. You've led them to their capture."

Protégé seethed with anger, crying out in pain but struggling all the same. Shackles merely chuckled and slapped him viciously across the face, the unicorn fell limp for a second, passing out.

Down below, I could only watch as the slaves and my friends were being assailed. A horrid sight of gradual failure and crushed dreams. My ears picked up more than that though, they heard the hushed voice.

Shackles moved back across to me, as I saw a collar drop on a chain beside him. I recognised it, and stiffened up. He must have seen the fear in my eyes, for he started it swaying, as he lifted it up.

"Welcome home, Number Seven. We've got a lot of work ahead, you and I. A lot of things to regress to and get back to the way they were, a time when we were both comfortable, both knowing our place. When things are just right as they should be."

"No..." I squeaked, trying to pull away.

"When you can finally live out your true meaning."

"No... it's not..."

"When you and the *mare* can both do what you were supposed to."

My heart felt like it had stopped, images of Unity flashed through my mind at the same time as everything I'd seen him do. The memory machines, the cruel 'leftovers,' the breaking of minds and ponies as resources, all in aid of abusing the most beautiful of magics into a horrid disease for his insanity. And when I saw Unity stuck in that with me, after everything we'd been through together to get away from what this city had done to us...

I just snapped.

And so did Protégé.

He hadn't been unconscious. I'd heard his slight whispers, the warnings to be ready. With a sudden glow of his horn, the revolver sitting on the ground back down the walkway lifted up and fired. I felt myself flung to the ground by the slaver as bullets started flying by us. One slammed into Shackles' armour and knocked the big slaver away from me with an angered roar. The moment I was free, I turned and fired my grapple gun and *Rarity's Grace*

at point blank into the slaver. All the anger, at them all threatening both Unity and I with the sick madness that he was clearly stuck in, emerged as I fired every shot I could. The slaver screamed and fell back, clutching his stomach.

“Runt!” The savage voice roared in my ear, before I felt myself yanked up by a massive and long-coated hoof. I squirmed and fought, claspings onto that heavy rifle of his as Shackles fought and clutched on to me. I could see Protégé wrestling with the other slaver over their club.

Not knowing what else to do, I let my hooves wander over his weapon to grip it tightly, and then reached forward and bit into his neck.

The roar of pain was enough, as I was thrown from his grasp before I could rip at the flesh. My world turned upside down, as my wings splayed and tried to right myself in the air, but I hit the surface of the wall at the back of the walkway before I could manage it. My bones rattled as I slumped down.

Shackles twisted and raised his rifle toward Protégé. The unicorn slammed the club into the slaver, before turning and stopping dead, his eyes wide.

The weapon clicked dry, and Shackles turned with murder in his eyes toward me, as I sat there with the magazine in my hooves.

“Murky, move!” Protégé screamed at me as he sucked up the pain and galloped down to swing the club in his magic. It met Shackles’ foreleg, as the thick and bony hoof blocked it. I rushed to try and get Protégé’s revolver from where it had fallen in the struggle, slipping the empty weapon into my saddle. Behind me, Protégé was being forced back. Shackles’ monstrous attacks were more than a magic wielded club, as every swing of a hoof made Protégé need to dart back and slowly move to the next level up.

Running, I fired my grapple onto the wall above them both, pulled myself up, swung and then dropped on top of Shackles, holding the heavy magazine in my mouth from his weapon, as I beat it again and again over his head, holding around his neck with my forelegs. Protégé swung at his knees or his chest, as I was thrown left and right by the massive slaver’s bucking and tossing.

“You’ve only led them to their end, upstart!”

Shackles roared, smashing the club with one hoof strike. He lunged to the side, as I yelled and clutched on tightly, hanging over the edge of his body and the walkway as his head shook madly.

“This wall is the chain that binds this city, it will never break!”

He was insane. For the first time in my life, past the fear, I knew he was truly insane. Intelligent, resourceful, a master of psychology, but at his core he was as broken as I had been.

That gave me the courage to cling on; he wasn’t a master of my life! He was just a foul and mad old stallion!

I instead threw the magazine away and took my grapple in my mouth, swinging the sharpened edge down to draw a huge cut along his skull.

The cry of pain was only briefly encouraging, before Shackles rose up on his back hooves and flung me cleanly over his head. Circling in the air, I came crashing down on the next level of the walkway, grabbing onto a wooden pole to not slide off. Coughing out sawdust and smoke, I tried to get my hooves under me, before a massive pressure squashed me from above. I felt a hoof pressing on me, crushing my body and pressing my ribs in. I squealed in pain.

Ahead of me, out over the gap that my upper half hung from, I could see the trapped slaves being forced back into the deadzone to not be killed. They were taking cover behind the pylons and conduit boxes. If they got any closer, the wall might be too close for them to survive it going off! Slavers were pulling individuals back with them one after the other. Hope was fading, ponies were starting to surrender for fear of their lives.

“You can see it, can’t you, Number Seven? You know how they feel, that crushing of something you thought might happen. The realisation that you belong here. With me. With family.”

Coughing, trying to shout back, I ended up just gagging and retching over the edge as my stomach was compressed down.

“Look at them! This is what all this foolish dreaming gets you! An eternal chain, Number Seven! For those destined to be in it, the cycle never breaks!”

“But this wall *will!*”

Protégé launched from behind with the shock stick, before I felt Shackles cry out in pain and sweep away from me. I sucked air into my lungs as the pressure was lifted, and rolled onto my back.

He swung the shock stick again and again. Shackles, faster than anyone his weight or size had any right to be, beat out with his hooves and batted it away or forced Protégé to back off, as they climbed another level in their struggle. Gritting my teeth, I grabbed my grapple like a weapon and rushed in again.

Together, Protégé and I fought our master up the walkways to the next level. We swung and thrust, we dodged and weaved. I saw Shackles trying to get range to reload his weapon, and pushed my fear down to rush inwards again. Protégé joined me and struck a ringing blow against the slaver’s foreleg, the shock stick’s tip breaking and sparking out from the impact, but making Shackles roar in pain. That same hoof immediately lashed out and sent Protégé crashing back into a pile of used cables.

Below from the ground, screams were becoming distinct from all sorts of slaves.

“Help us!”

“They’re coming, please!”

“I don’t want to go back!”

I briefly caught a glance of Glimmer’s bright pink hair as Unity helped her out the back of the shops. Slavers were right behind them.

Chainlink Shackles grinned through his bloody face at us and sneered.

“Far, far too late.”

Magically thrown cables flew through the air at him. They went for his neck, his hooves and his weapons. They spun, a multi-tasking only one unicorn I knew could manage, winding and tying. Thrashing, Shackles found himself bound and unsteady.

Hoarsely yelling, I charged, flapped my wings, and rushed into his side.

It was like ramming into a brick wall. His armour and weight made me bounce and fall away. I shrilly yelled as a hoof raised and stamped for my head, as I rolled away from every individual stomp aimed at me. I was underneath him, yelling and diving between his legs over and over to avoid being crushed. Reaching up, fired my grapple into his thick armour, where it dug deep and drew a grunt of pain from Shackles.

“I’m promising you now, Number Seven! This won’t end here for you!”

Diving away from a hoof, I got up and just kept running, as Protégé slung a crate at Shackles’ head with his magic. Shackles chased me, smashing the box away, his hooves

becoming clumsy and tied up as I led him on a chase around the power station. I snuck through thin gaps and slid under small holes. To my horror, he could still move faster than me, as I ducked and ran under trolleys and pylon lines that Shackles battered through. I ran around and around, as every moment, Protégé threw things and dropped debris with his magic, confusing, attacking Shackles as he blindly chased me. Within a few seconds, I snuck away behind a corner and, scrambling up a series of crates, I took the chance and got atop a generator. I gripped the trigger of my hook gun to tighten the line and leapt off to the wooden floor below. The line caught, and I stuck in mid air, as Protégé jumped up and grabbed hold of me to drop both our weights. The wire of the grapple hook *yanked*.

My pace, our weight and the line's own pulling power *was* enough. Just beside us, I heard the crash of Shackles coming down amidst the cables with a furious scream of anger and rage as the cables pulled tight and cut his hooves up from under him. I saw him thrashing on the ground, eyes glaring at me.

"This won't save *you* Number Seven. You think Wildcard didn't tell me what he wanted to say to you as well?"

He began to fight out of the cables. I felt Protégé pulling at me, as he started to limp away.

"Murky, come on! We have to get out of here and detonate it! The wall comes first! This is our chance!"

We both turned and ran. His revolver was still on the floor levels down, *Rarity's Grace* was empty, and getting too close to the thrashing Shackles would have been suicide. We were two levels up from the bomb now, two levels up from where the detonator was lying. A skyship soared by, pulled in by the commotion going on below, but it just kept on flying, as flak from the top of the wall chased it off. Its passing rattled the side of the wall and the walkways, forcing us to grab hold of one another. I supported him down to the next level, only one above the bomb!

"We're almost there! Come on!" I pulled at him, feeling the unicorn slowing down from his wounds. Shackles had battered both of us, but that gunshot wasn't—

That same rifle rung out again.

We both fell to the side of the walkway, Protégé's weight bowling me over. Gasping, I stood up and turned in horror.

Behind us, Chainlink Shackles had caught up, still trailing cables around him, but with his weapon bearing a fresh magazine and pointing along the walkway at us.

And in front of me, Protégé lay on the wooden ground, from where the heavy round had punched clean through his armour and through the centre of his body. His face was open in shock, his breathing starting to increase in pace as I saw the blood begin to stain his clothing.

A revulsion, a sheer unfairness welled up inside me. I screamed in horror, falling beside him.

Shackles began to walk toward us, the rifle pointed directly at me. I didn't dare run.

"Shot down at the last moment, isn't that how it's always gone, Number Seven? By the griffon, by the upstart before you now... it's always the way, isn't it?"

He stopped, pointing the gun my way still. I could sickly tell, it was pointed low, a non-lethal shot if he could, away from my skull.

"You will not escape *my* city!" He roared. **"This is a city of servitude! It was before the balefire, it will remain so after it! This is the city I was promised, the one I was bred for!"**

The one I was destined for! The eternal chain, the endless link surrounding the city. Just like this wall."

"Why are you doing this!?" I cried.

"Because there's always a master, and there's always a slave." His voice dropped from its booming tone. "Where there is servitude, there is power. Where there is order, there is simplicity. Where there is control, the wasteland cannot control us."

"That's not true! That's not true at all!"

He shook his head, that grin never once leaving him.

"Equestria's gone, little runt. Every one of you that tries to rise up sees the same thing. You get a look at the sun, the moon, the sky... maybe an orb or a photo. Music, a diary. Maybe artwork... and you all believe the same naïve things. They've all failed. For two hundred years they have failed again and again, little victories leading ultimately to nothing in their own silly little stories. Only the strong keep going. The strong control. I **am** control. I was **born** to control. Now I will control the ponies of this city in a way even the wasteland cannot stop."

Below us, there was a great cry as the last house was finally overrun. The slavers were closing in on the great mass of unarmed ponies.

In front of me, Protégé stirred, and lit his horn to try and lift one of the slaver's dropped weapons. Shackles' hoof dropped on it, holding it down even as Protégé strained. Yet the unicorn gritted his teeth, gasping in pain to merely speak, as he lifted his head and stared back at Shackles.

"Someday, ponies like you will only be a bad memory, Shack—" He coughed, before hissing and trembling, his horn faltering, before staying strong in trying to pull the weapon out.

Then his eyes turned harsh.

"I was wrong. Is that what you want to hear? I was wrong to dream the way I did. Wrong to dream of wonders while aiding in committing atrocities. I took Equestria further from what it ever was. Just a silly slave who thought he was free..."

Shackles' grin only spread.

"See? It isn't so hard to know your place."

Protégé spat blood upon the wooden floor, a hoof clutching his wound, he was sweating to not let the pain control him.

"Red Eye always spoke of generous souls, and the 'sacrifice' of giving up that which belonged to you for a greater good. And I believed him! Believed in rebuilding a world, even if it hurt the ponies in it. But now I know that was all the wrong way around! It's not the word that makes those in it, it's those in it that make the world, and now I've seen what we can be! I've seen ponies who had never met until today lay down their lives for one another. I might have led them, but I didn't control them. I see them down there right now, fighting for the slightest hope of a better world! That is Equestria's spirit, and I see it still lives in them, Shackles, you haven't taken it away!"

His magic kept pulling, before I saw what he was *really* pulling.

He'd pulled the detonator up from the level below. Shackles' eyes suddenly widened.

"So at the end of all this, I'll show you, Red Eye, this damned city, and this whole accursed wasteland the true meaning of *sacrifice*."

There was one, brief, impossible-to-believe moment of horror in Shackles' eyes, as Protégé hit the button.

Shackles turned and ran, disappearing into a tunnel. The bomb didn't go off entirely immediately, as several small explosions rattled out, as I grabbed Protégé and leapt into the air, before the bomb finally went off properly.

From below us, the world erupted into fire. We were hurled by the concussive force and the walkway slamming up into us as it was blasted away, catching my back legs and bruising the bone as I was sent spiralling away. I clutched onto him, opening my wings even as I was blinded and shattered inside by the eruption of Blunderbuck's explosive. I felt fragments dig into my skin, slamming through my sweater.

Behind me, I heard the dull and eerie creak of bending metal. The explosion from inside the wall carried up through it, before the shadow over us began to grow. As I felt my wings catch the air, I angled us downwards, trying to build speed. The wall slowly began to tip, as tearing metal ripped from the sides of this chunk. It fell inwards, crashing down at the base, before the top half came barrelling down toward us. Keeping my sore wings spread, I glided down ahead of it, trying to veer to the side, to get out of the way.

Then it hit the ground and the remainder of the unstable bomb went off.

Protégé and I were blasted as I lost all sense of direction. My ears stopped hearing. I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe.

I felt nothing until we both hit the ground, surrounded by the crashing of a hundred tons of metal and stone.

As I dreamed, I saw her.

As we fled together, before I could ever remember, we fled in an ill-fated attempt to escape our bonds.

As we ran for that wall the very first time.

As we were finally stopped, as we failed.

I saw her turn back to me, as we hugged one another and promised that someday we would do this again.

That if it took us another whole life to find one another and try... we would someday do it.

And we would win.

The world was bathed in orange.

Dust thrown up by the wall had filled the air in all directions. It hung lazily, forming a blanket that stopped all my vision beyond a few feet.

As I lay there, gazing from my side, feeling like I had died, I watched that dust drift and settle. Vaguely, I could hear screams and shouts from the distance. I was in pain. A far away, total pain, as every joint in my body felt stretched by the explosion. My head felt swollen, and cuts from wooden splinters covered me.

Yet as much as my body felt broken, I was not dead.

We had done it. We had actually done it. And as my vision began to clear, I could see the shadows of ponies flowing by us in all directions. Slaves pulling one another with them. They all headed for the gigantic ramp of scrap that led to the top, a ramp that shone with the bright blue sky into the haze of orange dust and smoke. Blacked-out figures all around

climbing higher and higher, some throwing their forelegs up high as they reached it.

I lay still and watched them. They kept coming from all directions.

Slowly, I moved to try and get up.

As ever, the limbs were the easiest, but the big core muscles were, like any winter morning in slavery, the difficult ones. Dumbstruck, I felt like I was watching a painting unfolding as smudged black figures flowed by me like messy charcoal, their voices sounding like they were a world away. Gradually, I put one hoof in front of the other. Unsteady, staggering, I moved toward the one other black figure ahead of me.

The one I saw not moving.

He lay on his side, legs flat down, his mane splayed out behind him. My heart was in my mouth as I approached. I didn't want to believe.

Yet as I laid a hoof upon him, I felt him breathing.

"P-Protégé!" My voice came out like I was underwater to my ears, as I rubbed them to try and get my hearing back. "Protégé! It's me!"

Slowly, his eyes blinked open, and he stared at me from below. I could see his horror wound was still bleeding, and before I could think, I tore off the loose sleeve of his clothing to wrap into it.

"Protégé, come on! We did it!"

"Mur... ky?" He gasped, his mouth as dry as mine from the dust, as he clearly started to recognise me. The ground thudded as hooves rushed around us on all sides.

"Murky... you're alive... please... please tell me..."

I tried to get him up, wrapping my hooves around his neck, but he was dead weight.

"I'm alive! I'm... I'm here! Just... just hold on! Oh no... Protégé it'll be okay, right? I'll be okay!"

I turned behind me, I had no idea where we were other than in front of the wall. I couldn't recognise anyone running through the dust toward the blue sky.

"Help!" I shouted, as helpless-sounding as it was. "Somepony! Help! *Help us!*"

Yet no one heard. They were all further away, or screaming themselves as they sprinted for freedom.

"Did we... do it?" Protégé had slumped back down, his eyes closed.

I had to fight to hold back tears as I grasped his shoulders and lifted him up to sit with me, trying to get him to see the wall.

"We did... we did." I sniffled. "Look, you did it, we all did it. They're..."

I gazed as they ran past the top, singles or groups. Some helped them over, one glowing green who seemed to fly around helping others.

"They're free, Protégé... *we did it.*"

His eyes squinted open, as his limbs finally held on to me a little more.

"Murky, I can't move. Please... take me there."

"I will! Please... just be okay! HELP!" I screamed again, before I got him under my shoulders and lifted, getting him to his hooves. I could barely hold his weight in my exhausted and battered state. I only realised now as I saw the drips that my own nose was bleeding terribly from the pressure of the bomb. Protégé's was too, but I just held us together, as we limped and stumbled up the remains of the wall. Every little step taking an individual effort and a moment to rest. My chest hurt, and I could feel Protégé grimacing and gradually coming to as his own head sorted out where he was. Every few steps, he would stumble and fall.

"Murky, I don't know if I can—"

"NO!" I screamed at him, pulling him again and again. "You kept me going back there! Keep going now! We're going to make it!"

Slower than everyone else, we ascended. Every step made the great blue through the gap grow larger. Every step brought clearer air. As we crawled out of the pit, toward the sky. Pushing ourselves for those last extra steps.

Then, suddenly, we were at the top. And ahead of us lay the wastes of Equestria.

The most beautiful sight in so long.

Rolling hills peaked with snow rose from the great plains, dotted with old farms and fences built around ditches and still-standing stone bridges over the dry riverbeds. Clouds coiled in the sky around the edges of the hole in them, rolling slowly, gently across the air. Every layer of hills gained a new subtle colour as the distance coloured them in steadily more saturated shades before great mountains rose up with their sheer peaks in the far, far distance. It was at peace out there, open and free.

I pulled Protégé over the lip of the wall, and pulled us both down the wreckage to get out of the way of the swarming ponies. We hobbled until eventually he fell, lying back to stare outside. I dropped beside him and put a hoof around his shoulders to hold him upright.

"I'm... free." His voice was soft, and his eyes stared out to the plains, a hoof held over his horrid wound.

"You are." I tried to hold back my tears again. "At last. You did it, Protégé, you led us here... you got them all to do this, past *all* of that..."

Then slowly, I felt him collapse. In a panic, I grasped him with both hooves.

"No, no no! Protégé! *Protégé* stay awake! Please stay awake..." I begged on those last three words, my lips quivering.

"Ngh..." He grunted, before coughing weakly. "Murky... Murky, are you there?"

"I'm here..." I sniffed again, my cheeks shaking as I fought to control my eyes and mouth at once. I saw his hoof reaching out and I took it, hugging his back to my chest, resting my head on his to hold him steady with my forelegs and watch the new world out there. "Don't worry, they'll catch up soon! And... and they'll help you! Weathervane will come and—"

"Murky... I'm so sorry..." He whispered, holding tightly to my hooves. "I'm sorry for everything..."

"You don't have to be... please, just... just hold on!"

He shook his head.

"I just... I just keep wishing... life hadn't given us what we got. Slavery... master and slave... being forced to... to hurt one another because of it. I hated it..."

I didn't reply, I just leaned my head into the side of his, feeling my heart sink terribly.

"I just always wished it hadn't been like that, Murky... I really did. That it wasn't this wasteland. We were better than that, and... and sometimes it showed. Just sometimes..."

"I know."

He smiled, but it was a sad one, full of melancholy.

"I just always kept feeling, if we'd both been born in a better world... in a better time... perhaps we might have been better friends as well."

I choked, tears on my cheeks as I could no longer control them, and I held him tightly.

"We *are* friends, Protégé. We always will be now."

In my heart, I knew I was denying the truth about the future, but I couldn't bring myself to say it.

I felt him grab my hooves and hold tightly.

"Promise me, Murky. Save those foals, a-and then live a free life. The one you wanted... the one you deserve..."

I shook my head, "No... no *we'll* do it, *we'll live*—"

He coughed, and I saw the blood seep from his lips again. "Murky... please..."

Sobbing, I nodded my head, before hugging him tightly, pressing the side of my head against his. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry. I... I will..."

His lips moved, but no words came out, only a gentle sigh, as he clung on to me, trembling with nerves. Briefly, he opened his eyes to look once more upon the vista of Equestria, the land he loved, before they slowly closed.

His voice was quiet, tinged with gentle relief, as I felt him slowly go limp across his body.

"I got to taste freedom..."

And with that, he fell silent, and did not stir again.

I froze, as a final realisation sunk slowly in, and then everything I'd been holding back finally flowed over. On the steps to freedom outside this hellish city and holding him closely, I cried until I could cry no more.

Minutes later, Glimmerlight and Unity found me.

I was sitting beside him, my eyes stinging and red, barely moving.

I didn't move until I felt Unity and my sister's forelegs wrap around me tightly, where I reached out to hug and hug and hug...

Night had fallen.

The slaves of Fillydelphia, or a great number of them, were free.

They had flowed out the city in a great number, overrunning the slavers once they saw what was up for the taking.

Now they lay in the city outside, hiding and away from the slavers who were by now too busy with the renewed Enclave attack to come after them.

Fires were lit against the cold nights, and many celebrated together, looking back across the city at the tall walls with delight to be on the other side of them. Some had already left on their journeys. Others were preparing to go.

Yet every single pony who had come from the Mall stayed. They stood in a circle surrounding the pyre. Every one of them that he had saved stood and watched the flames as they grew. Every one of them bowed their heads in respect. Earlier, they had all approached one by one to say 'thank you.' Now they watched over his memory amongst the flames.

I sat with my back to Glimmer's chest whilst she hugged me from behind. In my hooves, I toyed with his revolver, tracing over Equestria's sigil upon it.

Soon, I sat it aside in my saddlebag, and drew out my journal.

Lines... lines became curves.

Curves became shapes.

Shapes became...

I wished they would.

Trying to stop any tears from smudging it, I let my charcoal rise and fall in complex and talented strokes, all of my confidence and belief that he had instilled in me flowing through onto the paper. Soft and caring lines, all leading to the strong core shape that formed his belief in others. I added some things, then removed them. In place of that clasped mane, I drew him as he was when not in uniform. I drew him as the pony he was inside.

Slowly, I finished the final friend on my journal page.

Amongst all the others, Glimmerlight, Coral Eve, Brimstone Blitz, Unity, Caduceus, Chirpy Sum and Mister Peace, now stood Protégé. Added into the final space left, just beside me, with a smile on his face and a bright look in his eyes. The smart and wonderful pony I knew he could have been, but ringing with the hero I knew he had inside.

Not one of the ponies here would forget him or forget his sacrifices.

They would remember.

We all stood together as the embers fell at last.

"This is your decision, yeah?" Glimmer nodded to Sunny, as the earth pony slung up her things and grimaced at the motion on her ribs from the wagon crash. She looked battered, a mare who'd been at every front, strong till the end.

"I know these lands out here, Glimmer. I know the trails and the wildlife. Most of these ponies don't. They need a leader."

Glimmerlight smirked, "And they picked you?"

"Ha. Ha."

The two mares moved closer and hugged briefly.

"See you later, Ironshit."

"Take care out there, ya backwater primitive."

Sunny moved along to myself, and leaned down for another hug.

"I still owe you a stuffed toy, Murky. Make sure you come by to claim it, okay?"

"I will." I sniffed, and she patted my head.

Beside her, Blunderbuck and Weathervane approached. The former got another hug from Glimmerlight. He had decided to go with them too, and try to make it to Manehattan. He'd spoken that maybe Tenpony would appreciate his artistic talent more above practicality.

Weathervane just stared down at me with stern eyes.

"Don't look so slumped, kid. Don't you remember what I told you? Walk like a damn pegasus should."

I bolted upright from the sudden command, my wings shooting outright and my head up and straight. He smirked.

"Better. You should always walk like that. Better for the wing muscles."

I squinted and tilted my head, "It's not really, is it? You just wanted me to feel more confident, right? What's it called? A placebo?"

Weathervane, remarkably, laughed. "Finally."

Then he leaned down and lifted my hoof with his son's PipBuck on it.

"Take care of this, okay? Far as I'm concerned, he'd probably have been proud that you own it now. In my eyes, you're worthy of it after all you've done."

I had to fight not to cry again. I took his hoof as confidently as I could and shook it.

"Thank you... thank you for everything. All of you."

I let my eyes wash over the rest. Sunny, Blunderbuck, Weathervane, List Seeker. They'd all played some part at some time.

Now, as we said our goodbyes, I saw many of them, our friends and allies, walk off into the darkness. Free to begin their long journeys home at the head of all the ponies who now depended on those four.

And with that, I turned to my friends.

Glimmerlight stood ready, if hunched. Weathervane had closed up her wound and with a few extra strength potions, she insisted she was ready for one last run. She held out something to me, and played with her magic as she slotted what looked like a red gem into my PipBuck, then she winked.

"I figure he'd have wanted you to have this."

Before I knew what was happening, my vision suddenly saw small lines at the bottom, filled with little green bars on a red interface design. It flicked on and off as Glimmer showed me the button.

It was an E.F.S. The one from Protégé's eyepiece.

Glimmer clapped my back and stood up again.

Behind her, Unity slung the small pile of potions Weathervane had spared around her shoulders in a sack. She smiled gently at me as I moved up alongside her.

Beyond her, Coral Eve was staring back at the city with a furious intensity. If she felt any lingering effects from her concussion, Weathervane's magic was holding it at bay.

To her left, Brimstone Blitz pulled his battered body up. He'd never say die. Ever.

"There's foals in there counting on us before we can call this done, everyone." Glimmerlight spoke clearly. "We promised, and we owe a good stallion this, too. They can't have them, they won't make more slaves from them. So... this is it, huh?"

"Aye." Brimstone snorted.

Unity glanced at me for a second, and I caught her eye.

"What?"

"You always wanted to be free... and no one would ever think twice if you walked now. Yet you're going back. It's just... heh..." She couldn't finish.

I just blushed a little. "It matters. Together, right?"

Briefly, Unity and I reached out and held our hooves together. She nodded.

"Well then!" Glimmer spoke loudly, and began trotting forward, Diamond's rifle slung on her back. We followed her, together on our last journey.

"Let's finish this for good."

Together, or Not at All



“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. Murky, I don’t know what to say. Come here.”

O-oh?

Oh.

I just, I didn’t know what to...

Thank you.

“No one should have to go through that, or have it end like that so close. Protégé sounds like one of those ponies that are once in a lifetime. I know I won’t forget what you told me. What he did was unbelievable. If only more could turn their life around like that.”

In some ways, he was like a brother. We were both born as slaves, we’d both needed one another to get to that moment, and as much as we’d fought and argued, in the end we had been there for each other.

Standing on the ruins of the wall, looking back into the city before we started our final journey, all I could feel was that empty space beside me. Already, I missed having his quiet confidence to assure me that I was doing the right thing, or his cool initiative. He could really have been something special, a great leader, a hero of the wasteland for more than just a few days! If he’d done this much in such a short time, just think what could he have done for good out there!

“He saved all those ponies, Murky. Just remember that. Remember what he did.”

I try to. Sometimes I think that after all this is done, maybe I’ll see him again.

Will I?

“I...”

S-sorry, I shouldn’t ask that. I’m just...

“It’s okay. But he’d asked you to save those foals. You were all going back in.”

Yes, yes. Us five, plus some of the parents. We were going back into Fillydelphia for one

final task. They were in Ministry Station, at the centre of this whole nightmare.

Two hundred years before, Sundial had made this exact same trip. He could have turned and walked away, gone back to his life. But he chose not to. He put one hoof in front of the other and went back into hell to help others.

Now I was doing the same. I sometimes think that's what Weathervane meant when he said I was worthy of keeping the PipBuck.

"I think he meant it for a lot more than that."

W-well, I thought that was it anyway.

And what I saw regarding Sundial, I'll never forget that, or the way in which it happened. Memory magic is beautiful, but that place taught me how terrifying it can be if misused. We were aiming to rescue those who should never have been involved in all this; those who didn't deserve to be touched by it.

I was born into slavery. I lived through it as a foal.

I wasn't about to watch them make another hundred Murky Number Sevens.

"You care."

If there was one thing all this had taught me, it's that you have to. If my friends hadn't cared for me, I'd have been dead long ago. If Protégé hadn't truly cared about other ponies, then Fillydelphia would still have owned all of them.

If I didn't care now, there would be nopony left to stop all this abuse repeating itself over and over. There would be nothing to stop the eternal chain from turning all over again for another two hundred years.

"Amazing."

Huh?

"Murky, you gave up a chance to walk away into freedom! None of them would have shamed you for it. You had it, right there! And you chose not to in order to help others. You may not say it yourself, Murky. But this is the stuff that heroes are made of."

Well, then it never feels like it. Sundial was right. All you know is that it has to be done.

"Then, this is the end of the tale?"

Yes.

This is the end.

This is why, after all that had happened, I'm where I am now.

Fillydelphia. The city of slaves.

Built from heavy steel and thick concrete, it stood amongst a wide valley like a beacon of industry, thick with heat and an omnipresent red smog. Chemical tinted fog spread through the streets. Above them lurked the watchful eyes of slavers wearing red-eyed gas masks. Chain fencing shut off side-roads and guided sick and warped slaves to their places of toil and sweat. When it wasn't scalding hot from forges and crucibles, it was stinging from acid rain dripping through cracks in run down shelters, all of them packed with more ponies than they could fit.

Slaves lived here.

Slaves died here.

All that was now coming to an end.

Red Eye's power had been contested by the mighty force of the Enclave. War had come to

Fillydelphia. In the midst of the wasteland's two greatest powers clashing, a thousand stories played out. Every individual not part of their war had their own way to find. Be it whatever reason had driven Xenith to know about the green flare that had cleared the sky, Shackles' push to seize power from the shades of the past, or the frantic rush of the slaves to escape and break the wall that had enclosed them, times were changing.

Now all that mattered was who would get what they wanted in the end.

For some of us, pursuing our dreams, we had already lost something.

In the time since the green flare in the sky, and in our rush to destroy the wall, the war had reignited its ferocity. Above us, the hole to the blue sky was criss-crossed with smoke trails and scattered bits of cloud fallen from the skyships. Flares of energy fire mixed with dotted streaks of anti-air fire from the ground. It wasn't nearly as intense as the opening bout. Now, the Enclave and Fillydelphia felt like two exhausted and wounded warriors, struggling to lift their weapons and make tired swings at one another; driven only by what willpower remained.

The city lay in ruin. As I stood upon the shattered wall, I saw skyships littering the ground. The 'Thunderhead' that Protégé had spotted was slumped like some artificial mountain outside the city. Red Eye's infrastructure was broken and Filly's defences contained to small pockets as everything broke down.

Yet neither side wanted to lose, and it was that distraction that let twelve or so ponies sneak back into the city. We didn't talk much as we crossed the limits of that shattered wall and willingly set hoof into the hell-city we'd striven for so long to get out of.

Glimmer led the way, limping and having to hold Diamond's rifle in her magic to avoid its strap opening the wound on her back.

Behind her came Brimstone, trying with all his strength to not show the pain every step caused him, or that he always kept his back-right hoof on the ground for as short a time as possible.

Coral Eve strode with a purpose, even as she seemed to sway and have to right her direction, putting a hoof to her head now and then.

Around them were those who had foals left in the city, carrying whatever weapons could be brought. All of them tired, most of them wounded. None of them willing to stop until their children were safe.

And behind them all, came myself, and Unity.

We trotted side by side, occasionally bumping into each other as our tired bodies stumbled, silently helping one another to stay upright. Her bandages and coat were filthy and her mane looked thin and unkempt. Exhaustion was slowing her down. Her eyes were only half open, always looking ahead. She had admitted it herself; she simply wasn't as fit as some of the other ponies here.

I knew the feeling well.

Only right now, what I was feeling wasn't anything to do with pain or exhaustion or fear for being back inside this city of concrete and steel. Instead, I simply felt hollow.

The elation and excitement our success had brought had eventually sapped away. Now I simply felt an aching sense of emptiness in my gut, one that kept working away inside me every time I remembered Protégé's revolver in my bags. It was a frustration that grew and had no outlet because I couldn't figure out how to make it all better. I kept catching myself trying to plan out how to solve it for just a second, before realising all over again that some things couldn't be fixed.

No matter what I did now, he was gone forever.

It made me angry at everything. I wanted to rant about how it could have been avoided. I wanted to scream about how stupid ponies were that it ever had to happen at all. Yet in the end it would all just collapse into a heap of emotional confusion and hurt. Eventually, I'd mentally exhausted myself.

For the last half a mile we had crept down back alleys, surrounded by twisted metal and shattered concrete, ducking away from confused packs of slavers trying to find someone who knew what was going on.

I had tried to reason with myself that he'd done enough for it to be 'worth it.' Soon after that, I'd felt disgusted with myself for even trying, realising I was only trying to help myself feel better.

That was when I simply put my head down and trudged onwards. What should have been a heroic gallop to save the foals had instead turned into a loathsome and quiet trot, with me desperately trying to not cry in front of everyone. Again.

The others ahead of the two of us crept through an old diner with no roof. Most of its tables scattered across the street. I looked around to try to distract myself, placing my front hooves on the counter as the others moved into the yard out back. I heard Glimmer whisper that she was going to take a hunt past the beer garden and see if the next road would get us to the Ministry in a straight line away from the main streets.

Lingering in the serving area, I looked around the way we'd come for any danger. His E.F.S. wasn't picking up anything but—

His E.F.S.

Slowly, I slumped and placed my head in my hooves, before sucking in air and punching at the PipBuck to hit the button to turn off the new system. Then I laid my head down on the counter behind my forelegs and shut my eyes.

Outside, Glimmer made a hushed bark for everyone to get ready to move, but I just stayed where I was. I felt my eyes sting, and my chest began to spasm slightly with short gasps.

Then there was the sound of hooves beside me, and a gentle hoof at my side, before it disappeared. Cantering to the back door, Unity shouted out to the others, leaning out so that they could see her. Through blurry eyes, I saw her go from being stable to panting harder than before, acting more tired than she was.

"Hey, uh... one second! I need to catch my breath! Sorry!"

She turned and hastened back toward me, out of the sight of the others. I felt her leg curl around and pull me back from the counter to sit both of us down on the other side of it, out of sight from the others. Pre-balefire cap-thingies were strewn across the floor, along with empty cake trays and plastic straws. Both of us stared out across the rows of tables down to a long battered and unlit Sparkle-Cola machine.

Simply her taking the time to sit down with me made me sob lightly in my hurt state. Shaking my head, I rubbed my eyes and looked at her.

"Why did you tell them that?" I sniffed. "You're not—"

"I dunno, I just didn't feel it was right to tell them it was you who needed to stop. Sorry, I don't know why. Are you okay?"

Instead of answering, I slumped and bit my lip, my front hooves tapping lightly together.

"Sorry, dumb question." Unity muttered to herself.

"No, no, sorry I didn't meant to... I just... I just don't know and..." I shook my head

and looked at the window at the red ash dancing in the air. "I'm okay. I'm just tired and sore from it all. My rad-sores are hurting, that's all."

"Murky..."

"It's just all this dust, it makes them worse! And... and every muscle and bone feels like it's about to fall off and I just feel like I want to sleep for a month, but I'm not tired! That's all! That's all it is! I'm not—"

I coughed and stumbled in my ramble, getting up and pacing down the diner.

"It's not... it's not that it's just because I want all this to be over! I'm sick of coughing and bringing up blood and... and I'm sick of the taste of RadAway and that's all it is! I'm okay, all right!? I'm o—yah!"

My hoof slipped on a discarded food tray as I stomped in a circle, making me stumble and slam into the Sparkle-Cola machine. My temper flared, and I turned and slammed my hoof right into its stupid grinning face again and again and again until I could raise my tired and now throbbing leg no more. I slid down the front of the machine and rested my forehead onto it as I felt genuine and large sobs begin to quake my whole body.

"It's not fair. Why did he have to die? It's not *fair*!"

The last word extended and pitched higher, like a whiny foal. I choked and coughed, my nose running. I couldn't muster the energy to shout any more.

"He deserved more, Unity. I just... I just can't stop feeling... feeling... I don't know."

My body was lifted away from the machine, as she turned me around and gently pulled me in to hug her, chest to chest. One foreleg curled around my head, as I felt her push her cheek into my neck. There was a gentle sway, as I let out all the emotion inside. I'd cried when he had died, I'd done so again as we had held a brief funeral for him, yet there was more to come. I felt embarrassed to be in front of her like this, but it all just finally came out as I spluttered and whimpered about all the hurt and and pain I was feeling. She listened to it all, and she never let go or even blushed.

Eventually, after sharing a quiet moment, and after I'd let it all out, she led me to a seat in the diner. Now, we were both sitting across from one another at one of the diner's tables. My eyes were sore, but it had stopped at last, as though what I'd needed to feel had finally been felt. I felt like something eating me up inside had left me, and now I simply had a feeling of blankness. It felt like an empty page in my journal, as I found myself willing to accept whatever she had to say in response.

Unity apparently intended to confront the issue directly. She reached over the table, taking both my hooves in hers.

"You shouldn't be afraid of accepting that it happened, Murky." Her voice was gentle, but held a core of strength. "If you don't, then you'll only ever remember the end because you'll never stop trying to squash that memory down. The more you try to ignore the way it ended, the more it'll just bottle up inside you."

"Mhm." I nodded, mumbling quietly.

Unity shifted her hooves slightly and continued, "I know it's a hard thing to take in, and it's not very nice either, but it really is for the best. It'll let you accept that it's happened, and let you focus more on the reasons why he meant a lot to you. That's what Aurora Star always said about why memories matter. Just find the good they can do for us."

She cautiously smiled. "And if you honour Protégé by remembering him for the right reasons, you'll keep being the pony he always wanted to see you as."

"He taught me to read. He always treated me like I was more intelligent than I maybe

was, made me feel like I had someone who really understood what I was going through. I felt comfortable around him.” I almost whispered the words, before speaking up. “He sometimes said I gave him hope, but he gave me a sense of self-respect.”

“And it’s shown.” Unity let her smile grow. “You should always remember what your friends do for you. I read a book written by Twilight Sparkle once at home; she said that every friend you ever meet has some impact on you, and you should always try to be what they believe you can be because it’s the people we meet that make us better. If you do that, I’m sure you’ll make him proud.”

My heart stuttered at the thought, but this time I didn’t shy away from it. Unity looked concerned for a second, until I finally brought a weak smile onto my face and looked her in the eye for the first time since she’d come to help me.

“It’s okay, I understand,” I said.

Her hoof patted mine as she let go and sat back. I detected a little relief in her expression, as though she’d been worrying if she was saying the right thing.

“You know, Murky, it’s the same for me. Back in Friendship City I really didn’t have many friends, if I’m honest. I tended to stick to helping my parents with their work or making my trinkets to sell. Y’know, learning how to make them remind people of other ponies? But I never had my own group, and I sometimes kinda rambled at people instead of actually speaking to them if I tried to talk. I guess I still do a bit, heh.”

She shook her head and blushed, before looking at me sideways from under her mane.

“I guess it’s just... since I met you, I don’t do it as much. I feel more confident around others. Your friends feel like mine as well now, and I feel welcomed outside my family for the first time. I find it easier to make new friends. That’s why I knew what to say to you there, because I’ve felt it myself. Regardless of how it happened back then before we got separated, Murky, thank you for being there for me.”

I felt stunned. I’d always felt like I was having to pull myself together just to speak to her properly, but hearing that she had her own internal struggle and felt like I’d left a mark on her as much as the one she had left on me was a lot to take in.

Now I saw her sitting there looking a little bashful for having said it, her hooves toying with that wavy mane, even if it was all stringy and frayed. She was right and I felt honoured to know this pony. We were close, but right then and there I felt a little spark of remembering why we were.

I got off the chair and began to trot past her to meet up with the others, but as I passed by her side of the table I stopped.

“Thank you.”

With only half a second of worry, I turned and, for just a brief moment, kissed her on the cheek.

Unity blinked, her face still a little red, before smiling softly.

“Anytime.”

She gently patted the side of my neck as I blushed and trotted onwards. She caught up to walk beside me as we headed back out.

He had taught me self-respect, to believe I was the one who could matter to the world or someone else, like Unity.

I’d always remember and thank him for that.

Despite all that had happened to the city, the Ministry of Arcane Science building still stood tall. Gleaming obsidian walls rose above what had once been raised highways and apartment buildings. They now lay in rubble. I could see the Ministry's sheer sides bore scorched marks of energy weapon impacts, but still stood firm. With a ring of devastation surrounding it, Aurora's old headquarters was like a black monolith emerging from a very shallow crater.

"How in all of Equestria is that building still standing?" One of the ponies with us muttered to himself as he clambered up beside us to look at our destination.

"All the Ministry hubs were built to the highest wartime standards." Glimmerlight took my binoculars to look closely at the entrance, speaking from the corner of her mouth as she did so. "In other words, to resist balefire shockwaves and fire. These Enclave weapons? They'll likely just deflect unless they put serious effort in."

"I guess they gave up then." Unity lifted a piece of rubble to peer above the lip of the slope leading down to the building. Up ahead, a flickering set of blue flames on the upper level of the Ministry sparked and scattered strange embers that mixed into the smog of the air before slowly fading on the winds.

We were in the ruins of the high rise building I'd once sat in with Protégé before infiltrating this place for the first time. My talk with Unity had helped a lot to get me focused again, but I couldn't ignore the gutpunch I'd felt once I'd recognised the location, or the similar task ahead.

Glimmer put down the binoculars and rubbed her nose.

"Well here's the curious thing, I don't see anyone. No guards, all the towers at the perimeter are either destroyed or empty. Even the weapons in them are gone. Front doors look locked."

"Just like the metro," I muttered.

"From what you told us, exactly that." Glimmer nodded at me and rolled down out of sight of the Ministry. "But from what you said about Shackles, he knows that we're aware of this place. He knows we're coming, so why no guards?"

"They'd be a target."

Brimstone Blitz snorted as he hunched to keep his massive frame out of sight and settled down near us.

"If the Ministry is as tough as they say, then if they ignore the Enclave, hide inside the station below it and don't cause any trouble, they'll likely get by this safely. Aye, Shackles and Grindstone don't want their little project involved."

"Aurora's project," Unity corrected, a hint of sadness in her tone.

Brimstone raised the eyebrow above his one eye, before shrugging. "Whatever. It's a lift down to it, right? That's what the slaver snitched on? Well there aren't many better things to put a chokepoint on to trap ponies you know are coming down it."

Glimmer sighed and lay back, both her hooves on her face. She looked tired, and rather sick of all these obstacles.

Coral Eve, meanwhile, simply stood and stared at the building like it had personally offended her.

"Then I suppose we had better figure out a way to get out of a lift without being shot down, hadn't we?"

She started to trot down the mountain of rubble, heading directly for the scattered remnants of the walls that had once surrounded the building. After a moment, the others

began to follow her.

I stood and took in a brief glance of the area. Slaver or soldier groups were moving in the streets nearby, but they didn't seem concerned about this place.

Fillydelphia was leaving this place alone. Everything else was distant or quiet. An eerie sense of being in the spotlight began to settle on me, like the world was making way for this to, at last, end.

If we could just get them and get back to the hole in the wall, it'd all be over.

That's all we had to do.

Struggling to make my heart believe it, I cantered after the others.

My hooves landed on shards of bulletproof glass as I pulled myself into one of the upper floor windows. Over an inch thick, they were like big chunks of ice rather than a material anyone would expect a window to be made of. The building might have seemed almost indestructible from the Enclave's bombings, but the windows hadn't been.

Unhooking my grapple from the ledge, I gazed around at Aurora's office. I hadn't really meant to pick it, but it was the only window I knew for certain where I could find my way to the front door quickly to let the others in.

Her desk had been thrown across the room by an impact on the side of the building. Support columns on either side looked cracked up the middle, while the ceiling plaster and marble had been scattered all over the floor. To my left, I could see her prototype memory machine, the one that let non-unicorns use orbs. One I'd used long ago.

My heart skipped a beat as I saw the light green and cream orbs still scattered around the floor near it.

This was where Unity and I had wiped our own memories. I'd stood right over it last time and never even realised. Yet now that I could see them, see our memories right *there* on the ground, the still intact ones twinkling in the flares of distant explosions or flickering sunlight.

The thought of 'Why?' kept crossing my mind. It was so much time, so long to be friends all thrown away. Yet I'd seen two close friends forced to fight in the Pit before. Even now, I felt I could understand what she, and I, had been thinking when that had seemed to be our fate.

A momentary sting of pain went through my body to remember the selfless robot who had made that possible, one who had now given up himself to get us this far.

I trotted quietly across the room, my eyes finding papers of arcane looking symbols and numbers spread on the floor from the toppled desk. The door at the far end was ajar, and I could hear nothing within the building. It was dead silence, an abandoned lair of secrets and ancient projects.

Briefly, I stopped, as my hoof hit one of the orbs. The cream sparkles shifted and flowed like shooting stars in the night within it. Soft and welcoming. To my weary mind, they seemed like her.

I debated it, I really did. Unity had preferred not to delve, but seeing them right there, I simply couldn't resist.

I exited the room with my saddlebag clinking from orbs inside it.

Maybe someday.

Moving downstairs frayed my nerves to the point that my heart thudded faster, despite the relative silence in here. Every corridor had been left on emergency gem-lighting only, shrouding the Ministry in a low hue of dark blues and purples. I passed by engravings embedded into the walls, and around the enormous and theatre like mezzanines of the main hall. Every ornate decoration sent claw like shadows across the walls. Hopping up onto the railings, I leapt into the air and slowly glided down to the ground floor in small circles. Every pass took me by the enormous brass lighting fixtures that hung from a ceiling many floors above me, all of them lifeless, before I skidded and tripped to a halt on the wooden boards of the stage.

Around me, the cells built into the walls were all empty, or occupied only by those who would be moving no more. A faintly sick smell began to waft around as my wings snapped back in. Above, the hanging lights swayed as something thudded into the ground near to the building.

Then I heard a sharp knocking within the building.

I fled off the stage and dove into one of the cells. Hiding behind the curved stone at the side, I poked my head back out, trying to blend into the shadows.

There was nothing.

Then the sound came again. A rapping on metal or wood, from the same floor as me, echoing out into the hall and up through the large space. Suddenly, I felt very aware of every other little sound. The creaks of the lighting above me, the usually unnoticeable hum of the gem-lights keeping the darkness at bay and the rumbles of some boiler or spark-battery system in a room nearby.

The thudding came again, more frantically.

It was coming from the way I had to go.

Trying not to whimper, I got up and silently hastened my way out of the hall, toward the supply entrance I'd once left Mister Peace in before. I knew the way, and cut through the old locker-rooms to reach it.

That thudding only grew louder, more insistent, the closer I got.

It was coming from the supply area itself.

Oh please no, please don't let it be something else they unearthed and let loose in here. What if that's why they abandoned it?

Then I heard voices. Distant, panicked.

Easing forward, I exited the locker-rooms into the back entrance. The large room was empty, the concrete floor down from the delivery stands clear of anything but tipped boxes and abandoned repair bays.

My ears perked as I heard the source of the thudding, as my friends voices became clear. I could see the door I was supposed to open shaking.

Galloping forward, I reached the controls for the heavy shutter and threw my body over the lever to start cranking. At about the same time, the entire door buckled as Coral's magic thudded into it, knocking it back four whole inches, before it slammed back into place.

"I'm getting it! I'm here!"

"Murky! Murky, hurry up!"

That was Unity's voice. I felt a chill and a sudden panic, as I used all my bodyweight to

get the crank moving. The heavy door started to slide upwards as the pulleys finally got some traction.

Brimstone's hooves got below it, and the entire thing lifted up at a much faster pace. I had to leap away before rapid spinning on the crank hurled me off it. Down below, everyone fled inside, crawling beneath the door, before Brimstone himself tossed himself under, looking up at me.

"GET IT SHUT!"

Turning, I bucked the crank as hard as I could, knocking the chain off it entirely. The pulley flew upwards, and the door came slamming down. The rush of air brought momentary whiff of a scent to my nostrils.

Rotten mint.

Everyone scrambled away from it, before collapsing in a panicked heap. Outside, I could hear nothing.

Glimmerlight moaned in pain as she tried to lift herself again, her thickly bandaged back appearing a little more red than before. I hastened over and started trying to tie down her bandages a little more.

"What happened?"

She swore colourfully, invoking an act I was faintly sure wasn't possible, as I tightened the covers on her wound, before panting and answering.

"Just... just caught the smell over the wind. Dunno from where. Could be anywhere in that rubble or... or ruins out there. Damn..."

Brimstone checked the door to ensure it was firmly closed, shaking his head.

"Turning into a right apocalypse out there. City's going to shit. No one's coming out of this war with any good feelings."

"When do they ever?" Coral snapped as she got herself up, before immediately glancing toward the back of the supply bay. "Murky? Come on, get us to her lab. Now."

I gulped at the stern order, as Coral started to grow in impatience. "Y-yes, sure... this way!"

The halls and labs were as silent as ever as I took them through the same route I'd once infiltrated in the past. Coral strode alongside me, as though unwilling to be even one inch behind where she could be. Any time I paused, she would glare at me, unhappy and wanting to get going. I sometimes looked up at her, but that ferocious glare only intimidated me.

Once, I tried to quietly speak to her.

"I'm sure they'll be fine..."

"They *will* be." She snorted, eyes narrowing. "They're not keeping me from him this time. No one will."

Then she grit her teeth and sparked her horn, as though warming up.

That was the last time I tried.

Unity kept glancing around, until I realised she was doing the same thing I had. She recognised this place, even if she didn't remember it directly. Briefly, she paused as we passed by the cells, falling behind.

I slowed, before Coral turned her head sharply. Quickly, I pointed ahead.

"J-just up through that door past the main hall, the main labs are just through the next room! I'll just be a sec."

I turned and cantered back to Unity, finding her staring down a row of cells.

"Murky... look."

Ahead of us, I could see cells. Nothing special. A thin corridor, with what looked like old converted storage cupboards with bars welded across them.

"I don't get it, what's—"

"Murky, *look*."

She pointed, at the two nearest us, the ones that looked out into the main hall. Standing near them, you could just about see up to the enormous atrium on the high ceiling of the building. Just two empty cells, each with a metal skeleton of a cot. They were—

"Oh my..." I gasped, as I did recognise them.

Within one of them, there were two shards of metal, carved and shaped to look like ponies, details impossible to discern in this light, but clearly a unicorn and a pegasus.

Within the other, a few old slips of paper near the cot. Charcoal drawings.

In that moment, I felt very afraid and lost.

I saw Unity crying, before she brought a hoof to her mouth and bit down on it, screwing her eyes shut.

"Murky, I want to get out of here."

"I know."

"I want to go *home*."

"I know."

I gently pulled her away from the past, from the memories that didn't need to be felt.

"Let's go make it happen, okay?"

She sniffed and nodded, moving my hoof away to walk on her own, as we caught up to the others. I only looked back briefly.

The charcoal drawings were faded, but were all too familiar as that same unicorn and pegasus running free.

The others had already managed to find the lift. I'd been in this lab before, the one connected to her office, but I'd never given the lift a second thought. It looked like any other supply lift to any other part of the building to bring equipment up, ringed with brass and decorated steel covers. Now that I knew the truth, I could see the little clues. An advanced-looking lock and access panel were emblazoned over it, and I could see the symbol of Ministry Station embossed on the top, something only those who *knew* would recognise. Glimmerlight was examining the control panel, pulling at the lock on it, until Brimstone casually raised his hoof and knocked it off. The silent 'I had it!' look on her face was a brief lift for my spirits.

Around it, however, lay some of the last remnants of Aurora's work in this entire place. As Unity and I caught up, I could see her glancing at all of them along the way. She stopped to handle a large orb, muttering words under her breath.

"Crystal from the Canterlot mines, it has the right magical resonance. They used Twilight's new spell to purify and make them clear."

She turned and saw me looking, seeming almost shocked that I'd noticed.

"Unity?"

"It's... I, uh..." She scrambled to put it down, rubbing her horn. "I don't know, I just know it. She knew it."

I picked up the orb and felt its astonishingly smooth surface. It reflected my own filthy and bruised face back to me.

"I don't know." She bit her lip and drew over an old tome, and then a clipboard with runes on it. "I know these things, yet I never learned them. It's all related to the spell that Aurora gave me, research to craft it. Oh..."

She staggered back, dizzied.

"I guess Aurora really did give me more than she intended when she gave me some of her memories. This is weird, it's like I recognise things I know I shouldn't."

Unity continued to walk toward the others, her hooves aimlessly touching and handling so many parts of Aurora's works.

"These were all pieces in her plan. No, not her plan... her dream. All her hopes that this could be beautiful, that it could help so many ponies."

I could see the wallboards filled with notes she went by. Unity read them aloud, but the words honestly sounded like another language to me. I watched her stroke the cases of orbs ready for testing, and saw her use a small spell to light a bulky machine that projected a broken pony image into the air. It didn't speak, but just stood still like a picture.

"She became trapped like the rest of us, and all her dreams never worked out the way she wanted." She trotted around the flickering image. "We have to stop him using her life's work for the very opposite of what she wanted. My talent is memory too, just in a different way, I need to do this for her, Murky."

"You and me both, sister." Glimmerlight clapped Unity on the back as she moved over to join us, before patting her own cutie mark, three memory orbs. "You got the subtle feeling that I can't replicate, I got the method to show directly the things you can't. Trust me, this means as much to me as anything. I'm not as aware of the crazy heights of memory magic as you are, but I know the effects it can have."

Glimmer's face stiffened a little. "For good and bad."

My big sister let go of Unity and wandered the desks, before picking out a few choice orbs.

"Now see, back in the Stable, they had these things called spell orbs. You remember them, Murky? Damn handy. Single use spells in an orb for the unicorns who don't kill their social lives to study. Now I'm thinking, this is her personal lab in her own Ministry that the staff in the Stable came from, right? They got them on their own, but this is Aurora Star! Stands to reason she might have some... aha!"

Digging through what was there, she grabbed a few containers, reading their titles.

"Create door... clean clothes... grow moustache... hey, Murky, what do you think of that for ya, huh?"

She glanced back at me, the joke catching me off guard. Her face wasn't grinning fully. She was trying to make *me* smile and relax a bit.

"I... I don't think so, sis."

"Hm, pity. Now this is what I'm looking for!"

In her magic, she yanked across a container of multicoloured orbs.

"Firework spell! Just what we're gonna need for a distraction. Now, I better get that lift working..."

She and Unity moved to the lift. My sister worked on the panel's arcane technology, explaining to the curious unicorn with her what she was doing. Coral watched impatiently as other ponies loitered around and curiously examined all the empty orbs, magical equipment and discarded arcane technology across the benches and desks.

Brim, however, was up to something.

With a crash, one of the thick ceramic desks was overturned. Orbs scattered to the floor, and crown-like helmets shattered as he stomped around and ripped metal fixtures out of the walls or punched the bottoms of drawers out with little care.

"Hey, Murk." He nodded me over. "Get tying these onto the desk, aye?"

I picked up the wires he'd torn out and started on the task with my more dextrous little hooves. He was building a thick shield to lay in the door to let us even get out the lift.

Faintly, I could hear a rumbling. I kept working; it was hardly unusual. Skyships passed over from time to time.

Then I noticed that the rumbling was getting closer from the direction of the lift.

I leapt up.

"Everyone! Hide!"

There was a hurried rush. Brimstone, with his great bulk, ran into Aurora's office to entirely get out of the way. I dropped down behind the table shield. Unity and Glimmer ran with Coral and the others to get behind the far desks and worktables of the lab.

The lift was coming up.

As it neared, the cables started to squeak and strain. Scraping metal signalled a possibly warped shaft as it skidded and pushed its way into the level we were at.

The door opened, and panic came piling out.

I pulled myself into a little ball as over a dozen slavers fled from the lift. Throwing the brass doors ajar, they were shedding equipment, tossing it away in an effort to run faster. Some held their heads and staggered, screaming.

"Where are you!?" One hollered, swinging at empty space, before his friend grabbed and pulled him away. "What am I seeing!?"

"Screw that place! C'mon, exit's this way! This way! Let's get outta here before it happens again! RUN!"

They headed right past our hiding spots and out into the main hall. Their panicked voices echoed as they ran for the way out.

Slowly, we rose up again.

"What was that about?" I didn't really ask anyone in particular.

Coral Eve trotted up beside me and angled her head sharply.

"Doesn't matter. There's our ride."

She dragged the table to shield us into the large cargo lift, even before Brim got back.

"Come *on* all of you, or I'll hit this damn button myself now!"

Ponies hurried at her command, and we began to filter into it.

Unity and I shared a look. We'd both been down here before. Ministry Station did strange things to ponies, but I'd never seen slavers react that way before. Ever.

Coral slammed the doors shut, before hitting the crank to send us down.

"Hold on, my dears." She snarled to herself, low enough that only I could hear. "Mother's coming."

And if I knew Coral, then a storm was coming for anyone who would dare stand in her way.

The lift was not fast. To be more specific, it was particularly slow; creaking and juddering, probably running on rusted gears and stiff wires. It was all I could do to not habitually latch onto someone else's leg out of nerves of it simply dropping to plunge us all into the darkness. After everything we'd been through the idea of such a simple and pointless end felt strangely terrifying.

There were occasional flickers of red light as Unity practised the opening stages of Aurora's spell. While we intended to simply get the foals and get back topside, it had become an unspoken decision that if we got the opportunity, we had to shut down the Nexus itself to prevent it ever being used in future. Unity's face strained and sweated as the powerful spell hounded her mind and even seemed to sting her horn from the enormity of the arcane complexities. After a while, Glimmer laid a hoof on Unity's back.

"Admirable, hun. But save your strength."

Unity cancelled the spell, and hung her head, biting her lip. "I'm just a little unsure if I can do it."

"You'll do fine." Glimmer stroked Unity's wavy mane. "I know you can do it."

I curled my lips to smile, anticipating she might look this way.

And then I wasn't beside her any more.

My fluffy mane bobbed over my face, rubbing almost annoyingly at my nose as the lift thudded to a halt, before starting again. My knees were shaking, their bright coat dulled by dirt and gravel dust. I tried to stop myself from trembling like a foal before a doctor's appointment, but it was becoming harder as my mental stamina wore down and everything became a blur.

Beside me in the lift, Aurora Star was focused and still, practising her spell over and over, casting the small space alight with colour. Yet even so, I could see her grit jawline, her eyes too still and small. She was as terrified as I.

The only difference was that Aurora was controlling it, forcing her fears back to concentrate on the task at hand.

"This is all we've got left to do, Sundial," she uttered, her nasal voice mismatching the heroic duty she now faced on her path for redemption.

"I... I know..." I muttered.

"Then we can both go home."

I yelped, staggering back until I felt Brimstone catch me from behind, one giant hoof stopping my path. I heard Unity gasp as she fell into Glimmerlight. Around me, everypony recoiled, asking questions and patting their faces to remind themselves of who they were.

"What... what was that?" I spoke with a more familiar mouth.

Glimmer held her head. "Memory magic. I felt like... like I was being reminded of something distant. Being where I shouldn't be, like now but not as me. It was like when I let others see memories."

Gulping, I stood back up. "I saw it, like an orb."

Unity was shaken, but nodded. She stepped forward and rested a hoof and her forehead near the lift's control panel as it shuddered and dragged itself down the shaft.

"Me too, I was—"

"Sundial?"

"Aurora."

We spoke almost simultaneously, and then stared at one another with wide eyes. Very quickly my heart began to feel tight and my skin crawled.

"Felt like damn nostalgia," Brimstone muttered. "Didn't see anything, just felt like an old warrior sometimes feels, missing old stresses and adventures of youth."

Unity tapped her head again and again, pacing in the short space. The other slaves around us groaned and held their heads. Everyone had felt *something*, it seemed.

"If it's memory magic..." Glimmer clipped the ground with a hoof. "Then it has to be the Nexus, like before."

"It's my magic."

Everyone turned to Unity, as she stood up straighter.

"I don't, uh... I don't mean me, specifically. But it's... it's my magic, the kind I use. You know how I make objects feel like they remind you of something? A loved one? A friend? It's like that magic, only a thousand times stronger. I think that's why Aurora picked me instead of Glimmer. I did something similar to her."

No one really said anything. Coral was steely and quiet. Brimstone pensive. Glimmer just looked a bit spooked.

I couldn't blame her. I'd been Sundial. I'd seen through his eyes, like a memory orb but just from nothing. Yet it had been more than that, memory orbs still let me remember that I was me. With this one I'd actually felt what he'd felt.

This memory machine, the magic it was set to use, or the 'Nexus' if they really wanted to use that name, it was incredible. Incredible, and terrifying.

Unity sighed, trying to make sense of this. "It's reminding us of things from before, only the magic's strong enough that we might feel like it's an orb. Wow, Aurora must have been —."

"Wow or not, we're going to destroy it if we can, before that sort of thing gets us killed down there." Coral Eve shook her head to clear those thoughts. "Murky? Time for your E.F.S, we must be near the bottom."

My heart dropped a little as I remembered the system, bringing up more recent and hurtful memories than those I'd just seen. I swallowed the heartache, before tapping the button.

"See anything?"

As the red interface clicked onto my vision, I took a quick glance in front of us.

Then I squeaked.

"They're..."

Before my eyes, I saw the red marks. Lots of them.

"They're waiting for us."

The slavers were arranged in a half-circle. I could track them as we came down. About ten or

twelve of them in total, but the little marks kept sliding backwards and forwards every time I tried to count them.

Twelve slavers. We had more, but not everyone was armed, and most of us were walking wounded.

Glimmerlight crouched by the door, holding spell orbs in her magic. Brimstone was behind the massive desk we'd pulled in, his muscled legs taut and ready.

The lift dinged.

"Now!"

"Now!"

Both slavers and slaves put their last-ditch plans into action. The final ring of defence down here, against the last-ditch effort to get through.

The snap and rattle of long rifles and automatic weapons was met with the ear-splitting cracks of bullets on metal. I hunched onto the floor at the very edge of the lift, Unity and I clutching each other to fit into the small space away from the door, almost below a tan-coloured mare clutching a medical bag trying to get out the way.

Brimstone stood like a rock, wincing and grunting as his battered body absorbed the shockwaves of the desk being struck again and again. My eyes throbbed as flares of sparks lit and darkened the lift again and again like a strobe light, with the noise like a demented ironmonger wailing on an anvil.

Then Brimstone hurled it through the door. He ran with it, roaring with adrenaline and his final musters of strength.

Glimmerlight was ready. Behind him, her orbs erupted into sparkles that flowed around her horn.

"Happy Freedom Day, you sick bastards!" She yelled, as her horn suddenly projected streams of multicoloured flares that streaked out into the Ministry Station. I heard the crackling detonations as all sorts of coloured explosions lit up the lift, meshing with popping gunshots and reverberating echoes.

"Go!" She hit my hoof with hers, and we ran.

Rushing through the door, following Brimstone, I dove into the nearest cover behind the lip of a staircase leading up toward the top of the sloped room. We'd emerged into one of Ministry Station's enormous ticket office halls. I could see balconies above around the edges of the tall, two-levelled structure, beneath extravagant curves and white marble pillars. Each of them was lit by the flares of gunfire and the chaos of colour and explosions that was Glimmer's orb-cast fireworks spell. The flares blew up into glittering clouds of smaller lights that then themselves erupted like firecrackers or stun grenades. I could hear the slavers screaming about not being able to see. Any incoming fire lessened until the fireworks finally faded away. It was just enough time for us to get past the chokepoint of the lift entrance.

We were at one end of the corridor, the slavers at the other. On a raised dais, where the ticket desk stood, they had some sort of heavy weapon. Before that, amongst the chaos as a firefight began to break out, I could see frantic movements of red marks, confusing me and throwing information overload into my brain so much that I had to turn it off. I didn't know how Protégé coped with it all.

"Don't keep your head out too long!" Glimmer shouted to the others, falling to her side behind a pillar with a grimace, before snapping off a shot from Diamond's Rifle. "That heavy gun'll—"

That heavy gun was going to do what it wanted anyway. Finally it opened up, the exact

same model as the one that had shattered the front of the Mall.

The noise drowned out everything else. It didn't go bang, it made a bass-like *thump* on every round that cycled through. One of Red Eye's newly-built heavy machine guns, firing the same rounds as anti-machine rifles. Across the pillared hall, a column shattered atop a slave, making her cover her head with her own rifle from the chunks of marble raining down. The wall behind us was battered, six inch plates of ceramic and mural being sheared off the elaborate surface on every strike, the *thump-spacc* sound of the shot and impact overlapping again and again.

"The *hell* do we do now!?" An old stallion, dull green and holding a revolver shouted.

"Keep firing!" Glimmer screamed, trying to fire again, but just ducking back in as the floor was raked and torn up near her.

"It's gonna kill us!" A young mare half-buried in marble wailed.

"What do we do?"

"*What do we do!?*"

"I... uh... I..." Glimmer rubbed her forehead with her spare hoof. "I..."

"Unity, get back!" Coral yelled.

I heard Unity shriek so loudly that my heart stopped for a second, until I saw she had been thrown backwards by Coral's magic as her own pillar was torn to pieces behind her. The cream unicorn skidded over the floor, until Coral reached out to drag her back in, evading the line of gunshots that ripped up the floor after her. A cold sweat began to trickle down my back. We were losing cover.

"What's next? What's next!?" The slaves were trying to shoot, to aim, but there was too few of them, that cannon was chewing through the cover and forcing them to move. We didn't have anything like the numbers to take on a prepared position.

"Uh... try to move up one side, I've got an idea!" Glimmerlight stood up, put a hoof on the column, and rushed forward to the right, away from me, gasping in pain at her back wound. She was pulling with her magic at her saddlebag, trying to get an energy bomb she'd made out. "If we can just get up another line of pillars, I can—"

Then I simply heard her shriek.

Incoming fire tore up the ground around her, and she fell away, toppling over a step and out of sight in the lower fringes of the hallway sides. A trail of blood began to seep from behind the corner of the stairway.

No.

No!

My world simply collapsed around me as I saw what I just saw.

"GLIM!" Brimstone roared, but even he couldn't move. The cannon seemed to sense his will to charge in to help her and stitched the wall he hid behind relentlessly.

"What happened?" Coral tried to see from where she was, only hearing Brimstone's cry.

"We're going to die!" A young mare cried out.

I simply stared at where Glimmer had gone, and felt empty.

I'd only just—

I was still trying to come to terms with—

He'd only just died. I already felt like I was made of glass. I couldn't take this. I couldn't do it again, we were so close. A well of emotion grew inside me, and I felt my eyes water. My stomach tightened so hard that I gagged on the smell of gunpowder and marble dust. I wanted to scream and beg for them to stop killing my *friends*.

My *family*.

No, I *wouldn't* let them. Not again. I wasn't going to lose another one.

I spun around the pillar and shot my grapple hook toward the upper floor. Heedless of the rounds flying past me, I bit the trigger and sent myself surging upwards. Someone shouted and I heard Coral cry out, but I didn't care. Hitting the balcony's rounded wall, I grabbed it with my front hooves and rolled over it before immediately sprinting off down the top floor of the raised hallway. Slavers on the opposite side shouted, but I ducked below the level of the balcony barriers and stayed hidden as I dashed and weaved my way up the hall, unmolested by the pinning fire below.

Suddenly, I was behind the weapon itself. The one that had—

No, I wouldn't dare think that. I wasn't going to let *anyone* die.

There was a single slaver firing from the very top of the hall ahead of me, armed with a long rifle and several grenades.

Running as silently as I could, I threw my entire bodyweight into his outstretched hind knee. I heard a sickening pop. He fell, squealing like a foal. Crying in fear and trembling at a horrid new emotion I recognised as fury, I struck him across the face with my hind hoof. Tugging at his bandoleers, I yanked off the grenades, before pulling the pins and tossing all three over the balcony onto the slavers' position below.

I never knew if I killed anyone, but I heard the panicked screams before a trio of explosions ripped through the hallway. The heavy gun went silent.

"There he is!"

Two slavers from the opposite side of the upper floor skidded around on the smooth mosaic flooring and saw me standing over the unconscious body of their ally. Fluid, as agile as any pegasus should be, I threw myself off the balcony and opened my wings, gliding down over the devastation the grenades had wrought, before using the grapple hook again to drag myself into cover at the opposite side from Glimmer, my hooves sliding and drifting me sideways on the flooring. Behind me, I could hear the slaves moving up, and the devastating boom of Coral's magic. Mothers and fathers among the group cried out, I heard shouts of 'Save the foals!' and 'Give me my child!' Any of them would take insane risks, to have come this far, any would give their life for their foals.

I wasn't done, my friends could be hurt. I had to stop relying on them, they'd suffered too many times protecting me.

I couldn't listen to them scream. I couldn't watch any one of them die again.

Keeping low, I snuck around the side of the remaining slavers. They were panicking, firing at the advancing slaves. One of them spun his gun my way just as I slid smoothly into the shadows of the pillars on their side, before scooting my way up the rear stairwell toward where the heavy gun had been, mere feet from them. Peering up, I saw one had a battle saddle.

He was aiming at Coral.

No.

I dove up from behind him, making him yell at the surprise weight on his back. I gnawed at his saddle's release catch, before hearing the guns collapse either side.

"Get the hell off me, you stupid runt!" He swung me into a pillar, and the jarring pain dropped me to the floor. He stepped back, aimed at me and pulled the trigger, only to realise what I'd done to his weapons. Snarling, he instead drew a knife and advanced on me, murder in his eyes. His friend joined him.

There was a thudding *boom* of pressure, and a horizontal pillar shard crushed both of them.

From within the smoke of the grenades, Coral Eve strode forward, a heavily wounded Glimmerlight slung over her shoulders. Behind her, one of the slavers tried to run back to the heavy gun, swinging it around toward a couple I knew as husband and wife. Brimstone dove over the wall and bodily tackled him. The warlord tore the gun from its mounting and brought it down hard with a dull crack on the slaver. The other two slavers were quickly cut down as they fled. Perhaps not courageous, but the parents with us, especially that old stallion, had little give for mercy. Their children were within reach.

As quickly as it had begun, the firefight was over. Unity rushed past the others who were warily regarding the unsettling atmosphere down here, carrying the medical bag toward Glimmerlight.

My sister opened her eyes, her left side streaked with blood from numerous cuts. The shattered marble floor had sliced her bandages. She looked pale.

She also looked shocked.

"Murky... wow."

"Sis!"

She stumbled as Coral let her down and numerous potions were poured over her or down her throat to finally stop the bleeding and stabilise her. I was shaking so hard with adrenaline that I kept twitching even as I watched her.

Then, mercifully, I saw her smirk briefly.

"Quite the... the tide-turning moves from you there."

I felt a little bashful, so instead I simply knelt down and held onto her hoof. She pulled me in with her one good front hoof.

"You've turned into one little dynamo of a brave stallion, lil'bro."

My heart sunk.

I knew it wasn't bravery.

It was fear.

I clutched my sister as tightly as I dared while she hissed at others treating her wounds.

Please, Goddesses, I'm sorry if I've not spoken to you lately.

Please don't take any more of my friends at *this* point.

Please.

Very quickly, it became apparent that Ministry Station was not as secure and perfectly hidden from the war as we had all suspected.

The moment we had gotten everyone together again, I finally took some time to see where we were within the station now that the ambush was over. I remembered an ornate metro station, crudely converted for the designs of the zebras and then once again modified by present day slavers with scrap materials taken from the darker city above. I remembered the malign ambience that seeped into your mind, those whispers and eerie feelings that wore you down and brought bad memories to the surface. The one that preyed on those with inner worries and repressed experiences.

I remembered the place where memory magic had become the focus of a corrupted vision, one that Chainlink Shackles wanted to bring into the new age.

Yet while the shape was the same, the ambience had changed and the station itself was coming apart at the seams.

The ceilings bore enormous cracks that stretched end to end. I saw the bodies of slavers and slaves crushed beneath fresh rubble that blocked adjoining tunnels to the old platforms. The Enclave's bombardment had concussed Ministry Station from above and left it shattered. In the distance, I could hear muffled crashes as the station fell apart or crumbled as its weakened structure came apart. The voices of ponies rang through the halls like ghosts, incomprehensibly echoing further than their words would normally carry. Occasionally, there were howls and scratching behind the walls. I swore I heard something surge past in an adjoining tunnel somewhere. Those terrifying beings still wanted in. They might just have a way now. I wondered if they already were.

Briefly, I felt my heart clench as I saw the corpse of a withered slave, the chain on her collar feeding under a dozen tons of concrete, steel, and marble. The entire line of slaves had been buried in this passageway. I couldn't be sure, but I thought it led to the old platforms that Protégé and I had once entered through. As I stared, I heard a distant sound from down the tunnel it blocked, a horrified scream after a shriek that sounded ethereal and unnatural at this distance.

Suddenly, cold as it felt, I was quite glad this tunnel was blocked.

Glimmer clapped me on the shoulder, angling her head silently to encourage me to keep moving.

"Okay..." I muttered, trotting away from the grisly sight.

"Eyes forward, lil'bro... just... just so close... keep trotting."

My sister looked weak. The potions had managed to get her stable, but she needed time and rest to properly recover. However it wasn't just her body, but on her face. She was grimacing and lowly moaning every so often. We could all feel it, that distant and niggling toying at the edges of our minds. The Nexus was still here. It was still active. Glimmer no doubt had rather horrific memories of what it had once done to her in a moment of weakness. All around us, ponies who'd never been here before were knocking their heads, shaking them or clenching their teeth every so often.

For me, I felt it dredging up a horrid thought.

What if we failed?

It had happened so often before. Like an unending cycle, every time we began feeling like this would be the moment we finally got out, something would shut us down at the last second. What if this was just another one like that? I'd been teased with being outside the walls on more than one occasion, before being drawn back in for both good and bad reasons.

What if that's what it was this time?

What if I'd already failed and didn't know it yet?

What if I'd never get out of this city?

My hooves started to trot closer together, and I closed my eyes. What if—

—I never got to see her again? What if I never got out of this, despite only ending up a part of it while trying to help protect her?

Aurora was galloping hard ahead of me. My legs felt floppy and uncoordinated.

"Wait... wait! I can't keep this up!"

"You have to!" She shouted and turned her head. "They'll know we're here by now!"

Pushing my worries to the back of my mind, I put my head down and strove to catch up. Behind us, we could hear barks in an unidentifiable language. Tall and lithe shapes bounded around the corner, shadowed in their long cloaks.

"Aurora! They're behind us!"

"I know, run!"

"They're going to—"

"RUN!"

"Murky! Murky, run!"

I was running! I could see Aurora ahead of me and—

And—

Brimstone Blitz pulled me up off the floor. My mind spun harshly. I was dizzy. There was an enormous crashing sound all around us. I heard ponies screaming and hooves clattering on hard flooring. A huge chunk of the roof fell and shattered beside me as a shockwave tore through the entire tunnel and took all of us off our hooves.

"What is that?" Unity screamed, sheltering under an archway, before being pulled by Coral to keep moving.

"It's the Enclave again!" The stallion with the revolver shouted.

With Brimstone, I hurried after them, trying to dodge the falling debris. I could see the walls themselves buckle as another supernaturally powerful impact tore down through the earth. A pillar fell clean over between all of us. I leapt onto it and kicked my hind legs furiously to push myself over it, landing on my back and scrambling to my feet again. We galloped madly as a third strike lifted me a clean foot off the floor. Kicking at thin air, I stumbled as I came down again and collided with Coral's side.

"That's no Enclave weapon," Brimstone snarled.

"Wh-what do you mean?" I waited as others tried to crowd through a door only a couple of ponies wide, hiding at the side of the corridor to avoid the lighting units crashing down and sparking on the ground.

"Unless they hid something much more powerful from that war upstairs, which I doubt, nothing we saw would do this. This is something much more powerful hitting the city."

"Much... more..." I trailed off as I fell into his chest. Another wave of force surged down past us. It was like a giant's footsteps. Like one of the Goddesses had struck her hoof upon the surface of Equestria. Above me, I saw a trickling of rock dust falling through a series of growing cracks. Like slow lightning, they spread and twisted.

Even I knew that roof wasn't going to hold.

"Get out of there! Through the door!" Coral waved her hoof. Before I could do it on my own, I yelped as Brimstone picked me up and tossed me through to get me moving. He dove through after me, snorting in pain as he landed on his side.

Behind us, with a rush and a sudden hissing of broken pipes in the ceiling, the entire tunnel collapsed. Ahead of us lay an old security door, all sealed up. Glimmerlight was already pawing weakly at its controls panel, trying to get through to the wires. Behind me, Brimstone shook and clutched his battered chest as he slowly got back to his hooves.

On my back, feeling the repeated thuds of whatever this weapon was only continuing, one every thirty seconds or so, I heard the shattering of fixtures and hanging lights dropping as the impacts shook them loose. The whole metro felt like it was going to come down! I saw Unity waving to me, hiding within what looked like an engineer's station to the side of this tunnel. I clambered inside, along with a dozen other ponies. Briefly safer, we watched as the roof continued to fall outside in the much less stable tunnel. Brimstone sheltered Glimmer with his body itself, grunting in pain from the chunks rocking off him as she worked. One pony was hit in the face by a vent cover exploding off the wall. Coral dragged the pony in, their muzzle covered in blood.

Slowly, the impacts began moving further away from us. The tremors eased off. Aftershocks fed through the flooring and walls.

"What... what even was that?" Unity was shivering badly.

"Was that the Nexus!?" A mare, an aunt trying to find her nephew, was looking around frantically. I'd seen her jumping at shadows earlier.

Unity shook her head slowly, "No, no it wasn't. It came from above. Aurora's spells can't do that. But I can feel the memory magic deeper inside. It's like every so often I see it through her eyes, to remind me."

"Me too." I bit my lip. "I was Sun—"

I stopped and went quiet, staring directly ahead. The thought of Sundial passed away. There was a new threat.

"Sundial? What did you—what?" Unity looked confused by my staring and tapping at her shoulder, until she saw what I had stopped to stare at.

We were trapped until Glimmer could open that door, and I was looking at three vent covers on the walls that had been sealed off. Only now, they had been blasted open and hung loose. Behind them, the grey darkness of the ventilation system was now open.

I knew *why* those vents had been sealed.

"Seal them up!" I screamed, pointing at the covers. "Seal the vents!"

A wave of fear passed through everyone present. They'd been in Shackles' prison when we'd been chased before. They knew what lurked down here. Glimmerlight looked back briefly and then went to work with renewed vigour.

"I still need a few minutes!"

I was too short to reach them. Frustration mounted as I saw others grabbing the thick steel slabs the slavers had used to block off the vents and clamber up to try and replace them. Instead, I raced into that engineering room and started looking around frantically. Boxes of tools offered nothing as I yanked them off tables and spilled them on the floor to look for usable items. Hammers wouldn't be strong enough. Shoving the wheeled table to the side, I opened the cage for heavier track repair equipment and found what I was looking for. A nailgun.

"Brim!" I shoved the nailgun across the floor to him, allowing the huge pony to grab it in his muzzle. He used his height to start pounding eight inch nails in around the covers again. Every time he managed it, they'd have to hold the plate down again from the big jolt it gave. It was achingly slow.

A wash of unsettling feelings flowed over me. Was that fear, or Ministry Station's subtle ambience? My stomach twisted and I felt my balance suffer as I watched them work. Three unicorns, including Unity, worked together to shove piece after piece of marble into one of the vents to try and block it instead. The feeling only grew. This was a small space, with

nowhere to run. If one of them came in they would—

“What have they done to him? Sweet Equestria itself...”

I almost threw up as I saw the aftermath of zebra shamanistic magic. Within a brickwork back chamber of the station, we had finally lost our pursuers in the darkness and with a little spell by Aurora. Memory magic was powerful enough to make those chasing you forget where you were, it seemed.

Yet now I looked upon utter horror. What lay before me was no longer a pony. I'd seen zebras grow wings in the videos meant to demonise them, but this was far far beyond that.

The fact that it was still moving and aimlessly gurgling or exuding fluids only turned all the horror into a tragic feeling that made me just feel hollow.

“What have they done...”

I had to turn away as Aurora, tears in her eyes, ended its misery.

“You might not believe it from the propaganda, Sundial, but Twilight assured me that not all zebras are like this. This group, they're like some fanatical tribe. I get the feeling even those commanding the zebra lands would be horrified at what this group did down here.”

I covered the body, if it could even be called that, with a tarp and hung my head.

“I don't care, Aurora...”

“They wanted to create far worse. They may even still manage it. That's why we're here, Sundial. Twilight didn't ask to be the one who had to stop the eternal night or the lord of cha—”

“I don't CARE about Twilight, Aurora! I don't CARE about the zebras and what they do back home!” I rounded sharply on her, the smaller scientist recoiling from me. “I just want to stop this and... and then go home to Skydancer and just live my life and forget about everything. Come on, we have to help the others down here...”

My vision blurred and flickered; everyone around me was groaning. Blinking rapidly, I staggered around as the others seethed and held their heads. A number of them were crying quietly, seeming to be unsure why.

Had they seen what I had seen? Or had they just felt it? I wanted to stop and think, why was the memory of Sundial the one that came to me? Why Aurora for Unity?

Yet there was no time to think.

As we had woken up from dizziness and memory of whatever the Nexus was doing, the realisation that the corridor now *stank* of rotten mint landed like a dash of cold water upon us.

“Glimmer... Glimmer!” I slurred, finding my sister trying to pull out wires and twist small crystals in the control panel with weak hooves and faint magic. She was fighting to keep her eyes open, but she was the only one who knew how to do this.

“I'm trying! This stuff is ancient!”

Brimstone shook his head and launched back to the vent, hammering nails with the gun again and again around it. Someone in the engineering room found a spot-welder and sparked it up. We were slaves, many of us knew how to use these tools, and now we put our brutally earned skills to use. Carrying one another on their backs to reach, floating

equipment up in magic, they tried their utmost to block the path off again.

Echoing through each of the three vents, I heard a rattling. The metal within them began to shake.

Then the howl broke through from every side.

Ponies screamed. Some covered their ears. The one with the spot welder fell over, holding his head in mad fear. Some ran into the engineering room to hide. They all hounded Glimmer, and I had to push into one's chest to stop them from trying to interfere with her work. My heart thudded so hard I worried it might bruise my ribs.

Unity shrieked and fell back from the vent she was trying to block by floating marble chunks into it. The supernatural noise roared from it louder than all the others, and I saw chunks rattling and being thrown out. The cover Brimstone was nailing down thudded and bent inwards.

"GLIM! GET THAT DOOR!" he bellowed, turning to try and nail the other side of the one being welded.

Five seconds later, it almost broke off. The old warlord rammed his shoulder against it, until the next impact rattled him clean off it again.

The strength that would take left me in horrified awe.

"Get us out of here!" A mare screamed as she piled more and more rubble inside to try and block the one digging through it all. Nails pinged off like shrapnel and stung her in the side like a small bullet as the second vent ruptured. A gurgling, bubbling sound tinged with ferocious *need* emerged from it under all the banging.

The security door finally slid upwards.

"Go! Go!" Glimmerlight jumped through and grabbed the controls on the other side. Everyone followed. I almost got run over by the larger ponies, having to squeal and dodge like in any large crowd as a slave to pull myself with them and scamper through.

Briefly, I saw Glimmerlight delay on the handle until she spotted me for certain. Then she yanked it. Behind us, the vents pinged off. I saw them both falling to the floor again as the door slammed down hard. Moments later, I heard three sounds of things landing on the floor. Several bassy, gurgling, and animalistic growls emanated from the room. Protégé's E.F.S. was misreading it, showing only one of them for a few seconds, before it disappeared.

With a horrid rasp of fury, one of them collided with the security door. It held strong, but I saw the hinges rattle.

The outer metro's monsters were now in the Ministry Station. We couldn't wait around here too long, but it occurred to me that our way out was now shut off entirely.

We were trapped.

Panting, holding my face, I felt the station's aura of malcontent and sickening feelings as it washed into me. I felt it seep into my mind, reminding me of all the nights alone in chains. Reminding me how easily they could become a reality once again, and how little time had passed since it had been.

Unity dropped beside me, pale and ashen. On the other side, Glimmerlight held her forehead and lay against a terminal, her stamina drawing down.

Then behind us, I heard a voice not from our group.

"Hey, what the hell are you all... oh crap!"

Turning, we saw a group of slavers had entered through one of the side tunnels, looking as beaten up and terrified as us, carrying tools.

"What? Oh, crap! Hardy's ambush failed! Get 'em! Get 'em! He'll have us if we don't!"

They panicked, reaching for their guns, but they'd already said the unfortunate keyword.

Beside me, I more *felt* the magical flare rather than saw it. Coral Eve exploded out of our pack of slaves, galloping across the flooring and wrenching her head through the air like a rhino skewering its foe. The resulting *boom* of telekinetic force blew me head over hooves. Terminals tore out of their fixtures and desks hurtled across the room like enormous shrapnel. The slaver group were catapulted from their hooves, hurled against the far wall.

From the same route they'd entered from, more slavers emerged at the commotion. Up ahead, from the way to the slave pens I'd once found my friends in, the place the foals allegedly *were*, a second group ran out to check on all the noise.

The large and circular room was mostly intact. Terminals had been crushed by sheets of metal fallen from the roof, and the tunnel that led to the platforms was blocked by a pile of desks and furniture. A raised walkway crossed over the middle in two directions, while the old resting area below was occupied by banks of terminals and desks.

In the distance, I heard a sound. I was certain Coral heard it too.

A foal screaming in terror.

Now we all dropped into those lowered sections to take cover. Everyone pulled their weapons free for one last firefight, hoping to have it done with before the beasts broke down the door behind us.

We need not have bothered.

Coral Eve drove into them as an unstoppable well of power and wrath. Her eyes burned with hatred for these slavers. At what they'd tried to do to her son. She knew they were nearby. She had endured pain, sacrifice, time, heartbreak, loss, and taunting for this whole journey. She had fought in war and slaved for months.

Now that all anger and bile came out as she saw the final stretch ahead of her and heard that one telling sound. The change in air pressure set my ears ringing. The entire ornate lighting fixture in the ceiling was torn free and threw itself amongst the slavers like a skeletal wrecking ball. Glaring at those in her way, she sent not only terminals and desks hurtling through the air, no, that wasn't all! Panels from the walls and ceiling flew off and tore into the slavers like blades. Nothing was coordinated, nothing precise, just raw tidal waves of telekinetic power surging back and forth across the room. Hurtling, tearing, launching, and smashing. Slavers were thrown from their hooves and launched screaming across the room. Pillars shattered, upturned, and were fired like battering rams.

She trotted meaningfully forward toward that last doorway. Behind it, a terrified slaver hammered a similar panel to the one Glimmer had used moments before. The shutter began to slide down.

With a growl, Coral tore the entire door *off* before it could close and anchor itself against her magic. Twisting metal bent out of the walls as she hurled it into two of the memory machines resting against the far wall, the legacy of what these slavers wanted to do to her child.

Within twenty seconds of utter carnage, Coral had demolished the entire central hub of Ministry Station. Smoke rose from the exploded terminals, half-obscuring her as the furious mares now marched toward that doorway.

Those with us who had never witnessed her at her full potential gaped in awe, before fearfully following her. Everyone stayed at a safe distance as we did so.

Coral Eve was unleashed, and Goddesses help anyone who would stand in her way now.

Hurrying over the loose sheet metal of the raised walkways across the hub, I saw Coral sprint into the tunnel and veer into the next room. Flashes of light, gunshots, and eruptions of rubble and dust came hurling out ahead of us. The slaver we'd seen run departed the room sideways, slamming into the far wall. Above the noise, I heard her cry out.

"Grindstone!"

She held the 'o' in the word, seething. At the end of the low tunnel lay the thick door of the portal chamber the zebras had used to enter and leave the city without being seen. She had instead gone to the left. Sucking in air, I skidded around the corner and cautiously glanced in.

My friends had once been trapped here. It looked much the same, using cage doors I now recognised as having been taken from the prison to fit into the similar archway design of Ministry Station. The marble ceased here, giving way to damp stone and brickwork covered in mildew. Squat pillars punctuated the flooring, but I saw that it was different. They'd demolished the back half of the room, scattering a paltry amount of child's toys and dirty mattresses around in some hopeless attempt to distract the foals.

And in the cells to either side of me, I saw the foals themselves. Terrified, hunching together, they clustered at the back of the cells and cried aloud. The wails stung at me. Above the fighting, the roars of hatred, the shrieks of terror and shattering of stone, as though the whole tragedy of the foals in Fillydelphia had collated in this one place. To only scant relief for the moment, I saw they were uninjured, but they'd been stripped of all their belongings.

Slavers were picking themselves up from the far right of the prison. One raised his shotgun, before a telekinetically hurled swarm of bricks tore into the group. The bricks shattered in the air under the tremendous forces, turning them into lethal shrapnel. The slavers were flattened against the wall and ripped apart.

Before them, surrounded by a swirling aura of rock fragments and dust, Coral Eve was throwing everything she could see at anything that vaguely looked adult. Every time, she would scream as her horn seared and burned atop her head. I dreaded she might suddenly burn out.

"Coral! We're coming! Hey!"

Glimmer's limping body was cut off from going in by Brimstone as he held her back. Seconds later, a base of a pillar rattled above our heads against the frame of the curved door. Everyone fell back into the portal corridor, pointing weapons around corners.

There was no approaching Coral right now.

Inside, I could see her head swivelling left and right. She spotted every group of foals, hunting relentlessly. From behind her, two slavers suddenly ran from the shadows, metal pipes descending. Glimmer yelled in pain as she dropped beside me, but lifted her rifle in her magic and shot one of them down. The second of the two tripped over his falling comrade. It gave time for Coral to notice him.

He didn't even have a chance to beg before her magic sent him firing up into the roof with enough force to break a neck. He slammed back to the ground, slid and flew into a pillar. He lay very still.

"Grindstone! Where is he?" Her voice was cracking, drawn out by pain and anger. I could see her cheeks streaked with dampness as she strained and resisted her horn from shorting

out.

With the brief lull, I raced into the room. I heard Glimmerlight shout after me and try to follow; but I heard her gasp and stumble as Brimstone pulled her wounded body back into cover. My hooves skittered as I stuck behind every pillar I could until I was able to dive into one of the foals' pens. They screamed as I suddenly emerged from the shadows.

"Wait, wait! It's okay!" I waved my hooves. "We're getting you out!"

"Hey!" A familiar raspy voice from the group piped up. "It's Murky! Murky! You came!"

Starshine Melody pushed around another colt, before rushing across and clamping her little hooves around my chest tight enough that I actually gagged. Against all wish to act fast, I grabbed ahold of her and breathed a sigh of relief. I'd saved her once before in the crater; if anything had happened to her now, I didn't know what I'd think.

"Starshine, where's Lilac and Chirpy?"

"I'm here!" Lilac poked her head up, inseparable as ever from the only other ghoulish foal in the group with Starshine. She stared out at Coral, the mare who had promised to adopt her if they got out. "M-Miss Coral looks really mad..."

"Just a bit!" I hushed as I started to wave them on. "See that door? Run out there! Go, go!"

They looked hesitant, until I remembered who was with us.

"It's your parents come to get you! *Run!*"

That got them moving. The foals, crying and screaming as they went, rushed out of the cell in a cluster. At the door, several ponies ran in to retrieve them. There were tears, there were shouts.

"I want to help!" Lilac complained, but I just pushed the brave little filly with a wing.

"If you want to help then tell me, where's Chirpy?"

She looked around, hunching beside me instead of moving as rocks tumbled past us outside the pen.

"They wanted him first! They said it'd make her stop!"

"Then they're stupid," I muttered.

"That's what I said!" Lilac shrugged dismissively. For a foal, the gesture was oddly cynical.

I could hear more slavers deeper in shouting out in panic or rage. Creeping out and hiding behind the nearest pillar. I saw Coral ripping a cell door off to silence them with low-flying rebar, before she disappeared again, running further in. Crashing sounds signalled her ripping off the door to every possible side room as she went.

Then it suddenly stopped.

"Chirpy!"

Coral's voice wasn't one of relief—it was panic.

Against all my efforts, Lilac followed me. Ahead of us, we found Coral Eve amongst a squad of enormous slavers. Beyond that, I could see a large wooden gate slamming shut to the next section of the prison. The slavers rammed into her side, knocking the unicorn off her hooves on the stone floor. Rolling onto her side, she snarled at one, before he was lifted and hurled through a pillar, his back snapping on impact. Two others dove at her, grabbing around her body to try and choke her. In a flash of light, all three of them exploded off the ground and hurled toward a cell with Coral still in their grasp, driving through prison bars. Staggering, blood streaming from a wound on her forehead, Coral Eve sent the last one flying through the gate.

Upon breaking it, the last foals were finally revealed, and amongst them, Chirpy Sum and

Grindstone.

Grindstone stood alone, trapped against the back of the chamber. He was wheezing hard, with his eyes open and terrified. I guessed he'd just closed that gate after him when Coral had spotted them. With Coral's horn forming the only major light source in the flickering darkness, she struggled to her hooves and locked eyes with the slavemaster that had taken her son.

"Grindstone..." Her voice trembled as she gasped and then roared in nothing but pained anger. Brickwork began to shake and my ribs vibrated inside me. Dust seeped from the ceiling above her before being thrown away in arcane curves as it got caught up in the aura of power surrounding her. I didn't even hear what the end of her sentence was, for her horn shrieked, making the sound of a thunderstrike.

The donkey was snatched from the ground and catapulted forward, toward her and into the nearest pillar. At the last second, a golden flare surrounded him and the pillar's brickwork shattered. Dropping to the ground, virtually unharmed, Grindstone shook his head and glared at her.

"You will not take me for an obstacle to be cast aside!"

He had Aurora's shield talisman. Of *course* he'd have access to it.

Around him, foals fled toward Coral, surging either side of her like a small tide of ponies to flee out the way she'd come. Chirpy Sum fled with the others and sprinted forward. Grindstone's eyes twitched, before he snapped down and grabbed the young colt around the neck. Clutching him in his frail hooves, he lifted Chirpy Sum clean off the ground in a chokehold. The small foal was wriggling and gurgling as he tried to keep breathing.

The old slavemaster had a cane in his mouth, tipped with a small blade held to the exposed throat of the foal.

"Don't." He hacked and coughed around the cane, gripping it tightly as the blade rocked and rested on the foal's skin. I saw Chirpy go very still. "Don't consider coming closer, Mrs Eve. You want revenge, of course, but I know you wouldn't lose him to get it. You're going to stay right there, and let me get my radio."

Coral Eve stood like a rock with all four hooves spread and braced. Her horn spluttered and seethed with crackling magical energy. I saw Coral Eve's pained face watching Chirpy's. The foal was shaking hard, his hooves reaching out to his mother, but he wasn't whimpering. He was shaking, biting his lip.

"M-Mom..."

Coral was visibly struck hard, her legs trembling, eyes unable to leave that blade on her son's throat.

Grindstone began to awkwardly pull at his radio.

"Fiver, get a group together, they're trapped in the—"

Then Chirpy, that brave little colt, took a deep breath, before suddenly twisting and biting savagely into Grindstone's neck.

The old slaver screamed in pain. In shock, he dropped the blade. I saw blood run from his neck as he shook and fought. After a couple seconds, he tore the foal off and with what strength his body had, threw him onto the hard concrete ground.

"You little savage!" he shrieked, as he picked up the blade upside down in a blind rage, and swung it to strike Chirpy across the face with the hard wooden pole. He squealed, staggering backwards and falling. Holding his face with both hooves, crying aloud, he scrambled and tried to get away from the slavemaster approaching him, cane held high,

ready to come down again.

Grindstone snarled, holding his neck, before he turned back to find Coral staring right at him in horror.

Then her face twisted, putting any rage Grindstone had ever displayed into deep shadow. At that moment, I felt the very ground of the Ministry Station shake.

Immediately, everyone that wasn't Coral did their level best to get out of the room as fast as was physically possible.

Coral's horn sprang into life, lightning blue. It flared like a spark battery, stuttering before roaring into its incredible depths of power. I hid behind Brimstone, clutching onto his side. Coral Eve scowled in a way I'd never imagined she could have.

The resounding *boom* of her telekinetic wave drove every piece of debris in the room toward the slavemaster. I felt the entire chamber *shift*, bouncing all of us off the ground. He held up his hooves and his shield snapped up as chunks of rock, metal from cell doors, slaver bodies, weapons, and entire pillars hurled into him and blasted him and his yellow sphere of protection into the far wall.

The protective talisman drove a three foot hole into solid concrete, somehow absorbing the impact for Grindstone, who hunched inside it, before screaming up at her.

"This is Aurora's shield! *You can't break her shield! You can't!*" His voice was panicked, and he reached once again for his radio. "You're going to die in here when they arrive!"

Any hope he had was shattered by a whole pillar crashing into his shield and knocking the donkey head over hoof inside it. I saw rock pillars shattering in mid-air from the impact of her magic. The very slabs of the floor hurtled through the air. A side office collapsed from the stresses on its rotten wood.

Coral Eve was standing within a cyclone of telekinetic power, a storm of debris and heavy objects whirling, slamming and haphazardly flying toward Grindstone. There was no accuracy and no subtlety. Grindstone tried to crawl out from under it all, rolling onto the floor, that golden shield sparking and reflecting many times every second. He lay back, his hooves held up, body bruised from being tossed around inside his shield.

As I caught sight of Coral's face, I saw her eyes seem to briefly light with power as she glanced from her motionless son to the one who had put him that way.

"You led them. You did this to him. To me. To all of us!"

Grindstone was lifted up. He stared at her in horror.

"I'm an old, dying donkey! If I didn't have the power with Shackles, I'd have been dead! *Stop!*"

Coral's face stiffened, the distaste of his trying to justify himself bringing up every bitter night I'd watched her spend worrying for Chirpy in her time within this city of slavery.

"And I'm a mother who just watched her son struck down before her eyes."

Grindstone's face betrayed a sudden terror as her magic surged inwards and gripped the sphere amongst all of her telekinetic power.

"You can't break—"

"I don't need to."

Arching her back, she leaned upwards and cried out in pain and effort, as her horn gleamed and erupted with power. A whirlwind of rushing air surrounded her body, as I saw her horn now held two shining auras of magic over it, one overlapping the other. I'd heard tales of unicorns powerful enough to do that. Now I saw it for real, and stared in awe.

The ties on her braids snapped and exploded off, letting her long mane blow wildly in the

furious winds driving around the chamber. The floor cracked beneath her hooves.

Clenching her teeth, her horn surging with those layered auras, Coral *squeezed*. Around Grindstone, the sphere ground and squealed with conflicting magic. White sparks flew off the shield like embers from a furnace. Grindstone's face contorted in horror, as he suddenly realised what she was doing. The space inside grew smaller, as Coral's emotionally driven magic took out every last ounce of her long ordeal on him. He turned over and over, unable to place his hooves, scrambling inside as her magic crunched the shield inwards. It buckled, crackling like glass.

"Wait... wait, wait! NO!"

In one horrific motion, Coral threw everything she had at him, and the sphere suddenly gave up. Within half a second, it imploded to the size of a baseball. With a wrench of her head, Coral sent it careening into a far cell. An unnatural sound accompanied it shattering within as the talisman was smashed.

With a great snap and a flurry of rank wind, Coral's magic ceased. My ears popped and rung from the change in air pressure.

The entire room seemed to settle by a full few inches. Pillars toppled as the swirling magical forces ceased. At the epicentre, Coral wobbled on her hooves. Her horn fizzled, before going truly dead.

At the same time, even as she raised a hoof to take a step toward Chirpy, she fell over. Her body landed hard, but her shaking limbs refused to give up. Crawling, pulling her shivering body, I saw Coral Eve use the last drips of her energy to drag herself to the young foal.

Only after she had gotten to him, to wrap her forelegs around his body and reclaim her son, did she lie still.

I waited impatiently as Unity and a couple of the more medically trained ponies saw to Coral and Chirpy. It had taken three ponies to pull Coral's hoof from around the colt to check on him. Both had stirred, but now I simply waited to hear if they would make it.

Coral had pushed herself too far, probably further than she ever would again. Chirpy's head was cruelly swollen, and Unity was crying as she held him gently in her hooves and slowly helped his barely conscious lips to sip a healing potion.

Glimmerlight sat beside me and held her head, watching them all. She'd wanted to be the one to help Chirpy, but her body was simply too weak to even hold up the little colt's weight now.

Stretching out one wing, a limb light enough that it wouldn't hurt her back, I placed it around her. Soon enough, she leaned over, the side of her head on the top of mine.

"We made it, lil'bro. Got back through this awful place, got the foals, got Grindstone. Classic storming the castle, huh? Isn't this the bit where we go off home to cheering crowds and we all get medals?"

Her face tried to smile. She was coping. That whole run had been exhausting and (for her) even more painful from her wounds.

"First thing I'm doing when we get out is get a drink, Murky."

"Can I have one?"

"You can drink straight ethanol for all I care by this point... oh my gosh..."

She had turned to see the foals. A heartwarming set of reunions had started to occur as

the others all caught up. Parents were hugging their children as though they might slip away again. I saw one incredibly lucky family of a husband, wife, and two foals all reunited without having lost anyone. The uncle found his nephew. A father cried like the colt he was holding in his hooves to merely touch his child again. I heard him muttering a phrase over and over, 'never again.'

Yet off to the side was something that broke my heart in two.

Almost three dozen foals were standing quietly and alone in a huddled group, staring at those with parents who had made it this far. Some of them were quietly sobbing to themselves, looking very lost and scared.

Turning away, I tried to hide that I was about to do the very same thing.

Glimmerlight wiped her eyes.

"The way back to the lift's blocked by those beasts, Murky. There's only one other way."

I gulped, knowing what she meant. Staring back through the prison, I could almost feel it just around the corner.

Glimmer pulled herself up, grunting in pain.

"I've got a portal to try and fix."

Behind us, there was a sharp gasp. Her long mane spread out below her, Coral Eve suddenly woke up, groaning in pain. Half her face muddled with barely cleaned blood, and her whole body seeming drawn and burned out, she nonetheless swatted and pushed at the others until she got at least up onto her hind legs to shuffle forward.

"Chirpy... Chirpy, my dear..."

Unity carried the colt over, helping his mother to take a grip of him, as I breathed a sigh of relief. She was all right.

From beside me, I heard the tapping of Lilac Rose's hooves as she slowly approached the mare who had promised to adopt her as one of her own. If my heart had broken only a few minutes before, now I felt it mend as Coral immediately held out a foreleg, her tear stained eyes only looking welcoming to the young ghoul.

Behind Lilac, however, was Starshine Melody.

The second of the ghoul fillies, Starshine nervously scuffed her hooves as Lilac spoke for her.

"Miss... Miss Coral... Starshine heard that... that you were adopting me and... and she wondered if... if..."

"Would you t-take me too, please?" Starshine's voice was as fragile as marbles across thin glass.

Coral Eve's eyes trembled, before I heard the kind and soft tone that was so tragically rare from her.

"Of course, my dear."

Behind me, the crowd of orphaned foals were all watching as the powerful mare that had saved them hugged Starshine tightly. A crowd of bright, wide eyes saw her take one of their own under her wing.

Then a colt suddenly spoke up, stepping forward nervously.

"C-can you take me too?"

He rushed forward, hopping up to rest his hooves on her chest.

"Can you take me home with you? I... I don't have..."

A few seconds later, a second colt followed him.

"M-me too! Please! Me too!"

Then a filly shouted out, and then a third colt, followed by three foals almost at once. In ones and twos, they cantered and then galloped forward. Foal after foal suddenly began to run toward her, desperate and pleading faces upon all of them.

"P-please, can you take me!"

"Me too!"

"I don't want to be alone!"

"I want a mummy again!"

"Can you be my mommy?"

Within seconds, Coral Eve was surrounded, by a crowd of foals all reaching and pleading from beneath her, tugging at her hooves and trying to shout the loudest, all of them asking in one great rush. In the months of isolation, after the horrors of the past few days and the realisation that their parents were gone, they had seen this one mare storm through their captors like Celestia or Luna herself. Like some protective force of nature come to save them, as strong as any foal imagined their mother always was.

In the centre of them all, Coral Eve closed her tear-stained eyes, emotionally overwhelmed.

Then she reached out her hooves and bent down with them all. Sniffing and hugging again and again to all sides, she nodded.

"Yes... yes, of course I will. I'll take care of you all, my dears... I'll take care of you."

I felt Unity squeeze my foreleg as we watched the foals troop after Coral into the portal room. Every time she saw the relief and hope on their faces, I saw her expression melt in happiness. Undoubtedly, my limb would have the blood cut off from it moments later every time Coral helped one of those who were still crying.

It was official now, Coral's role in the new village we would make was decided.

She was going to open an orphanage to care for all the foals that Red Eye's industry had left stranded.

I couldn't think of anything more appropriate for her to be doing.

Yet watching them find their 'forever mommy,' as Lilac Rose would chirp, it only reminded me of the scene I hoped to have soon enough. My hoof clasped around the shape of my journal in my saddlebag, trying to fill my heart with just one more bit of energy to finish this off.

Glimmerlight limped around the chamber, moving from arcane console to terminal, to floor panel and generator. I could hear her making very mild, 'safe for around Coral and foals' curses under her breath as she huffed and threw her hooves up.

"Well, it's as we thought, no power reaching this place, not enough to activate it after all. I can... I think I can repair it. Spent enough time in this place as a mute to learn after all..."

She shivered, like a chill had gone down her back. I didn't blame her, I could feel it too. Far off, through the corridors, that strange ambience felt like it had retreated during that last rush, when we'd all felt a common, straightforward purpose to keep us focused. But now that things were pausing as another obstacle came up, I could feel the whispers at the edges of my mind. Tugging at frayed ends, trying to get a reaction.

I closed my eyes, all too well remembering it. Every little doubt, every fear or weakness. Each memory dug up by this strange place. The times that I'd failed, as far back as the last

time I found an orphanage, and that vertigo as I'd leaned forward, and—

—grabbed the chains around the lock. Putting a hind-leg against the door, my forelegs wrapped in chain, I pulled with all my might. The rotten wood snapped and splintered bit by bit. Every yank dug the chains into my hooves, shooting pain up my legs. I could hear the begging behind it, every wail and shout for salvation. I pulled again. Blood began to trickle between the chains and years fell from my eyes, but I couldn't stop now.

The lock snapped off the door itself, and the prisoners were free.

They rushed out, weary and damaged. Some carried broken friends with them. Behind me, I heard Aurora's magic tear another lock apart as though she were dismantling it for experimentation. Ponies fled by us in their dozens, directed by several Equestrian soldiers. I still wasn't sure where they'd come from, we'd only come down here ourselves. Something about a portal in the room just beside us, they seemed just as confused as anyone. I could hear gunfire from outside the prison chambers, near to the main waiting room of the metro station. Ponies were being hustled through it. The rescue was underway.

We'd done it.

Checking the cell, I picked up a dizzied pony who babbled nonsense and threw him over my back, before rushing back out to catch up with the others. The leader of the soldiers was speaking to Aurora, shaking his head. She gripped his collar with her magic and sternly said something in his ear that I didn't hear. Gulping, the officer nodded.

"Yes, Ma'am." he uttered, before turning to the others.

"Miss Star and Sundial will take care of what they needed to. We get these ponies topside! No... no matter the cost! Let's do what we signed up to do, mares and gentlecolts!"

"We didn't sign up! We were draft—"

"Technicalities, Dreamer! Grab a pony, let's get the hay out of this place!"

Aurora helped me with the pony I carried as we dragged the poor soul between us to pass him to a much larger soldier, one who could easily carry him. My companion then turned and slid a hoof around my neck.

"One last thing before we go, Sundial... we have to shut down what they did to these ponies. Remember in the mountain? The orb on the machine?"

"The Nexus?"

"Yes. We have to shut that thing down. We can't stop them coming here for now, there's not enough time to dismantle it. There's too many for that. But we can delay them. Someday, I'll finish this for good. Once Twilight hears..."

"Let's go! Let's go!" The officer was waving at us. Together, Aurora and I galloped after them, keeping low from the fire being exchanged around corners and over metro benches with the flickering shadows of zebra infiltrators coming from what seemed like every tunnel around us. I felt a swell of pride as I saw some prisoners take up discarded weapons and step onto the line to help hold them off and give their friends a better chance to get away.

Bit by bit, following the waved commands of the officer, they got us across that giant room with the four entrances. We ran when he told us, and dropped when he screamed a warning. Eventually, as they began to shuffle ponies toward the lift out of here, Aurora and I took a new path.

She stumbled, holding her head.

"They've done it wrong... this isn't what it was supposed to do..."

Wrapping my hooves around the mare, I tried to keep her going, as a looming metal door became apparent ahead of us. The central chamber of the metro, where they'd stored the memory nexus itself. The full working model of the prototype on the mountain.

"Please, Aurora..." I muttered, pulling her with me. "We're almost there..."

Snapping back to reality, I gasped and stumbled, making Unity yelp in surprise.

"Murky? You okay?"

I had to stay focused. Just keep my eyes on the finish line. That was all I had to do now. Don't let it win. *We're almost there.*

"Just this place..." I clenched my teeth, looking back down the corridor.

Glimmer rested a hoof on my shoulder, taking a rest by using me as a leaning post.

Thanks, sis. Love you too.

"We're gonna have to do Aurora's plan, everyone."

She spoke to the group, as we all gathered around. The parents and foals were setting up on the platform of the magical portal, where zebras must have once stood to leave this city. Yet Brimstone and Coral stood with myself, Unity, and Glimmer to listen.

"We have to activate that Nexus in there. Get it to spark power into the station, activate this thing, and then turn off that cursed machine forever before we go. Stop them ever using it, and get out together. All together."

Glimmer's voice was sullen, direct and tired. She was really running on fumes.

Unity closed her eyes for a long enough time that I worried this place was getting to her, but she'd seemed almost serenely immune to it thus far.

"The orb he took from us is primed. I can feel the memory magic around this place. I... I wish I knew how, it's just like I recognise it from a memory that isn't mine."

"Aurora." Brim's voice was low and rough. "The old rot isn't quite gone yet I suppose..."

Unity looked around nervously, before shakily nodding. "I think so, I didn't tell everyone but... but I told Murky. I've been feeling things like her a lot. Since I came here, I recognise it."

Her eyes turned harder, a serious side of her I'd rarely seen.

"Shackles, or Grindstone, has set the orb in place. That's why the Nexus is so out of control. An orb without any memories is sitting in it, waiting for someone to give it a memory to activate with. Aurora experimented with it once. Murky and I heard it on a log in the mountain. We only need to get there, he's put it where we need it..."

And that was where I felt my spirits drop.

"If Shackles put it there, it's because he knows now that we need it to be there. He wants us to come."

Brimstone made a low sound, as though he was thinking and wanted others to expect him to speak any second. His one eye was almost closed, the big warlord looked exhausted and shivery.

"Glim, you need to get this thing ready. Coral, you're not in any state to go anywhere."

He looked at Unity and myself.

"I'll go with them and make sure it's done."

Glimmer stiffened up, standing up from leaning on me to lightly knock the massive earth

pony on the shoulder. Her hoof bounced.

"You keep those two safe, okay, big guy?"

Brim closed his eye. "Just get that portal working..."

Coral kissed us both on the forehead, her movements graceful but slow.

"You'll get there, my dears."

Glimmerlight ruffled my mane and bumped hooves with Unity, winking at her.

"We'll get that mares night out yet. See you soon."

Unity and I stood on either side of Brimstone as we left the portal room to return to the rest of the station.

The Nexus, and undoubtedly something else, awaited us.

'We can do this.' I kept telling myself that. *'We can.'*

'You said that every time before.' The nagging thoughts replied, pulled from my subconscious by this eerie place.

Shackles was waiting.

He would be.

I had to steel myself. I had to pull my courage to the top now.

Even exiting that room was like pulling myself from a warm bed into the cold. That reluctance and temptation to stay was strong. The marble and sheet metal floors gave way to dark corridors filled with whispers and sparks. Rumbles of collapsing tunnels and eerie howls of unknown forces echoed through them.

Pushing our bodies through the pain to move at this point, we galloped through it all. Brimstone led the way, directed by Unity's shouted commands. Yet at this point, I knew the way as well. I'd seen it, the flickered, confusing memories that wandered this place had made the route from the cells to the Nexus very clear. Looking down, I felt strange to know that I was following the same way that Sundial himself had ran. His, or rather my, PipBuck was retracing its steps.

History was repeating in a way that made me feel quite intimidated by the scale of time and events around me.

As we came to the central room, running out onto the raised platforms that crossed across the middle, we wheeled right, toward the one exit I'd yet to take in this place, the one to our east. Across from us, to the north, the thick door was bent and buckled inwards, but whatever had chased us before seemed to have gone in search of others. Through the western door, I could hear ponies shrieking and running. Squinting, I saw slavers pass briefly across it, fleeing in a panic. There was no cohesion left down here.

Heading in the opposite direction, we closed in on where Unity and I now knew the Nexus would be. I thought back to the mountain, to that strange arcane device at the centre of a lab. This entire city had been about control. Right from the war with the draft and fear, all the way through a prison, to the slavery and enforcing memories. This device, these orbs like I had seen on that mountain, were the twisting of beauty into the worst form of control I could imagine.

This entire station was a place of insidious being now, and none of that was the fault of the memory magic itself. It had been abused, taken and used in ways never thought of, and part of me wondered if Ministry Station itself wasn't so much evil as it was just as broken as

the unfortunate it had been tested on. If the memories the nexus and its larger orbs had felt around it had been of better times, could this station have instead been a place of peace to all those who wandered its halls?

Instead, it had been forced to remember agony and enslavement. No matter what its original intent, it was now a place of nightmares, projecting it upon everyone who entered it.

As we galloped through rows of traveller lockers and passed by the old metro station cafes, I found myself quite surprised at how much sense that made, now that I knew the whole story. If we'd had more time, I would have wanted to ask Unity if she—

I tripped. Distracted, I felt my hooves catch on a raised marble slab.

Only I didn't land on the ground.

My sense of direction spiralled, and vertigo surged through me. A sickening wave of nausea passed through my gut into my mouth. Like there was no gravity, I felt myself flip end over end, stretching, reaching out for the others. I saw Unity briefly, then, Brimstone, but they were so distant. So distant and blurry. Unity and—

What was his name again?

Blurry shapes overtook my vision, the two unidentified ponies seemed to fade. I couldn't remember where I was now. I felt scalding ground beneath my hooves as I found myself standing. I could smell hot metal and toxic fumes.

I was a slave, and this was my factory.

Dark shapes stared down at me. I could see a cream unicorn huddled and shivering, her stringy light orange mane with red streaks covering her face as tears dripped from below it. The shapes, those imposing dark figures, raised a hoof. I saw the glint of a metal-studded whip.

The roof began to close in, tightening, as the machines, whips, and barking orders condensed, pulling inwards until I felt like I was in a small tunnel underground, surrounded by slavery. Orders were being barked at me from every side, so many that their voices overlapped until I couldn't hear them. I screamed at them that I didn't understand, how could I obey them if they all talked at once? A farmer, a factory overseer, a lecturer, a monster. They twisted and stretched, their bodies bending around me, following my face no matter which way I looked.

Chains crept like snakes along the ground, moving with a life of their own. I tried to run, but I couldn't remember where I was trying to run to. One by one, they snapped shut around my legs, as I pulled and pulled and screamed.

Something massive curled around me, and pulled at me as though I were being yanked out of water.

I surfaced, and saw a spiralling cafe area of Ministry Station. Dizziness sent me reeling into an upturned chair and table, away from Brimstone Blitz who stood with Unity held in one hoof like a foal. His other one had been lifting me.

Gasping, sweating as panic and adrenaline surged through me in equal measure, I held my head.

“What... what the hell was—”

Brimstone shook his head and reached out to pull me with him.

“Something in the mind...” His normally gruff voice was low and dangerous. “Stay focused...”

Unity cried out and fell from his grasp, stumbling until she realised where she was. Her

cheeks were streaked with tears. Reaching out, I tried to help her, but she fled from my hooves for a second, eyes wide.

"I was... I was back home, I was being taken again..." Her panting voice was thin and high pitched, more vulnerable and fragile than I'd ever heard her.

Brimstone pushed both of us ahead of him. "Keep... moving..." He growled and stared directly ahead.

Unity limped and bumped against me as she found her way. Up ahead I could see the exit to the food court, now a disused area where slavers had spent their time with cards and drink while stationed down here. I put hoof in front of hoof and kept moving. The exit at the end here led to where I'd seen Aurora and Sundial go. The last door. We just had to—

"You are Number Seven!"

I screamed as I felt the lash split my back. Falling to my stomach, I cried out for him to stop. I knew he wouldn't. Turning my head, I could see his beady eyes staring at me with a sick mixture of anger and pleasure.

"Stop! I... I am..."

"You are Number—"

The apparition was made blurry as Unity came surging through it and picked me up. The pain faded to a dull throb of memory on my back.

"Murky! I'm here, keep moving! It's this place! Fight it, it's not real!"

I wailed as I saw the blur raise that whip again toward here, but it faded before anything landed. Shivering, I clung to her as she kept trying to push me ahead. Brimstone was in front of me, angrily tossing a table out of the way and breathing hard.

"Fight it! Fight—"

She shrieked, falling against me instead. I didn't know from what memory, but the sound yanked me from my own nightmares. Unity was hurting. Unity needed my help. Just like I needed hers.

"Unity, I'm here!" I pulled her up into a hug, trying to edge closer and closer, following the path Brimstone made for us. Together, we fought through it. Each helping the other. Friendship defeating the memories. If one stumbled, the other was there to help.

We would do it, together.

We always—

Two ponies escaped. Together we ran from the Ministry of Arcane Science slave-den to try and make it to the wall. The siren had sounded, the griffons had gone up to hunt. Beside me, I saw Unity racing forward, keeping pace with me as we made for our planned route. We each were the others only friend since we'd come here, since we'd met in a factory. Since we'd found comfort in the other being a good pony at heart. I'd helped her feel confident. She'd helped me feel like more than a number.

"Come on, Unity! We're almost there!" I struggled and spoke, trying to keep her moving.

"They're coming!" she shouted, and I turned to see the dark shapes from above descending. Nets, shock sticks, and whips were held in their vicious talons.

Something grabbed us both from behind. We struggled, but there wasn't any pain. Being shaken from the delusion, I saw the shadows clear until Brim's face stared down at us. He was grimacing, scowling and shaking his head, warding us away with his hoof.

"Go..."

"Brim, what wr—"

"GO!"

Brimstone Blitz sent us both sliding across the floor to slide to the end of the cafe, before he stumbled away and lashed out at some invisible foe. My head hurt, I could barely tell what was what any more. We were in Ministry Station, but things I had seen, they were so *real*. They were *my* memories.

Behind us, however, a great crashing became obvious as Brimstone hurled an enormous table into a line of old vending machines.

“You can’t have my clan!” He bellowed, twisting to snarl at whatever he saw. A furious anger burned in him. A savage bestiality.

The fear in my gut mounted as he swung and destroyed anything in reach of himself. His wounds reopening from trying to fight something with a body much less healthy than he apparently now saw that he had.

“Back down you runt! This is my clan! My raiders!”

Unity was backing away from him, and I did much the same.

This wasn’t the Brim I knew, and we couldn’t be there to snap him out of it without getting crushed. He charged and struck against the side of a bar, smashing it into tinder wood.

This was the Dragon, and who knew what he would do to any shapes he saw, one strike would kill us.

“Murky, if we do what we have to, it’ll end it for him, it has to!” Unity tugged at me, as I watched my oldest protector snarl and froth, a berserker-like persona that he had long put to rest by the time I met him.

I didn’t want to—

“Murky! Move! We can help him, but not here!”

Unity grabbed my head and pulled it to hers. I was crying, she was too. This was all so much.

“It’s the memory magic of the orb, Murky! Shackles has put it in *without* a memory, it’s trying to find some, but this place is so corrupted and ruined that it’s trying to find your worst memories to take, to give it something! Stay together!”

I saw her determined but fearful eyes, and nodded with a whimper. Behind us, we left Brimstone. I only prayed we’d fix this in time to save him from really hurting himself.

Holding hooves, we took step after step, approaching that same thick door I’d seen Sundial arrive at. The one Sunny had spoken of, that none of them had been through, but had felt all these nightmares as they’d gotten closer.

“Brace yourself, Murky...”

Unity winced and grabbed its handle in her magic, before pulling.

I raced inside, following Aurora. A great white light hit my eyes and sent me reeling. I heard Aurora shout something, and grab my hoof to pull me with her.

“Stay with me, Sundial! I need you here!”

Unity pulled me from ahead. I pushed forward, a blinding green gleam from within the chamber making my head throb. It all emanated from the orb. The same one we’d found on

the mountain top. The one that was the key to getting out of here.

It was held within a giant, walk-in freezer, probably for the café outside. A metal gantry had been built above the slick floor to support the machine itself, with a walkway in a circle around it. Below it, the ground was covered in a thin layer of ice. It wasn't large, but it held the orb ten feet above the ground, looking like the pedestal or spire I'd seen in old books of legends in Equestria, crafted from stone and metal. Arcane symbols that glowed seemingly from within were carved upon it, along with strange markings that didn't look like any Equestrian language I knew, looking more ritualistic.

Yet as I pushed inwards, I felt the room grow so much larger, like reality was bending around it.

I felt my hoof slip from hers. Then she was gone.

"Unity? Where are you?"

"I'm right here!"

Aurora was just ahead, climbing up onto the gantry within the large room. The temperature in here had dropped. It looked like it was converted from the old freezer of the food court, with a metal walkway added above the slippery floor. Around the edge, generators were hooked up to an enlarged version of the memory machines from before, the ones designed to let non-unicorns see memories. Atop it, on a small metal and stone spire covered in markings, lay a memory orb gleaming like Celestia's sun itself in purest white.

The Ministry leader was covering her eyes, trying to push toward the orb. My head was splitting from the intensity of the light.

"Hold on, Aurora! I'm coming, I'll—"

"—help!"

I pushed forward, before finding myself facing in a different direction from where I thought I was. Screaming, I tried to tell the present day from memory. I fell onto the ice-cold metal walkway. The white became a sickly, balefire-like green as I blinked and stared at the orb. It warped and pulsed with a magical aura, seemingly uncontrolled. My throat thickened. The shot of sickness passed right through me, and I threw up off the side of the gantry, looking down the short two foot drop toward—

The street below the Orphanage. One little step forward and it'd be over...

I leaned. I didn't even realise how far I was gone before—

Unity's hoof grabbed onto my sweater, pulling me until I fell onto my back, looking up at her tearful eyes. I could see desperation and care in them as she stared down at me.

"I'm not letting you go..."

Filled with renewed purpose, I—

—surged upwards, grabbing her in a tight embrace in the glow of the memory nexus itself. Breathing hard, I turned to look at it. Together, we guided ourselves toward the centre of the room, right below the orb.

The same place.

"This is it!"

I caught her eyes, helping support us both up.
“Unity...”

“Aurora...”

“End it!”

Getting up, I saw Unity take a deep breath and nod, an inspiring strength on her face. She turned toward the orb and marched up the gantry steps, until she was just below the orb itself. Spreading her hooves, she planted her forelegs on the railings and closed her eyes.

Her horn lit, a hazy red amongst the sick green. Twinkles and rings began to pulse around it, and I heard her gasp with effort. Her body shook, her hind legs almost giving way as her horn suddenly sparked and grasped the orb itself in a tight field of magic.

“I can’t do this, it’s so complicated! I’ve never worked on magic like this!” she muttered to herself, before groaning and almost slipping.

Catching her, keeping her upright, I held on to her.

“Yes you can. Aurora Star knew you could! She believed in you!” I paused, before taking a sharp breath. “And *I* believe in you! We all do!”

Something bolstered in her, for the field around the orb suddenly grew stronger as she grit her teeth and concentrated. Our manes blasted backwards, the collision of magic sending a wave of power rocketing around the room, not unlike Coral’s own magic.

I heard Unity scream in effort, before finally she got her magic locked onto it. Waves of power kicked at my sore body and rattled the gantry we were on. Slowly, the overwhelming green hue began to fade and grow dimmer.

“I... I have to get it to properly activate first!” Unity strained to speak. “I’ll tell you when it’s... when it’s at full and I can... I can shut it down for good!”

“You can do this!” I encouraged her. I hoped Glimmer was ready back at the portal chamber to make use of this.

“Very sweet, just like the last time I caught you two.”

The voice cut through everything like a cold spear to my heart.

“One of Aurora’s last ‘special’ orbs, the unicorn with the power to project memory into other things and the perfect slave. I told you long ago, Number Seven, everything I own always comes back to me in the end.”

I heard his stomping hooves. As the green flaring light died down and Unity strained with Aurora’s spell, I saw his leering face in the darkness behind the nexus itself. His huge body stood up, moving away from a back door to the chamber. A hulking shape that set the gantry creaking began to move toward us.

He came toward me, ordering a slaver to use the firehose...

...to strike me and always move into my personal space to remind me I had none...

...to bring the lash down again and again...

...to play games, order me to do things, ask questions that had only horrible answers...

...to put the collar back on.

Yelping, I staggered back. It was as though the memories were fresh as he slowly marched

over the circular platform around the orb. His face was twitching, and he had an obsessive gleam in his eye.

This place was affecting him as well. Ever since he'd found this place, he'd become more obsessed than ever before. It had drawn him to activate it early, to revel in its madness to bring us here.

"Unity... move, we need to—" I whispered to her, trying to pull her by the torso.

"I can't... the spell, it... ergh..." She gasped with the effort, sweat streaming down her face.

Shackles held out his hoof. I heard a clattering of chains, and I saw two collars looped over it; one of which I recognised all too well. Unity's eye facing him was open and fearful. I felt frozen as he moved toward us. He stepped around the gantry, gradually coming closer, as I stood shivering between him and Unity.

"Put them on. This fanciful runaway attempt was longer, but it always ends. It always does, Number Seven. You are mine, if both of you run then you will be trapped. If you run alone, then you'll know I have her. Now put it on, Number Seven. There's no Protégé to shoot at me for you this time."

He sneered, looming over us, chains dragging on the ground. The comment struck deep, and he saw the reaction on my face.

"In fact, there's no Protégé at all now."

The brief silence that followed was interrupted as I felt it all rise back up. Every frustration, every bit of grief and sadness.

Every bit of *anger*.

My body moved before my sanity even caught up with me. I screamed at him, for the first time in rage rather than terror, and launched at him.

Shackles merely caught me, twisted, and hurled me against the far wall. Spinning in the air, I impacted upside down and dropped onto the back of my neck. Wailing, I held it with my hooves on the ice-slick floor of the old freezer locker.

A thick crunch beside me indicated Shackles had dropped off the gantry. I saw him raise his hooves and kicked off the wall. Sliding on the slippery floor, I shot between his legs and crawled under the gantry itself before his hooves slammed down. The thin ice shattered, revealing the old floor beneath it. Already, I could feel the chill penetrating into my body from lying against it, but that was the least of my worries.

"You know what I do to the disobedient, Number Seven!"

Turning, he grabbed the thin metal gantry and tore a section clean off, reaching in for me. Kicking at his face, I kept trying to get him further away from Unity, trying to flick a foreleg to get my battle saddle to activate as I crawled through the metal struts. Up above me, I saw Unity stumble and fall against the railing, moaning as her horn flickered and threatened to drop the spell.

"Keep going, Unity!" I screamed up to her, as I felt the mechanism of my trigger finally whip out to my mouth. Twisting, I angled it at Shackles and fired off the grapple-hook.

It impacted directly on Shackles' chest, making the massive stallion stumble back with a grunt. Getting out from under the gantry, I fled to the back of the room instead, fumbling with my saddlebag and trying not to slip and fall on the ice. *Rarity's Grace* wouldn't do it, but I had something that might.

Chainlink Shackles wasn't willing to give me the time.

The whip shot out, and this time for real, sending a welt of pain across my lower back.

Screaming, I dropped to my side as my legs gave way. Exhausted and stumbling, I floundered.

My old master's hoof landed on my chest before I could get anywhere, and sent Protégé's revolver skittering across the floor before I could use its heavier rounds. The crushing impact jarred the leg caught between my chest and his hoof, before he picked me up and dumped me into the corner with enough force that every bit of air was forced from my lungs. I heard Unity shriek as she saw it, but my vision was hazy. I kept having to blink, feeling like I could see the Mall, the prison, the soil fields of Fillydelphia, or his personal office. His mad face grinned at me in obsessive glee, rotten teeth yellow and clear in the light. It was the same no matter where I was. It was the same grin, the same teeth, the same scar. He was a constant. An unchanging figure who I felt like had been with me my whole life. I was the born slave struggling to be more. He was the born slaver striving to remove change.

Here, now, I just couldn't fathom what could make anyone be like that.

"I was always waiting for you, Number Seven. Someone like you. It had to be you."

Gasping, fighting for air, I shook my head.

"Why? *Why me!?* Why did you choose me for all this? I'm not the only born slave ever! I'm not the only pegasus ever! I'm not the only pony who ever wanted out! *WHY ME!?*"

He lowered toward me. I could smell the reek of sweat and rot coming from him this close. His eyes were glazed over; he'd lost it. This place had broken him as much as it broke me. But his tone was shockingly quiet. No demand I not speak when not asked a question. No demand that I end with 'Master.'

"Because the others just didn't last this long, and I'm just as determined to never give up and lose control as you are..."

The line sent a shockwave through me. I didn't know what kind of childhood was needed to create a stallion like this. I didn't know what had been the point when he had snapped, but finally I realised why he saw me as comparable.

I had been right.

It had always been about control. Whatever had happened to him, he was a *born slaver*. Growing up, the thought of losing control of others was as strong to him as my drive to not lose control of myself.

Then Red Eye had come.

He was, in his own sick way, fighting to regain control. The insanity, the disgusting logic of a broken mind, reminded me of all the reasons I wanted to be free from this place, from this kind of life.

I had to be free from this madness.

I had to be.

I had to be!

Biting hard on my trigger, the grapple wound in from behind Shackles. Repeating the same trick I'd used against Sooty, I yanked it as it neared, sending the metal hooks belting into the side of him. They dug into his armour, sinking deep.

Roaring in pain, Shackles recovered a lot faster than Sooty did.

The sudden impact across the side of my face sent me whirling across the floor to lie in a heap. I felt my cheek swelling, and a tooth felt loose. Looking up, I saw him turn and stamp toward me.

"I don't make threats..." He snarled. **"I simply carry them out, Number Seven."**

The whip dropped to his side again, and he bit into its grip. Shivering, I gazed at it,

trying to protect myself as best I could.

Above me, I saw the orb suddenly flare brightly. The green flares from it dimmed, as a brighter white began to pick up from it. Behind the Nexus itself, I saw Unity standing strongly on, her horn flaring with a second aura, much like Coral Eve's had before. Her eyes were wide, staring directly into the orb itself. Around me, I heard the hum as all the machines and connections to the Nexus itself sprung into being. The lights on the roof above brightened. More power than ever before began to spread through the whole facility.

Chainlink Shackles stopped, staring at it with a scowl, before Unity's eyes turned to him.

"He is more than just a number... and he's not yours. This place, these orbs... they need memories, they see memories, they seek them out. I see... I see memories..."

The spirals of power from the orb reflected out and around us all. Aurora's research, taken to its zenith, activated before my eyes. Unity's mane was surging in the air behind her.

"I see *yours*." She twisted her face to one of disgust. "And I see why you're so afraid inside, because of what happened to you when you *had* no control. What your fath—"

Shackles roared at her, surging toward the gantry again. "**Quiet, you little runt!**"

Unity screamed back at him as the orb blinkered and shone one last time.

"Murky was stronger than you ever were! He became a pony to be proud of knowing, no matter what you did to him! You only tried to repeat what happened to you on others because it made you feel stronger!"

"**SILENCE, SLAVE!**" Shackles stormed around the gantry, and I saw his lash crack through the air. Unity's head whipped backwards as he struck her directly on the face, and she fell, clinging on with only one hoof to the nexus' railing.

But she would surprise even me, for she didn't fall any further. Throwing her other hoof back on to the metal to catch herself, she rose once again, despite the pain, and stared directly at him. She was breathing hard, and a line of blood from the gash in her forehead ran down her face, but her eyes were strong, and undefeated.

"I'd pity you for why you did all this... but I know you eventually started to enjoy it. Your chance to create a city of ponies who'd never be able to stand up to you? You're a coward! It's over, and no matter what happens, I can be proud of that!"

A beam of light shot from her horn, striking the orb, and emitted an enormous ring of sparkling white light. The gantry railings were blasted off. I saw Shackles and Unity hurled back, before I slammed against the wall again.

Before the light blinded me, I saw the connection between Unity's horn and the orb grow stronger.

The strength to get to her surged through me, and I pulled myself up, trying not to look at the orb itself that flared again and again, as the energies in it, the memories, were shut down bit by bit. I felt everything it had shown me collapsing away. The whispers in the shadows quietened one by one. Climbing onto the gantry, I saw Unity lying on her side, writhing and crying out. Her horn had a third aura around it. I pulled myself bit by bit, before diving to her side and holding her.

"Unity!"

Her shouts were dying away. Around me, the entire chamber was crumbling. The magical power unleashed when Unity had activated the nexus itself and started to break the memory spells it was woven with had weakened the already damaged area's roof.

"Unity!"

Behind us, Chainlink Shackles suddenly loomed against the white light. I tried to pull

Unity away, to try and break the link that was clearly costing her strength, but that monster followed us.

Brimstone's warcry carried into the room. Thundering across the floor, he came charging into the nexus' chamber, leaping right over us.

His dive sent him crashing into Shackles. The old warlord tumbled head over hooves with the slavemaster, crushing the gantry below them. Together, they rolled off it, dropping to the far side of the machine. Rising, I saw the hatred in their eyes. Brimstone's hooves flew with the experience to get striking right away, throwing a blow to the stomach that buckled Shackles, dropping him to the floor. Rising up, Brim brought both front hooves together to try to drop them hard. Snarling, Shackles blocked them and drove Brimstone into the wall, ramming his thick bulk into the red stallion. The two quickly staggered away from one another, grasping at the walls. They were both injured, but Shackles retreated from him, stepping up on the gantry.

He paused and stared at me, then at Unity, and then me again. With a sick grin, he reached out and cranked out of the dials on the Nexus. Lights shone from the platform holding the orb. The spell it was imbued with shone out and magnified to a much higher potency.

While Unity was still connected to it.

I heard her sudden shriek of terror, as whatever she was trying to shut down grew stronger. Shivering, with spasms every time her horn glowed brighter, she wept and cried out with one final effort.

I felt my ears pop as the feeling of something invisible shattering exploded in the air around me. Control panels burst and wires spiralled into the air. The glow of magic snapped and deadened. The spell flickered and warped through a whole rainbow of colours in the air, before imploding into itself.

Unity had broken the spell. She'd done it. Aurora Star's spell had worked just as it should have. Exhausted, she fell limp into my grasp.

In the aftermath, I could feel the creeping ambience of memory magic in the air, leftovers of the stronger, more malignant spell that had been unleashed again and again in their sick experiments down here.

Shackles glared directly at me.

"You'll never truly escape me, Number Seven. You'll come back to me."

The orb, now glowing only a light cream with orange wisps and red streaks, sparked dangerously. Even while Shackles saw Brimstone rising, prepared for a fight, he kept his eyes on me and backed away.

"You'll always come back to me in the end."

A section of the roof caved, dropping a pillar between Shackles and Brimstone.

"Murky, get out of this room!" Brimstone hollered, coming running back.

"Always!"

Brimstone grabbed me, yanking me into the cafe again and slamming the door shut behind us. I could see another corridor behind Shackles, another exit to the locker. His grinning face never left me as he slowly backed away into the safety of the opposite door, before the one facing me slammed shut.

"Always."

The cafe itself was starting to crumble, but concrete shattered down behind us in the room with the glowing orb. I hoped it buried it forever.

Putting Unity down, I held on to her limp body until Brimstone slammed the door shut behind us, trapping that vile magic within it. Slowly, I forced myself to finally open my eyes and look at her, hoping against hope that whatever he'd done hadn't—

I felt a stab of terror. She didn't move.

Long seconds passed. I spoke to her, lightly shook her, held her, and used my own body to protect her from the small bits of debris falling as the unstable metro station began to fracture above our heads.

"Please... please don't go..." I cradled her, crying into her shoulder. My stomach clenched tightly. I heard Brimstone step behind me and stare over, as I simply held her.

"Don't make me lose another friend..." I hoped, I prayed.

Ignoring the crashes and crumbings closing around us, I only stayed there for her. Nothing else mattered. Then, slowly, at last, I finally saw Unity's eyes open again, and breathed a sigh of relief. She blinked, moving vaguely as she figured out where she was. Hugging her tightly, I cleared her mane from her face.

"Unity? Unity, are you okay? You did it... you actually did it! We can go home!"

She looked at me with dizzied eyes, before looking around, seemingly confused.

Feeling my heart thud a little faster, I jostled her slightly, "Hey, hey! It's me!"

Her eyes just kept staring. There was no reaction at all. Panicking, I got her up, but she just stood and stared blankly.

"Unity! It's me! Murky!"

Unity just stared ahead past me. She wasn't even looking me in the eyes.

A bit of rubble from the roof dropped and struck against her head hard enough that anyone would react. Crying out, I pulled her away as cracks split up the walls of the food court, joining the ones on the ceiling. Plaster and fragments began to drop around us. I could hear fresh gunfire in the distance, and shrieking howls muffled by thick walls.

She didn't react to anything.

"Unity!" I screamed at her, starting to feel my eyes dampen. The same sinking feeling as I'd felt when I saw Protégé go down began to fall over me. We'd come so far! I couldn't lose someone else! Not like this!

"Unity! Your name is Unity!"

I shook her again, and again.

"YOUR NAME IS UNITY!" I shrieked.

Brimstone looked on sadly, before jumping to the side as a thick slab fell beside us. This entire area was unstable now, but I held onto her. I didn't care.

"Speak to me! Say something!"

She didn't.

"ANYTHING!"

She didn't.

It was like a blank slate. Her eyes refused to look at me. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I fought to get my journal out. I'd show her! Make her remember! But I felt Brimstone pulling at me.

"Murky, we have to move now! This entire wing is going to collapse! That bombardment earlier and then that spell shook the foundations loose!"

I threw him off and held onto Unity.

"I don't care! Get off me! We can fix this! We can find a way to fix this! Unity, it's me! MURKY! You... you and I! We're friends! You're from Friendship City! Look at me! *Please!*"

From the side of the cafe area, a sealed door bent under the weight of an archway collapsing. The stench of rotten mint flooded into the area.

Brimstone's huge legs grabbed us both, and I shrieked and fought him as he threw us onto his back before galloping off. Behind us, enormous chunks fell to the floor, and yet I just held the blank, motionless *thing* that had once been Unity in my forelegs. What had that spell done to her? What had that orb done to her? Shackles had done something right at the end, he'd done something to rob me of something at the very last moment.

Again.

"No..." I cried into her shoulder, feeling nothing reacting in return. This was just cruel. It was unfair! "No... no... not after all this. Not again. NOT AGAIN!"

Screaming, crying, I was carried with her, as Brimstone raced through Ministry Station as it finally began to crumble under the weight of the war, the impacts and the unleashed magic within it. He outran the monsters, he smashed through fleeing slavers. He got us both back. Both of us. Both alive.

She was alive, in the strictest sense.

But I'd still somehow lost her.

Glimmerlight had done it. The portal was active. In the end, all her planning had worked out. All the hours she'd spent pouring over details and routes, it had paid off.

Brimstone Blitz had done it. He'd kept those he protected alive. He'd ended the horror of the Bloodletters and he had, in the eyes of many, redeemed himself.

Coral Eve had done it. The foals were safe. She had found her son, and made it to the point she'd promised she would, finding a way to forgive and find a new way forward.

Unity had—

I sobbed and held my head in my hooves again.

She'd done it. She'd finally put an end to the whole horror of what Aurora Star had been forced to start. Only in doing so, it had cost her.

I'd watched Glimmerlight examine her through tear-stained eyes. She confirmed my fears. That orb, whatever Shackles had done, had cut out memories similarly to what Glimmer used to do to herself. Only, it wasn't the precise and targeted methods she used. It was effectively complete.

Aside from basic instincts, almost nothing remained. Glimmer had come out of trying to view one of Unity's current memories with a sudden migraine and a sharp scream. It was just a jumbled mess. She'd said it was like she was far away, trapped somewhere else, and what she saw made no sense at all.

From that point, I'd simply found the quietest, darkest corner of the portal room and sat with my head tucked into my hooves.

I couldn't stop thinking about every time Unity and I had escaped danger. Every time she'd saved my life. Every time I'd saved hers. I remembered the way we'd giggled like foals over silly little things, or the times we'd been there to comfort the other in this journey; whether or not we each remembered it. I recalled the ways she used to tease me about my journal drawings, or the way we'd bicker about whether I'd landed or crashed. The way she'd been the one to help me confront losing Protégé. The way we'd sat atop the Mall and agreed to spend time together after we got out of here.

To spent time together. Just us. Just in case.

Daring to look up, I saw her standing, looking blankly at a wall. I couldn't bring myself to keep looking, or to hold her. It *wasn't* her.

I just wished I'd done something else. If I'd not been so weak, maybe I could have knocked Shackles back. If I weren't so small and useless.

I just wanted her to be safe, so I could have my friend back.

Holding my PipBuck closely, I finally felt like I understood the core of what Sundial had been going through.

Behind her, I could see my friends helping to get the foals and all the supplies we'd carried with us onto the portal's platform. There were rumours about unicorns who could teleport, this seemed to just be a bigger version. Glimmerlight had explained it worked similarly to the spell-orbs, a contained knowledge, fed through a machine. The orb being charged had given it enough energy for one last trip to wherever it ended up.

A murderous hell was breaking out in the metro station behind the thick metal door. I could still feel the creepy ambience in the air. It was lessened, without the sense of something evil lurking where the memory nexus once had been, but memories still felt like they were drifting through the air. I knew that anywhere was better than here.

We were effectively ready.

We'd escaped.

Unity was standing right there, but I felt like we'd left her behind.

I couldn't—

—keep up. My singed hooves stung with pain as I tried to keep up with Aurora. The stairs out of the metro station were far too sharp and steep to get up any sort of speed after everything I'd just been through.

The streets of Fillydelphia were a complete shock to the system after all that. Bright red brick and sculpted concrete between grass mounds and benches. Coloured wagons rolled back and forth, with all manner of smiling ponies unaware of what had just happened beneath the ground. I could see the tower of the Arcane Ministry above the tenant housing rooftop, and the chariots offering to take ponies to the Harmony Mall.

The serenity would never last long, as ponies saw the prisoners come limping and dragged out into the sun. Exhausted, as medical wagons started to pull up and the soldiers started trying to call for help, I fell against a tree and held my head in my hooves.

It was over.

Aurora dropped beside me and we shared a glance, and a relieved smile. Now that word was out, the Equestrian Army would purge the metro. The officer had said word would get sent out to Frontier Six Two, the outpost that had spotted the other side of the zebra's portal.

Things would have been happier, but for the sudden beeping from my PipBuck.

Looking down, expecting an alarm I'd forgotten to turn off, I felt my blood run cold.

"No... no no no... Aurora... Aurora, look!" I stammered, pushing it to her to see.

The tired mare adjusted her glasses and stared at the screen, before pulling out some form of pager and checking herself, tapping it impatiently. Around us, I saw every radio-equipped soldier suddenly stop and get that same look of disbelief. I finally forced myself to read it.

"All valid, in-date, Stable-Tec ticket holders please report to your designated Stable

immediately. Its location has been automatically added to your E.F.S. interface. Only ticket holders will be admitted. Bring a minimum of belongings. Move with haste and remain calm.

This is not a drill."

Those five words.

Those last five words.

I stumbled to my hooves. I felt sick. I looked around, panicking, but seeing most of the city blissfully unaware. Was it a glitch? Did I really have to? Why now?

This. Is. Not. A. Drill.

Any bit of doubt was removed. With a slow, warbling, and bass-filled moan, I heard the sirens.

Across the rooftops, echoing off the hills either side of Filly, the Balefire Alarm System was activated. The rise in volume matched the sudden tingling I felt all over my body. I felt my eyes water. Around me, ponies ceased moving and started looking at one another. They didn't know, they weren't sure. Foals wailed at the sound. Wagons stopped on the spot. Slowly, one by one, the truth began to seep in as that horrible, mournful sound surged through the air again and again and again. A death note for the end of the world.

Then the first people panicked. The fleeing started. The screaming followed. Pegasi took off. Shoppers dropped their bags, or foolishly kept them clutched as though they could save them. Wagon drivers begged people to help detach them from their harnesses. Past us, dozens fled into the metro we'd just left. The soldiers were barking orders and trying to pick up the prisoners.

No one knew what to do.

"Aurora... Aurora, help me, I... I... I don't know..." I begged her, I felt confused and paralyzed by fear. The world felt blurry. Detecting my lack of movement, my PipBuck started a shrill and loud beeping on top of the sirens that, strangely, made me scream.

Her hooves grabbed me.

"Come with me! The Ministry's built to withstand it, we've got a basement!"

She was just as scared as the rest of us. Together, we fled through the crowds, many of the soldiers coming with us, pulling a wounded one with them, before a single driving thought made me stop.

"I can't! I can't!"

"Sundial what are you doing?" Her voice cracked into a terrified shriek.

Gulping, I looked down the next street, toward where I knew—

"Skydancer. I can't leave her! I need to get her to the Stable, we'll get in!"

Aurora opened her mouth, but didn't say anything. We were both knocked about by ponies fleeing and screaming, but Aurora just sniffed and took a deep breath.

"You're a better pony than I ever realised, Sundial. Go find her."

"Thank you..."

"Thank you."

With that, for what was likely the final time, we parted ways. I saw her help with the wounded soldier, as she started pulling him toward the Ministry. Instead, I turned back.

It was the reason all this started. To make her safe with me in case this happened.

I began galloping toward my own streets, the ones I knew she lived in. I thought about my father, my friends. I had no idea where they'd be.

I just hoped I could get to her in time.

Startling myself back to reality, I gasped and shuffled away.

Looking around, it seemed like most had just assumed I had nodded off.

This place was still brimming with memories. I wondered how many it had gathered over the years. How many lost souls from the world above it had remembered the final days of.

Wiping my eyes, I let my heart settle from the rending fear of having seen *the* moment. That one moment when everyone knew it was over.

He'd gone back to get someone he cared about, even when it seemed hopeless.

Slowly my eyes focused on the blank form of Unity, standing motionless as ever as Glimmerlight and Coral gently tried to get her onto the platform.

What had Chainlink Shackles done to her? Was there no way I could undo it? Would she slowly remember who she was?

There was just one little niggling thought in my head. I'd *recognised* that the power growing before she'd shut it down had made it more difficult for her. It seemed logical to assume that's what had gone wrong, but something about it just felt, well, familiar.

As my friends gave me space to my grief, while they set about getting us ready to leave, I found myself looking at my PipBuck, and beginning to search.

For anything.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing...

Some minutes later, I heard the soft trotting of Glimmerlight as she limped over to me and lowered her head.

"Hey, lil'bro..." Her voice was low, heartbroken by the loss of Unity as well. "It's time to go. Time to be free."

Pulling me upright, she hugged me tightly.

"We'll maybe find a way, I'll help and... and see if I can't put something back together. Maybe being away from here will help?"

I didn't say anything, I just sniffed and held onto my sister. Gently, she led me over to the main console. Lights flickered around several levers, not that it was working again. Behind it, the portal itself was a low platform surrounded by a cage that would lock in its intended things to be teleported. I figured it was to make sure no one was standing at the edge of it and maybe got half-transported. A portal with safety railings. How about that.

Unfortunately, what normally would have made me smile to see only produced a dull and unwilling ache instead.

As though seeking something to be said, Glimmer pointed out the levers.

"Just one flick of this one here, then we canter up and we're gone. We made it."

Upon that platform I saw them all waiting. Amongst them, Unity was being held protectively by Coral Eve. Feeling sick, I looked away from her blank stare and instead glanced up at Glimmer.

"Can I... can I pull it?"

She ruffled my mane. "After all this, you deserve to be the one."

Kissing my forehead, she wandered over to her things and picked them up, before joining the others on the platform. Slowly, I turned back to the console and tried to stop myself shivering in trepidation. This was it. No turning back.

I reached out and pulled the lever to close the cage shut around them, and then immediately threw my weight on it to snap the lever off. Up on the platform, the metal bars descended and rolled into position. Safety locks engaged, holding it shut.

Any talking on the platform ceased. I saw them panic, noticing me back outside and realising what was happening. Glimmerlight rushed up against the thick bars of the protective cage, now more like a prison to those ready to be transported. She shook at them, yelling out to me.

“Murky! Murky what’s going on!?”

I couldn’t look her in the eye as I did this.

Biting my lip hard enough to feel it bleeding, eyes watering, I pulled down the next one to start the portal up, to engage the teleportation spell. I’d watched her figure it out, sneakily viewing from the side.

“Murky stop! STOP!”

She reached out with her magic, but the lever was broken. She tried to grab my hoof with it, but I shook it off. Above them all, a magical spark began to form.

It was done, there was no stopping it now.

All of them crowded against the cage, reaching through, screaming at me to stop. Telling me that I was free. My sister’s voice carried above it. Slowly, I trotted nearer, looking at the ground.

“Stop! Please, stop! You don’t have to be a slave! You can come too! You don’t have to stay! Murky, please, don’t do this! Don’t!”

In front of them all, I finally looked up through tear-stained eyes.

“I’m not a slave.” I sobbed, and forced myself to keep going. “I just... I... I can’t leave her... I know a way.”

Reaching down, I hit the play button on my PipBuck, and let the audio-diary I’d collected from Aurora Star’s assistant Sparkler play. I’d found it in his office on the mountain, just after the firefight inside the prototype memory nexus lab. As soon as it began playing again, I held it up and cranked the volume dial.

“Up the power to account for more ponies and you make it harder to shut down... of course. It didn’t go right. It projected too much of the memory, lots of subconscious ingressions. We had to shut it down. Dazzler was on shutdown duty and... well that’s the problem. It backfired. Shut down the nexus sure but... it took his memory with it. All of it. Absorbed into the damn orb!”

“They whisked him away to the medical bay. He was awake but unresponsive to anything. So I went up to the orb. I could feel a kind of connection between him and it, the magic was still connected to his body’s mind as though he’d become linked with it. I regret to say it, but to help him we had to use his own signature to draw him back and then destroy the orb, one of only six made. Wasn’t apparent at first but he’s making a slow recovery.”

All my hunting, all the clues, I’d managed to finally dig out the one that made me realise what I had to do now. My chest heaving, I put down my PipBuck leg and spoke quietly to them, my eyes finding the emotionless ones of Unity.

“Together, or not at all, remember?”

I had never, in my whole life, seen my sister's face as distraught and agonised as I now saw it. Not any pain of slavery, nor any horrid truth compared to the look in her eyes, and it hurt me dearly. She sank down, pushing her hooves through toward me.

"We'll help you, Murky, we'll help you! Let us out and we'll go with you! You don't have to—"

Screwing up my eyes, I found myself suddenly screaming, as the well of emotion finally boiled over. I struck my hooves against the cage.

"You're all almost dead already! *Every* time we... we have to go back to get something, to do that little bit more, I *lose someone*! Caduceus, Ragini, Mister Peace, Protégé..."

I almost lost it, feeling the hollowing in my stomach to say one more, the pain making me whine. "And now Unity... I... I just..."

I wailed it out, my voice breaking and rasping from my throat in utter terror.

"I DON'T WANT TO LOSE ANY MORE OF MY *FRIENDS*!"

Collapsing down, my tears hitting the metal floor beneath me, I felt Glimmer's hooves on my own, holding them tightly through the cage.

"Murky, I don't want to lose *you*! It's... it's not fair."

Then, from behind her, I felt Brimstone's massive hoof rest on his side of the bars, on top of where my left one was. To the right, Coral's gentle touch held on.

No one could say anything else. I heard the whine of the portal's spell picking up its power. I didn't have long. This would be the last time for a very, very long while, if at all.

And I didn't want to see them crying as my last time.

I steeled myself, trying to force a smile. I had to be strong.

"It's just, y'know, the long route, right? Maybe I'll get out some other way, someday..."

Glimmerlight reached all the way through, grabbing me and hugging me against the bars.

"No! You're going to do it this time. You will! I... I can't stand the thought of you not. So you're going to *do* it this time. You are. You *are*. Please... do it, I don't want to lose you. I can't. You're going to help Unity and... and then you're going to get over that wall. And you're going to come find us, and I'll... I'll have your new home ready."

Brimstone leaned down against the bars.

"Aye, if there's any pony I've ever known who can make the impossible happen."

Coral Eve stroked the hoof she held in both of hers.

"I know you'll make us all proud when you walk into our new village with stories to tell."

Shocked, my mouth hanging open, I stared at them all.

"I... I..."

Glimmerlight couldn't bring herself to smile in support as they did. Letting me go, letting me stand up, she wiped her eyes.

"You're not the same Murky I met, lil'bro."

Her magic held up her own mirror, and I felt a sudden rush of worry as to what I would see. I always remembered what I'd seen long ago whenever I looked in them. A fragile, skeletal little ruined pony with rags, broken wings, and a meek expression of submission. One who would cry at the vaguest threat, who would beg and plead. A pony who shrank away from challenge, who stopped when he was told. A slave.

Now, I saw something different.

I saw a pegasus. His height didn't matter, it was the look of purpose in his eyes. The inner strength that held him up. He was clad in clothing he'd made himself and a saddle that he'd earned and carried through countless dangers. He had goggles atop his head he'd taken

from a hated foe, for a PipBuck on one leg, and a saddlebag full of proper supplies. By his sides, feathered wings were spread that he had flown on. But most importantly, he stood tall. He was his own pony.

He was not a slave.

"I believe in you, Murky. I always have, ever since I first saw your cutie mark. And I... I can't stand to go without you, I don't want to say goodbye..."

Sobbing, I leaned my head into hers through the bars.

"I don't want to either... but if it were me, you'd do the same."

Spluttering, I saw her finally nod, accepting it, pushing a sad smile onto her face.

Above her, the magical sparks finally grew to their utmost. The twinkling lights formed up around them all as I stepped back from the cage, slowly letting go of her hoof.

I stared up at Brimstone. His wry grin betrayed the pained look in his remaining eye to part ways. He'd been a constant, a cornerstone in my life since he'd first saved it.

"Brim... thank you. Never let anyone try to say you aren't a hero at heart, no matter what you started as. You taught me what it was to protect what matters to you."

He winked, and I could swear I saw a tear, an unthinkable sight.

"You got more strength in that little body than you know, kid."

Turning, I saw Coral, her blue mane fluttering in the portal's growing magic. Her soft smile sent a warmth of maternal comfort through me, even as much as I could see the pain it took her to accept this and put that expression onto her face.

"I never knew my mother too well, Coral, but if I had... I'd want her to be like you. You're the strongest pony I've ever met, you showed me what determination really is."

She pressed a hoof to her lips, then pressed it on the bars. "Any mother would be proud to see their colt turn out like you, my dear."

Below her, Chirpy, Starshine, and Lilac clutched to her legs, and waved. I tried to laugh and wave back.

Finally, my eyes fell back to Glimmerlight.

What words could even be said?

"Sis... you... you were... you gave me..." I stammered.

Thankfully, I didn't have to finish. She wiped her tears and grinned.

"You've been fighting your whole life for this moment. What's one more little wall, huh?"

Laughing, despite my weeping, I saw them all lifted from the floor as the spell took hold, my gaze following Glimmer.

"You were always there for me, for everything."

"Only cause you were for me, lil'bro." She spoke quietly, just enough for me to hear over the growing rush of magical energy.

Then the sudden flare of a teleport spell cracked into the room, and I caught one last glance of Unity's blank face looking almost directly at me. My heart thudded, pulling up what reserves I had left. Don't cry more now, I told myself. Not in these last few seconds.

I saw Glimmerlight's hoof reach out.

"Don't lose hope! You'll make it—"

And then, as that flaring light faded, they were gone.

The spell flared, leaving an empty platform and a singed taste in the air. The lights cut, and the panels all died. The last energy left in this place finally ran out.

Leaving me alone, in utter darkness.

Standing there, hearing only distant sounds in the corridors outside, I stared down at the

floor and shook, trying to not be overwhelmed by the realisation of what I'd just done. Of what I'd just given up.

Fighting with my body, to make it not shake, I had to keep telling myself over and over.

"I'm not crying..." I whispered. "I'm not crying."

Those were just drops of sweat dripping from my face, I told myself. Just water from the roof dripping off my mane. Just a leaky canteen. That's all they were.

"I'm not crying..."

Amongst the buried remains of Ministry Station, surrounded by the whispering shadows of fading memories and within earshot of howling entities that prowled the lost facility, I had never felt so utterly alone. Even on the surface, there had been ponies that, while not friends, were not enemies.

Now, I felt like the one remaining rational-thinking pony amongst the madness that had overtaken this place.

I had to wait for what felt like an hour in the portal room before the noises outside slowly subsided and any audible trace of those horrors had receded to further-off places. Only then did I dare open the heavy door to re-enter Ministry Station.

With none of the lighting units in the station active, the pale green of my PipBuck was my only source of light in the corridor ahead of me.

Once, such an environment had scared me into creeping around and tearfully curling up in whatever corner I could find. Now, I had a purpose. It was that purpose that had fuelled me to take this path, and if I hesitated for just a second, I feared for the hole of terrified inactivity I might fall into.

'Do what Protégé would do,' I told myself. Feel the momentum, let it carry you. Change something when you see a chance that you might be able to.

As soon as that door opened far enough, I was under it and galloping. I had to trust in my own ability to be quiet by this point if I wanted to do this. I ran for the central hub of the Ministry, that crossroads at the centre of the station, I knew it was straight ahead, even if I couldn't see it in the gloom. My light picked out the ruptured floors and door frames that threatened to knock my hooves out from under me. My ears heard wails and shrieks from far off that reverberated through the empty tunnels and platforms of the old metro station.

Upon reaching the hub, I swerved to the right, making for the nexus again. Behind me, I heard the crumble of loose earth and clattering panels as a broken ceiling split apart at last.

Immediately, I picked up the whiff of rotten mint.

I expected it, I knew they were here. They had reclaimed this place as their own. Vents and doors rumbled and clattered with their movements behind the walls, echoing through the earth in ways that simply shouldn't happen. The smell grew, and finally, I heard the sound behind me.

A gurgling, unnatural howl came from the hub behind me, so loud that I felt it overwhelm my senses and make me stumble while holding my ears until I hit the wall. At the same time, I felt something rock the entirety of Ministry Station. The ground heaved, and tossed me onto my nose. That howl never ended, I couldn't hear anything else, and it just grew and grew.

Stumbling, dragging myself up to scamper and flee, I saw a slow white light forming

behind me in the hub. They must have been in the room right across from it. Through the darkness, I saw a sudden movement, and felt my blood run cold.

The thin light was the form of two piercing eyes. That was all that was clear about it as it shifted and jerked into sight. The darkness felt like it was folding in around it, moving in rapid and sharp movements. Never smooth. Never distinct. It was like my eyes couldn't focus on it at all. I caught sight of lines. Limbs? I couldn't tell, as it shrieked and began to move in such rapid stuttering bounds that it almost felt like it was tearing through the air. Ahead of it washed a terrible change in the ambience, like Ministry Station itself was reflecting its presence. A wave of terror, pain, and hatred flowed through me and threatened to paralyze me on the spot.

I screamed and hurled myself away from it, galloping onwards down the corridor, tearing my eyes away with more effort than felt natural. I felt a sickening drop in my stomach, making me glad that darkness obscured any further detail. A nightmare made real came after me! Tripping, catching myself on the raised marble tiles and aftershocks passing through the corridors, I tried to remember which turnings led to the nexus, hearing it impact on the floor far harder and more rapidly than my own hooves were.

"NO!" I yelled, in futile command, at whatever it was coming up behind me, before colliding headlong into the doors to the small food court.

This was it!

Standing on my hind legs to reach the mouthpiece for the doorway, I pushed back with my forelegs and swung it open.

Hanging wires and lighting fixtures behind me began to sway and kick up. My shaking hooves fought to get inside from the howl only getting louder and closer. The door had a bar on the other side, linked to a lock that went behind a heavy self-service stand. The padlock fell off as I panicked and tried to slam it on. Wailing at my luck, I scrambled for it as the light in the pitch-dark area grew in the cracks of the door. Behind me, I could feel the dying pulses of the nexus in the next room. My head was spinning in fear, heartbreak, and dizziness. My hooves fumbled and dropped the lock again. I couldn't stop thinking about Unity and my friends. Their hurt faces, her blank, dead look.

You have to do this.

A wave of focus flowed through me as I gave up on the lock. Through the crack in the loose door, I saw those intense white glows streak around the corner. A darkness yawned open in the air below them, like a great maw, a tear into an unreal void. The howl amplified in volume, making my head buzz, as a feeling of revulsion and hopelessness washed over me.

Throwing my grapple to the top of the service cabinet, I bit the trigger and leapt backwards. With a metallic crash of plates and cutlery, the entire cabinet dropped down in front of the door, just in time for it to be knocked a good half a foot inwards by an enormous and intensely focused strike on the other side.

Go!

I didn't wait to see if it would hold, or to contemplate what I'd just seen. I fled between the upturned tables for the far door, trying not to throw up as the sensations faded. Off to my left, a second shrieking joined the first as another corridor heralded the rapid *thumpthumpthump* of something approaching. More were coming. The vents to my right were shaking violently free from their fastenings.

There was no way back.

I genuinely had no idea how my strength lasted to get the door to the nexus open again.

All I knew was the fear in my mind reminding me of the nightmares I'd had about how long the screams of those caught by those things lasted for. Pulling with all the might I could, I opened the door to the stunning orange and cream hue of the nexus once more.

Immediately, unexpectedly, the pain hit me right in my heart.

Slamming the door closed behind me, dropping the lock as the food court became a haven for those things, I felt my emotions crack. Something assailed me, and made me stagger back into the door again in time for their impact on the other side to make it strike me in the back of the head.

I fell forward and hit the floor. My head felt split, with pain lancing through my brain again and again from the back of my skull. Had I been concussed again? I couldn't tell. Rolling, I felt my balance fly out of control.

"Argh... what... Unity what..."

I mumbled. I forgot everything. I forgot those twisted creations, I forgot where I was. All I saw was orange and cream colours illuminating vague shapes of a room. Yet inside, all I could feel was raw emotion.

Intense fear. Hopelessness. Loneliness. Heartbreak.

It wasn't mine.

Hers.

Finally working out where the floor was below me, I got all four hooves down on it. Lying on my belly, I squinted hard and stared up at the orb.

It glowed in a horrid, broken way, like the colour within it was fighting, struggling against something. I felt so very afraid. I barely understood all this in the way that Aurora, Unity, or Glimmer did.

But I knew how she felt, and as I pulled myself closer, I could feel her solitude as if they had locked her away from me. Forgotten times were surfacing. As I got my hoof onto the railing of the gantry surrounding the nexus, I remembered the agony of us embracing before we erased our memories, or the panic when they'd told us we were to be executed in the Pit. Pulling myself up, I staggered and limped along the gantry on three hooves, the fourth holding the railing.

Find their signature and destroy it, Sparkler had said. Destroy it and she'll be saved.

But what about you?

I forced the thought back. I couldn't think on it. If I did, I'd snap.

Easing forward, I put my hooves onto the nexus itself and began to climb. While it was only around ten feet tall, the climb was hard for a dizzied, tired little pegasus to clamber up. Yet as I got closer, I felt the memories only get stronger. My eyes erupted into crying. My nose became blocked. My ears rung, hearing the howling outside, the thumping on the door, the collapsing of the station and the screaming of-

Of—

Her—

No, me. Or—

Slumping forward, I dropped my upper half beside the orb. My coat felt frazzled, like pins and needles all over, this close to powerful magic.

Find her signature.

I didn't understand what it all was, but I remembered her talking of that. Someone's magical signature, how everypony was different.

And I had hers.

Reaching into my saddlebag, I drew out the statuette she'd made for me so long ago. She had infused it with her magic, her special talent, to make me never feel entirely alone so long as I had it. Holding it against the orb, I saw all the colour in it gravitate toward the model. Sparkles shone around it, with the colour seeming to push and glow, like it was trying to escape; to get out and return to her.

I prayed this was right. I hadn't prayed so much these days, but at this moment, trapped below the surface in a nightmare, it was all I had.

I reached forward and grabbed the orb.

Then I screamed.

Agony surged up my limbs, the magic within it lashing out as I gripped my hooves around it and began to pull. I lost track of where I was. I saw the Ministry above, the Station below, the mountaintop, the Mall, my friends. It assailed my memories, forcing them back before tugging at them, like if I'd shoved my hooves into a spark-battery generator. My voice pitched, shrieking until I felt my lungs spasm. I wanted to let go. To shout 'please, stop the pain and the madness.' I wanted to throw myself away, but something kept me doing it. Kept me pulling, kept me lifting. Behind me, the door began to breach, the nightmares were trying to get in.

It didn't matter now.

I lifted the orb above my head, my balance whirling atop the nexus. Magical arcs flew out and streaked the walls around me. I couldn't look away from the galaxy-like shapes inside it, seeing dens, chains, and whips. It was holding Unity's memories, everything that made her Unity, trapped inside it!

"*Do it!*" I screamed to myself, willing my limbs to summon up the strength to move past the surging energies flowing through me.

Behind me, the door smashed open. The howling began, deafening. The walls, assailed by magic, split and collapsed. The roof began to cave.

Do it!

Crying out, I dove from the nexus, and brought the orb smashing down below me.

The feeling of my sore body impacting on the metal floor clashed with the shattering of glass.

And the sound of the entire room falling down behind me.

"Skydancer, hurry! Hurry!"

She was hesitating, looking back every few minutes. I'd found her in the front room with her parents, trying to overturn their couches to make a hopeless shelter in the way the pamphlets claimed might work. Her mother had been running the bath to collect water and trying to hang rugs over the windows. When I'd arrived to tell her about the Stable, her parents hadn't hesitated to push her to go with me.

Having to pick her up and tear her from them as she refused over and over to leave them had been the hardest thing I'd ever done, even after everything that had happened. Her father had looked me in the eyes before I left.

He'd realised the same thing I already knew, and I'd never seen him give me a look of respect and gratitude the way he had back then.

We had gotten out of the city after I'd convinced her to start flying us there. Only in the last

run to the Stable had the stable down after Equestrian Army soldiers warded any pegasi to land and not try to overfly the ticket gate. Others had gotten there first, with only some being let through. Even out here, the sirens were making my head hurt and my body feel chilled every time they picked up. We'd heard far off rumbles and seen flashes on the horizon, and I hoped they weren't what I thought they were.

Finally, we arrived in the queue at the gate, and I held onto Skydancer as we both wept along with anybody else who'd made it up here.

No one could find any words. Even the soldiers at the gate were wide eyed and shivering as they pushed people through or warded them back. I saw the mighty sight of two Steel Rangers guarding the Stable door itself within a short cave. Inscrutable and unmoving, they watched us all.

Around us, there were scant few reunions, and a lot of questions. Stallions and mares were bitter and angry, while foals clung tightly, wondering why everyone was shouting. Pets ran rampant as they were denied access and pushed out to be abandoned on the hillside. One stallion lay on the ground being attended to. He'd had a heart attack in the shock of the moment.

"Sundial, they—"

"Don't try to see it."

"Why..."

"I don't know, I just don't know."

We swayed back and forth, hooves tightly wrapped around one another, until finally we came to the gate.

"Ticket!" The soldier hastened to us.

I took the large plastic ticket from my pocket, holding it up.

"In addition, Miss Aurora Star of the Ministry of Arcane Science says that Skydancer here can—"

The soldier cut me off.

"Where's her ticket?"

"Sir, this is Aurora Star herself that told me she could—"

"No ticket, no way in! Come on! We don't have time, ticket or get back, sir!"

"The Ministry—"

"The Ministry isn't Stable-Tec, sir! Now come on if you have one!"

I hadn't held out much hope for that plan. I'd just wished. I'd hoped that this could have all ended better. Only now I knew what I had to do.

I turned and gave the ticket to Skydancer.

"Sundial, what are you doing!?" She shrieked as I took her in my hooves and pushed her toward the guard.

"She's taking my ticket, is that okay?"

"Sundial!"

He nodded, "This way Ma—"

"NO!" Skydancer fought us both, before grabbing me and planting her lips onto mine. "I don't want to lose my family and you! We... we could—"

Holding onto her, feeling my tears hit her shoulder, I shivered at the choice I was making. Yet everything up till now, it had been to do this. To get her in.

It hadn't always worked out the way I'd wanted to, but I'd been given a chance to do at least this.

"Sky, I wish I could tell you everything that happened. But... but you have to do this."

I actually expected her to argue more, but something was off about her expression as she slowly nodded. Her voice dropped.

"I... I will. But it's... it's because... I was going to tell you, I meant to soon, I..."

She leaned into my ear, and I heard two words. Two words that changed my entire outlook on this. That reinforced all the reasoning, all the more importance for her to be the one to take the ticket. The reason her father had looked at me that way, he'd thought I knew already.

Leaning back, we tearfully gazed at one another, as I felt my hoof go to her belly and softly settle there. It felt insane to laugh, to smile at this time, but I did.

At the end, I could save more than just her. And I felt happy that I was. There were no words, so I simply pulled her face closer to mine instead.

With one final kiss, exactly the kind that had turned her from crush to love, I let them pull her away toward the Stable door.

Amongst the rioting mob left behind, I stood alone and still as I watched it close.

Somehow, I dreamed. As though my mind was so tired, so hurt and worn thin after all this time that I simply needed to fall into another world from tiredness.

I dreamed that I sat upon the hills outside Fillydelphia, watching the panic below as distant sirens touched the edges of my hearing. The horizon was lit with great flares that crackled and glinted in the dying light. I could even feel the soft grass beneath me, and feel the intoxicating touch of clean air in my lungs. In a moment of horror, everything was oddly peaceful and quiet.

Beside me, sat Sundial.

Only now did I really see how weak and worn out he was. His eyes were sunken with thick black marks, and his normally bushy mane hung limply around his shoulders. His head turned to me while I stared, and gave a sad smile.

"I guess this is finally it, huh? All this way."

I had no words, simply nodding instead.

Sundial sighed and stared at his home below. "In the end, this mattered more. I couldn't save us both, but at least I got her... I got them, safe."

"That's what matters." I didn't know what else to say, not knowing if I was speaking to him or not. "They're safe..."

He spluttered, his eyes turning wet, but as he brought a hoof to his face I saw him force a smile.

"Those I care about. Maybe not all in the end, but enough for me to feel I managed something. Now I guess it's just..."

He looked up, as I felt my vision darkening around me. Everything grew hazy, and I slowly began to lose feeling from my body. Yet in the sky, I saw and heard the distant approach of something coming down from the clouds. He held up his PipBuck and clutched it tightly, as I felt myself do the same to my journal.

"I'm going to leave this for someone else. Someone to know what happened here. Someone who maybe, sometime in the future, will carry it away from this place, to find some measure of freedom, to return it to those who survived."

The object fell, and a static noise of crackling green fire washed over the world.

I fell, knowing this was as far as I would come. At least, in the end, I'd done what he did, something worth-

The green light warped and split. Orange and cream grew within it, burning my eyes and warming my freezing body. From within it, I saw a shape. A hoof reaching down for me, grabbing my own.

Unity.

"It won't be just me. I won't allow it, Murky. Remember what we swore?"

Her face was bright, determined and believing, as she pulled me back; away from the darkness. I heard the resolve in her voice, the determination to keep a promise.

"Together... or not at all."

She smiled, as she pulled me from the brink.

"So go and make it 'together,' Murky!"

My eyes shuddered open to find myself covered in dust and rubble.

From my hoof, I heard a *Click* of a PipBuck's audio recording ceasing.

And in front of me, around the shards of the orb, an orange glow drifting away.

Tired, I was so very tired. Behind me, the entire room had collapsed, sealing me away from the entrance and those things in the tunnels. Sparks dropped from shattered lighting fixtures above me, giving intermittent lighting in the blackness of the abandoned station.

Watching the final glimmers of the orb's glow fade away, I hoped Sparkler was right.

The task ahead of me was terrifyingly daunting, however. I'd been granted one last chance. One last, desperate, chance to do the impossible. I couldn't lie here and die without taking it. Not after all this! She wouldn't want me to. None of them would.

Even if I didn't think it possible, they believed I could; and that was enough for me this time to try it.

Staggering to my hooves, gasping for air and sucking down RadAway, I fell into the corridor behind the nexus room, the same one Shackles had escaped into. Limping, swaying on my hooves, I cantered as best I could down the corridor, knowing there was some way to the surface, he wouldn't have come this way if there wasn't. I left behind me the shattered remains of Aurora's work, for the very last time. Just as I'd left behind the Mall.

But now I knew to myself, just as I'd leave behind Fillydelphia.

It took time, but eventually I found the thin service-way that Shackles must have taken, its steep steps promising an escape. Falling into them, I pulled and pulled, every step a sore effort, until I finally came to the heavy trap door, still open.

Rolling out of it, grimacing as my muscles rebelled against the motion, I dragged myself onto the wooden steps of the serviceway I'd ended up in. I was back in the ticket hall we'd entered, a previously sealed door forced apart with Shackles' strength.

Limping, I fell against the lift controls, and heard it descending. I fell into it, and felt like I was sleeping the whole way back up. I had my saddlebags left. A canteen of RadAway, one healing potion, some food from the raid on the logistics warehouse, a small tent, my battle saddle and Protégé's pistol. There were other odds and ends to survive outside like camping tools and a map of the surrounding area, but I'd not been able to carry much with me. Most of the supplies were in the bags I'd sent my friends away with, I couldn't have made it through there again carrying so much. It'd do. It had to.

As I came to the surface and wandered through the abandoned Ministry, I did not find the same city I had once known.

Fillydelphia was burning.

The heat struck me first, before my I felt my lungs spasm and clench within me. The front yard of the Ministry was ablaze. Choking, eyes stinging, I staggered through the gaps in the fire and witnessed the fiery carcass of the city.

Red brick and concrete splintered and cracked from tenements. From the ground to the fragmented rooftops, everything was covered in a fine layer of ash and red dust, the same material that hung in the air and the sky, drifting in lazy, choking clouds. To my left, at the end of the street, I witnessed a searing and blackened crater, fifty feet wide that radiated with magical sparks. The ground beneath my hooves was stinging from red-hot fragments littered all around from the factory that had been exploded by whatever that meteoric impact had been. No Enclave weapon I knew of could have done that, and I could see their ships looking like they'd been melted in the same way. Their remaining ships hung in the sky, exchanging sporadic fire with the ground, a stubborn and pointless gesture from two sides clearly no longer capable of fighting. Skyship wrecks littered the ground, their clouds still sending lightning shocks into streetlamps or fences near them as their cloud generators malfunctioned on the ground.

It felt claustrophobic and alien. On all sides, I felt blocked off by collapsing structures or sparking fires. Struggling to breathe, I pulled my fleece up over my mouth, stretching the collar to give me any form of filtering from the choking smog in the air. Blinking away my watering eyes, I staggered down the only route I could. There were a series of steps ahead, possibly into a park. I hoped that a little more open space might give me a break to get my bearings.

Around me, dark shapes hid in buildings that weren't ablaze. Most were shivering, or rocking in shock. Others moaned and cried from wounds. In the distance, I heard worryingly familiar howls of supernatural volume on the cutting winds. I wandered as one lonely little pony around those who had witnessed what happened here.

Some of them saw me, before fleeing deeper into their building. Another one grabbed a radio before he went.

It was an uncomfortable reminder. This was still Fillydelphia. There were still griffons in the sky, and still slavers surrounding me. Their scrap-built bridges were, in some places, still intact between bent buildings. I heard shouts and pushed onwards, trying to disappear through the thick smoke that billowed horizontally out of an old toy-shop to my right and across the street. I felt the stairs beneath me in the blinding cloud, and pushed myself into a gallop to climb them. Slowly, I gained sight again as I passed out of it, seeing a row of concrete steps, that led me onto a raised area. Park benches were settled either side of me, with old tourist telescopes overlooking the city.

I gained my first sight of what had become of the city as a whole.

Fires, hundreds of metres in length, surged across Fillydelphia in great walls, consuming buildings and turning them into blackened silhouettes. They rose into the sky, warping and twisting to greater heights than I thought possible, like some nightmare-scape. I could hear a screeching hiss, before realising it was rain, boiling and evaporating in the air before it could often hit the ground above the fires. Storms had gathered above the city and gale winds rushed down to fuel the fires and blast boiling rain across my face at this elevated

position. I could see more of those same craters all across the city, where they had devastated factories, or left bisected ships strewn on the ground. Something had rained from the heavens, like a meteor shower, and had killed the war. In doing so, it had broken the Enclave fleet and shattered what remained of Fillydelphia. In the distance, through all the smoke, the imposing figure of the Wall remained present, and below it, I saw scattered remnants of slavers trying to round up all the unfortunates they could, like faded black ghosts in the distance. Elsewhere, I heard wailing screams echoing off walls. Terror, panic, and pain.

It felt like another world. I'd often called this place a 'hell city,' but it felt like that abstract comparison had become a terrible reality.

A warped electronic shriek cut through the air. Static and audio feedback so loud that I winced and hunkered down against the vista's wall. My hairs bristled, remembering the unnatural electronic sounds of the metro's horrors from before, and how they were once again on the surface now, somewhere in this city. Yet instead the PA system speakers to either side of me cut into life, finally breaking through into a deep and sickly voice.

His voice.

"Stern is dead."

It seemed to echo from every angle around me, coming through the fires themselves. I could hear the speakers and their vague direction, but I couldn't see them anywhere through the smoke and fire.

"In her death, I am now the Master of Fillydelphia."

"No... no, no..." I whimpered to myself, feeling very visible all of a sudden. I heard him continue, sending instructions to his slavemasters, to the overseers, to collect all they could. He decreed that Enclave soldiers found on the ground will be the first generation of new slaves to rebuild their, or his, legacy.

The circle would begin all over again. Protégé had told me how Fillydelphia had been before Red Eye, and fate seemed to have conspired to return it to that state.

I heard Shackles begin to chuckle to himself, a confident, smirking laugh. I could even see his face in my mind.

"And Number Seven, I told you that you'd come back to me, didn't I?"

I willed my limbs to move, but they were rooted to the spot, even as they felt like they were burning on the heated ash covering the ground as the city itself spoke. Suddenly, I became aware that I wasn't alone. In the buildings surrounding the park, I saw dark shapes approaching. Fuzzy at the edges, their outlines bending like broken mirrors in the heat-waves, they began to shift out toward me.

"You have cost me, Number Seven. You have cost me dearly in a way I can never recreate now. I may not be able to do that, but I still have you, and you will be an example. A reminder of the consequences. If at the very least that is what I can retrieve from you after what you did, then that is more than enough. I rebuilt this city once, Number Seven. I can do it again. Fillydelphia!"

His voice rung out, and I winced hard at the last, shouted word creating feedback that rung in my ears.

"A small green pegasus exists among you. Many of you know him."

I saw the slavers begin to all stand up, advancing out of the buildings they'd been sheltering in. Red eyed gas masks moved beside bandaged and warped faces. Many were shivering, looking shell-shocked and broken in their eyes, like they obeyed without

question. Slowly, I began to back off.

“He belongs to me. He always will. He is at the crossroads park near the Ministry of Arcane Science.”

A shuffling made me pause, as I turned to see more ponies began to limp and stumble around the front of the park. All of them fixated on me.

“The one who brings him before me, who brings him home, shall be the one who is to be pulled from the fires, and to be rewarded with whatever they wish, protected by my side. A successor to the chain.”

A circle of slavers surrounded me. Injured, desperate and seeing their chance to be elevated before them, they growled and threatened with intermingling voices. Behind them, I saw others coming around corners, or peering from windows and bridges. Griffons began to circle toward the crossroads.

Activating it, my new E.F.S. was blanketed in red. Alone in a hostile city, with the Wall far off and with limited supplies, I realised for the first time the sheer impossibility of my challenge.

One lonely slave, inside a city that sought to keep him here, surrounded by a colossal wall. A legion of slavers seeking him. No one behind him now. No known way out.

In the end, I always knew, it came back to this, at the very simplest level of everything I knew I was, since the very beginning.

A slave seeking to escape his master.

“You will be brought home, Number Seven.”

Looking back ahead, I bit my lip and steeled my heart.

“You’re right...” I muttered, as the circle closed and I kicked out my hoof to activate the trigger on my saddle. “...but this isn’t my home.”

Crying out, if anything to stir my own frightened body into action, I raced forward, my wings spread. They swarmed toward me, as I leapt and fired my grapple-hook above their heads. Feeling the impact of it on the nearest building, I bit hard on the trigger. With a tug on my saddle straps, I shot above their heads and opened my wings. Gliding past those surging forward, I dropped to the floor behind them and stumbled, reeling the hook back in as fast as I could.

Dozens, perhaps more, immediately spun and chased me. I could hear radios barking locations already.

In the distance, the slow winding moan of the balefire siren began to pick up across the city, a rallying cry of an escapee, even at this insane moment. It was a city with one purpose now in mind, as far as I knew.

“Running won’t help you now, little slave. You have nowhere to go.”

With howling slavers at my heels, I put my head down and ran into the city. I had no idea what to do now.

I’d known it the moment I’d chosen to come back. I’d known it back when I had first taken a run at the wall on my own. This couldn’t be done.

But I was going to try anyway.

My hooves pounded into the split tarmac, carrying me down the street we had so recently fled through in armoured wagons. Behind me, a crowd of slavers surged from every alleyway

and still standing doorway as the word of their prize went out. I could hear their taunts, their every command. Gunshots occasionally slapped into the ground near me, causing me to stumble and try to swerve around, slowing me down.

Already I was breathing hard, my heart thumping painfully in my chest like a jackhammer. Every instinct said to stop, to lie down from the battering I'd taken in the last few days. But if I did, then I'd have given it all up.

I yelled, suddenly scraping to a halt. Down the street, a group of slavers tumbled out of their den, snarling and preparing their battle saddles. I saw nets loaded into them, blocking my path.

"Come here, slave!"

Surrounded, I ran to the side and fired my grapple-hook to the nearest building. As the two sides of slavers converged, I bit the trigger and tugged myself up the fractured wall. Teeth hurting from biting so hard, I peddled with my hooves, trying to climb the vertical surface as the winch mechanism in my saddle squealed and grew hot against my side from the steep angle. Rocks and sticks hurled up at me. Heat seared my underside as I dropped through a window and found the building to be aflame. The floors had dissolved inside, leaving me with only rotting and smouldering planks to edge and canter across as I tried to keep moving forward.

It was my only plan. The hole in the wall from before was the only way out I knew of. Once the panic had passed, I'd spent the last ten minutes trying to head in that direction. It wasn't too far from where I'd come out.

Outside, the slavers kicked in the doors, and I heard them arguing about the bottom floor being covered in fire. Above me, griffons descended and began pointing through the smoke, down through the roofless burning building. I leapt across a gap, pulling myself into the next room, before screaming and scrambling on flimsy wood as it kept falling out from under me. Grabbing hold of a staircase, I rushed onto the rooftops, choking and patting at my clothing from the embers that had fallen on it.

Hidden in the smoke, I ran to the edge of the building, and leapt the six feet to the next one. Made of sandstone, it had stayed upright, and I tried to get my pace up again. I could see the broken wall in the distance. I just had to stay out of sight, to become hidden again, and I could—

No. Oh no.

The wall was still broken, but it was closed.

Even at this distance, the moment I crossed over to get a better look at it from this high up, I saw the full squads of soldiers surrounding it. They covered the ramp I had carried Protégé up, with searchlights and hounds prowling the old killing-zone between the buildings and the wall.

Reaching the edge of the rooftop, I stopped and stared. My heart sunk.

"You honestly thought that I would permit you the same way as those wretches before you, Number Seven?"

The voice carried across Fillydelphia, ever-present, making use of Red Eye's system to reach all his 'workers.' My hooves quivered as I hunched into an old air-conditioning unit and watched the griffons searching for me.

"You have forgotten me, slave. You have forgotten that I know you. Chains are in your blood, my blood."

I shook my head, I refused to believe it, even now. The scar on my forehead thudded and

ached. 'It's just the headache,' I told myself. That balefire siren was unending, driving into my skull. The roar of the fires like a bottom line of sound that was blanketing my fragile hearing.

Shivering in place, as slavers surrounded the building, I struggled to think of any way I could get past the soldiers, but they were even setting up a giant net to cover the hole. He knew I could glide. He was taking steps.

The madness, the sheer, single minded *insanity* of it to capture one small slave was soul-crushing. Had I died in the station and woken to a nightmare world built for me?

He was making a point.

Looking around, I saw the griffons coasting on the hot fumes of the fires, scanning with their sharp eyes.

They—

That was it.

I had done it before. I'd glided from the top of a crane and crossed half the city by air to catch up with Unity and a sky-wagon. The furnaces had given me lift, but now the entire city was a rising wave of heat.

All I needed was a high enough starting point, and maybe I could gain enough height to at least get a grapple onto the lip of the wall. Once I was up there, I could just glide off the other side!

And I knew just where to go. Peering out across the rooftops, between two pillars of flame that erupted again and again as ammunition stockpiles exploded warehouse by warehouse, I could see the crane still standing.

Crawling out before this entire building fell into itself, I threw on my goggles and made a run for it. I felt my wings flapping by my sides as I rushed for the front end of the roof and dove off of it. Behind me, the cries of griffons were almost immediate, attracted by the movement below them. Damn their hunting attuned eyes!

Spreading my wings, I felt the wind catch them and pull me away from my perch. My weight was supported from the air currents, as I flew across the street, into the next side road back toward the Ministry, the crane I remembered was nearby to it. Four flights up, I had enough height to stay aloft and pass over the old highway, using the dropping away elevation of the city to keep me in the air.

Risking a glance back, I saw and heard the rushing griffons diving from above, talon's outstretched. Screaming, I banked hard. One flew past me, their strong wings recovering to gain more height. I felt uncertain in the air, as I dove and turned, whirling in circles to try and dodge more than move forward. Hanging in the air, I started to lose height. I started to slow down.

Three griffons began to dive from above. I wouldn't have enough speed left to properly dodge them.

So instead, I tucked my hooves in and dove sharply. Retracting my wings, I did the only thing I knew I could to get some speed back, I dropped like a stone. The burning ground of the city rose up to meet me, as I felt the heat on my face growing. Behind me, the griffons surged through the air.

At the last second, I opened only a single wing, and let the sudden resistance on one side of my body flip me over and throw my body to the side. Spreading them both, I veered for what I could see that might help me, a narrow alleyway between two warehouses. The moment I had it lined up, I shut both my wings again and hurtled out of the sky toward it.

Blanketed in smoke, I could barely see it through my goggles. They misted up slightly. I couldn't see the edges.

Far faster than I had ever expected to go, I raced into the alleyway.

Behind me, I heard the shocked cries as the much larger griffons threw out their wings and halted their descent. They couldn't fit their wingspans into it, but the few seconds I had to appreciate that were immediately lost. A fire escape came racing up through my vision, and I struggled to get my wings out. I barely slowed down enough to not break my ribs on impact, grabbing onto it with both hooves as the rusty structure collapsed below me. My hind legs kicking into the air, I tugged and pulled myself onto the leaning structure, diving off it before the entire thing tore off the wall and fell into the darkness beneath. Confused, disoriented, I threw out my tired wings once again and drifted to the ground, almost spearing myself on the metal bars of the fallen fire escape in the process.

The moment I got back up, the smell of rotten mint fell across the alleyway.

Screaming in abject frustration and panic, I immediately ran forward as something began to move opposite me through the corrugated walls of the warehouse. The sheer, hurtful unfairness washed over me like a reminder that this world had become one of darkness and terrors ever since I had broken the orb. I couldn't stop. I couldn't rest. Ever.

And I could feel myself losing the stamina and mental strength to continue already.

Metal panels broke ahead of me. Wailing, I ducked and rolled beneath the level of them, catching a glimmer of movement from the corner of my eye following every panel knocked out. I wove and ducked. It tried to smash through every section of the warehouse, and I could only pray that the door wasn't open at the end. My fear drove me to leap over a burning pile of wood and bluntly ram through the flimsy fence at the end of the alleyway. Tumbling down a slope, end over end, I eventually felt the wet slap of mud hit me.

Above me, I saw a griffon land at the top of the slope, with two others descending.

He was pulled back from the lip and I heard a horrid shriek. He disappeared so quickly, I almost missed it during a blink. His group began firing from the sky down into the alleyway with desperation, crying what I guessed was his name.

Slopping in the thick mud, finding an odd relief in its damp coolness from the heated air, I awkwardly pulled myself down the dry riverbed I'd fallen into. Near the bend in the river, I could see the crane, it—

Exploded.

I saw the white flare from around its base, before the detonation shook the ground below me. Slowly, it toppled, the crane's arm turning and pointing to the sky as it all crashed down and demolished the surrounding construction yard.

Tugging myself out the other side of the riverbed, putting some distance between me and the massacre happening behind me at the warehouse, I could only stare as the plan I had only just imagined went down in front of me,

"I will permit nothing that you might use now. Nothing. Think about your position, runt. Even if you got over the wall, what then?"

Shivering, I ran into the nearest cover I could find, a shanty-town that had once housed slaves. Now it had become a maze of rot and debris. Running in circles, I sought to find a way out, a way back to the streets.

"Fillydelphia is surrounded by low hills and plains. Hellhounds prowl its territory. The next closest city is many miles away."

'I don't care,' I thought to myself, as I bucked the mesh gate open and fled back onto

what I recognised as the roads back to the refinery I'd first gained my rad-sores in.

"You have little to no food, you are sick and hurt. How far could you even get? You haven't nearly enough RadAway for that sickness, do you?"

I'd made it this far! As I turned the corner, I saw a roadblock up ahead, as black-clad soldiers pointed in my direction. In my exhaustion, I was getting sloppy, I should have stopped and gone to ground.

The crane collapsing had left me aimless, and careless.

"No..." I whined, before turning back again to flee further up the street, as though heading toward the old town, where that Orphanage had once been.

"And what beyond that, Number Seven? What then? You believe the wasteland is a paradise? It is every bit as ruthless as it is in here, and much of it isn't too fond of pegasi after what just happened."

As I neared the old town, hoping to go to ground properly this time, I skidded to a halt. Every street I tried was almost the same. Road blocks. Hovering griffons. Rotten mint. Swarming parasprites after the pits had been broken open in the war.

"You have to slow down and face the fact at some point, Number Seven. You cannot run forever."

Turning back, I made for the only safer place I knew.

For the next hour, I sought to return to the Mall and locate the sewer entrance, but as I got close, I could spy the harsh light of slavers welding it shut. I ran, I hid, I flew, I fought, I escaped, and I struggled against the cage that was tightening on all sides.

My energy was dwindling, and every way I turned, the net was closing in. They had radios, top cover from the skies and an army behind their master. Every time they saw me, they were coming closer. For hours, I tried to find any opportunity to rest, only for them to root me out, or for the fires to spread into whatever building I hid in.

Every step of the way, he threw nothing but near truths into my head.

I was afraid, in a very terrible way that I had never known before. I had been frightened, both sharply and over time. I'd been scared my whole life. But this was new. It was a creeping inevitability.

As I huddled against a chimney stack, staring at slavers in the roads below hunting for me, I realised that was wrong. I had felt it before, when my wings had been taken to that anvil the night after gaining my cutie-mark. When something you know is going to destroy your new-found hopes is going to happen and you can't prevent it. A mixture of frustration and denial.

This was like that, only stretched across hours, rather than seconds.

"You are in the block beside the Ministry of Wartime Technology, Number Seven. We know. The irradiated tunnel below the wall you tried on your first time has been sealed."

It was impossible to escape through that anyways, but he'd sealed it. I could hear slavers muttering to themselves, questioning the apparent obsession of their master; but their prize was worth it, and none would dare oppose him openly. It was like he had thrown a blanket of control over the whole city. A psychological command of being the only voice of authority left who could speak to them all. I could see Shackles' most ardent supporters leading the groups. Brutal and respected by their peers, they were enforcing his word. They spoke of figures like Whiplash and Wicked Slit being elevated into upper ranks due to their support of Shackles, bringing their own loyal followers with them.

He had cast my capture as a sign of unity, an accomplishment to prove that slavers were

still in control of this city. One of the slaves who had helped 'lead' the rebellion that had killed many of them or their comrades and robbed them of their slaves.

I wondered if it might crumble later, if his single-mindedness with me would let others see the madness that had overtaken him. Not that it made a difference to me. If I was caught, it wouldn't matter if he lost to more sane leadership again in future, I'd still be his.

Right now, that felt like the only thing he cared about. The thought that *I* had driven *him* to this in the same way he'd driven me to want to escape sent a shiver down my spine. I'd never imagined such hatred following me.

He knew everything about me. He knew every escape attempt and had been learning all my likely safe-spots.

I wiped my eyes. They hurt and stung from swollen tear ducts and the heated dryness that had overcome them afterwards. If I wanted out of here, I had only one option. Every bar had slammed shut around me, and every one of my plans had been killed before I'd even gotten to try.

"You are alone, Number Seven."

Only one option. Do something entirely different. Something I *couldn't* have done before. Something he didn't think I was capable of.

Break the chains. Break that which held me in. Break the wall, and then soar through. All on my own.

"Your friends aren't here to save you."

They didn't have to. They believed I could do it.

And I trusted them more than I believed *him*.

I held my charcoal in my mouth, even as I shivered and sweated from fear. The plan was in my head, but I needed to see it before me. I needed to know it could work. Tucked into the last hiding spot I could find, I had a blank and grey wall before me, crying out for something to be added to it. Slavers weren't too far away, but I needed this to settle my mind.

Lines. I had to do lines. They were shaky and jagged as I squinted through my goggles. Lines connecting all the parts I needed. To show the wall, I began to curve them with thick and strong sweeps. Curves. Curves to show me the route I'd have to take.

Curves, linking all the parts across the city. From where I was, to the Enclave crash site somewhere along the way. I knew one had to be close by, they were everywhere. From there I needed shapes.

Shapes, to draw the items I needed from it to help escape the iron ring closing down around me. They had to show me what I needed before reaching the FunFarm. Shapes to draw the enormous ferris wheel I'd seen every day for so very long in that den. Shapes to show me the pegasus skyport nearby to that side of the city, to show me its tall control tower. Shapes to show the wall behind the ferris wheel.

Shapes to show me the path to *life*.

I stepped back, the charcoal dropping as I clutched my saddlebag like a soft toy and stared at it.

My last chance lay out in front of me. One last attempt. If I failed, I somehow just knew that I'd never be able to escape again.

But it was mine. My plan. It was all I had, and it was new. He couldn't predict me now.

I heard shouting from nearby as I gathered my things. I glanced at the charcoal, before rubbing it all off with a rag. No mistakes, no evidence. I strapped my bags and battle-saddle on, and then began to climb the building. I had mere minutes before griffons spotted me, but going up the metal gantry gave me enough of a view to look over the houses until I finally spotted what I needed.

The black carcass of a crashed skyship, surrounded by lifeless forms of Enclave troopers.

Beyond it, the FunFarm, where it had all began.

Beyond that, the wall next to the ferris wheel.

Beyond *that*, freedom.

I couldn't hesitate. If I did, they'd clamp down again. A belief that I could do it was the only thing holding me up.

Taking a deep breath, I leapt from the edge of the roof, and began to glide toward the ship, passing quietly above the heads of the slavers. Already, I saw a griffons beginning to stop and stare from much higher up, checking out the movement they saw.

'I can do this,' I could only keep telling myself.

'I can do this.'

"You cannot escape this city, Number Seven."

'Yes I can.'

"I think he went into the wreck!"

"Get down there then!"

My hooves tossed the supply crate to the side and went back to fighting with the locker. I wasn't an expert on anything about the Enclave, but I'd seen their soldiers working. I'd seen them use flares throughout the war. We'd learned early on to avoid areas marked in bright colours. They often got hit from the sky soon after.

I didn't have any explosives, so I had to make someone else do the task for me.

The locker burst open, revealing nothing but several small packs of tightly sealed food and tablets. Not what I needed, but I shovelled them into my saddlebag regardless as I looted my way through the shattered ship. Trying to hold my stomach, I dug around in the harnesses of the corpses within it, pushing their broken armour aside to try and find anything that looked like a flare. Further from the flames amidst the skyship's crater, I could feel rain lashing against my back through the holes in the upper side of the wreck and making the metal slippery beneath me.

The voices from outside got closer as I heard hooves sliding down the loose and damp earth. Clattering metal signalled their approach, as my hooves finally found coloured tubes with small strings behind them. This had to be them!

I gathered all of them I could, before coming across two others that looked thicker. Struggling through my misted goggles, I tried to make out the letters, mouthing them as I touched my hoof across them.

S-M-O-

What was that one? 'K'?

Smoke!

"There he is!"

Looking behind me, griffons were clambering up through the hole in the middle of the ship.

“Come with us!”

I bared my teeth and pulled the pin from the smoke grenade, tossing it at them.

“How about you blow up instead!” My raspy voice screamed at them, as I turned and ran toward the cockpit, aiming to dive out the shattered glass. Behind me, they scattered with yells about a grenade. They’d fallen for the trick! The smoke ignited and filled the interior in clashing and thick grey fog.

I ran through it, did my best to avoid the shards of thick glass in the cockpit and dropped to the ground outside. Tripping once over an Enclave trooper’s metal body, I scrambled up the side of the crater. Already, the radios around were bleeping and crying out about me escaping again.

Running into the closest home, an old bungalow that looked about fifty years older than any of the others, I started pulling out the flares. I’d seen the roadblock on the other side after all.

The moment I got inside the house, two of them were waiting for me.

The first grabbed me from around the door, his wet forelegs gripping around my neck. Squealing, seeing the second one rushing over, I kicked out frantically with my legs and connected with the second one’s muzzle. Behind me, others were climbing up the crater.

“Got ya! Stay still! Stay—YARGH!”

I bit his foreleg and clenched as hard as I could. This was no time to fight cleanly. I tasted blood, and it felt like my teeth tore something as I ripped away from him. Grabbing a broken lamp from the house’s cabinet, I hurled it at the first one I’d kicked and ran past him, slipping beneath the dinner-table to block his path. As I passed by the front of the house, I pulled the string on one flare and tossed it outside through the open front door. I could see the roadblock starting to move in on me, with soldiers advancing.

At the sight of the blue smoke sparking up from the bright light of the flare, they immediately fled. They knew what it meant as much as I did.

“Is that...” The slaver behind me stared. “You idiot! What are you doing!?”

Hyperventilating, I began backing away from him. “What I need to. Because you won’t let me go.”

Their radios lit up with panicked voices. Both of them turned and ran out the back, screaming at the others to back off. Taking the opportunity, and against every instinct I’d learned from the war, I ran out the front and past the flare itself; using the fear they had of it as a distraction. Slavers and soldiers ignored me as I slipped past them in the shadows and smoke.

Up above, I heard a roar as one of the remaining skyships braved the few anti-air guns left to start angling in on the street. Likely they thought they had some grounded pegasus survivor in trouble. In a way, they weren’t wrong.

Sprinting until my lungs burned, I fled down the street and tried to veer away from anyone who noticed me. I kept hoping they didn’t launch anything *too* big, before—

The street beyond me erupted, launching me off the ground. The impact hit me like a gale force wind, before the sound caught up and deafened me. Closing my eyes, I careened into a wooden picket fence, smashing through it into dead grass.

For a second, everything seemed still. Deafened, my ears ringing, I lay there and stared into the stormy sky. Through the smog, the lightning seemed red in colour, only

occasionally lighting in a crackling white when it peeked through gaps. Burning wood landed around me as debris from the airstrike dropped all around.

Looking back, the roadblock's barriers were simply gone, with a dozen slavers and soldiers rolling on the ground, just as dizzied as I was. Loose earth and flat tarmac chunks clattered down to the ground around the small crater. The plasma weapon had struck exactly where I'd dropped the flare.

They were accurate. Compared to other airstrikes I'd seen, this seemed to be something low-yield, probably to not endanger troopers on the ground. The skyship arced around, orbiting the site as though watching for something.

A small rise of hope began to fill me again. That was what I needed! The mess of sounds in the city began to slowly return, as I pushed onward. I'd slipped past those pursuing me, depriving them of knowledge on where I was for the moment. I had a clear shot at the FunFarm.

Ahead of me was the main route of trade through Fillydelphia, the same direction Shackles had humiliated me down when he'd first claimed me. Now, broken from the pursuers, I limped until feeling returned to my body. As I moved at the edge of the road, sticking behind smoke and dark overhangs of the half wrecked factories, I saw the FunBarn itself in ruins. Struck right at the start of the war, it was just a shell of thick timber now. On my left, I saw Wicked Slit's factory at the centre of attention. Shadowed figures of captured Enclave were being herded into it along with any recovered slaves. A shrieking mare's voice carried on the wind, ordering higher ranks than before around. I didn't go any closer.

Ducking off the road, I took a few minutes to crawl beneath an upturned wagon to get my breath back. Outside, slavers ran past my hiding spot. They hadn't a clue which road I'd taken, and I couldn't imagine they would predict I'd try to return to my old slave pen. Fighting not to choke on fumes as the storm's furious winds send red ash surging across the street, I returned to my last journey.

I approached from across the back road, slipping into the scrap-fields I'd found Sundial's PipBuck in. Crawling through enormous pipes and hiding below tarps, I slowly, achingly, made my way toward the ferris wheel. It lay behind the metal ruin of the old rollercoaster, the spotlights on it all smashed. It wasn't tall enough to get enough height for gliding over the wall, and it was much too close to it anyway, but I had an idea.

The entire Farm seemed abandoned, other than occasional passes by griffons and some individual slavers wandering the stands, but I knew that as soon as I did this, they'd work out I was here in a heartbeat. Moving through the old food outlets and carnival games, I sneaked behind slavers or hid from them to close in on the wheel. Their attention was on everywhere but their immediate surroundings, mostly seeming concerned about the fire from the FunBarn making its way down to the rides if the wind turned this way.

It was about now that I felt my adrenaline finally start to ebb away in the slower paced sneaking. It would be brief, but I had to stop and put my hooves to my face. Surrounded by hellish fire, stinging rain, and a city falling into anarchy all over again, I just felt overwhelmed. It was like slavery and war had found a horrific middle ground, with horrors and creatures seeping back to the surface from parasprite pits and the metro.

"I can't stay here." I had to mutter it aloud to myself, just to hear a voice that wasn't foul and demanding. "I'm going to fly away, and he's never going to see me again."

Gulping, I tried hard to believe it. Only after stopping could I feel how tired I was, but with any luck, after this last run I wouldn't need my legs any more to do this. Sucking down

RadAway from my canteen, the relief it caused made me aware of how much my throat and lungs were burning with more than exhaustion. The radiation in the air was being carried on all this ash from the fires and winds. The air felt thin, eaten up by the furnaces. The rain slicked mud in this cooler section of the FunFarm looked like blood beneath my hooves in the red glare of Fillydelphia, and my skin felt like it was crawling with light burns. My breath was wheezy every time I tried to suck in the hot, thick air. It felt almost funny, to think that hours before I'd felt like I was at my limit.

Now I was finding what that kind of talk really meant.

If I was going to do it though, I couldn't wait here. If Shackles got desperate, who knew what measures he might take? I only had a limited window before he started working through every possible measure I could take.

Pulling my body back up, I ran the last hundred metres to the ferris wheel, winding my way silently behind the petting zoo to reach it, out of all sight.

It loomed above me, and I looked between it and the nearby wall. This close, the structure seemed impenetrable, but I tried to remember what Protégé had said about it. Enough of an impact, and it would fall. I thought about throwing a flare onto the wall itself, but I could see guards atop the towers and along the fences guarding it. It'd be suicide to run at it on hoof.

Well, I had multiple hundred tons of steel ready to do that for me.

Pulling the flare's cord, I hurled it onto the ferris wheel's hinge supports, and then ran for the pegasus skyport as fast as my rapidly numbing and sore legs could carry me.

Immediately, I heard voices cry up from the FunFarm.

"Hey, what's that? What's that!?"

"Enclave flare! They said he's using them! He's here! Get away!"

Slavers fled away from it, much as I did. Leaping broken fences, even running through my old pen, I tried to get back to the road. I only knew a few ways to the skyport, and I hoped they'd be distracted with what I just did. Skidding to a halt, I ducked behind a popcorn wagon as three of them passed right in front of me, before rushing ahead again the moment their eyes were facing away. My heart thudded, I had to make it this time.

Above me, a skyship veered away from its orbit and dove toward the ferris wheel. On its side, I saw the glowing charge of some large weapon. Getting out of the FunFarm, I crossed the road and dove through the window of the closest ruined house, before looking back.

With a static roar, the enormous magical energy weapon discharged its lethal blast into the struts of the ferris wheel, right on target. In a blinding flare of white, I saw the wheel lurch and topple. For a heart stopping moment, I thought it would collapse to the side and I felt the whine of disappointment rising in my throat.

Then, it dropped back again, and it began to roll.

Through the smoke of the airstrike, the wheel dropped onto its outer frame and came crashing down from the raised platform it rested on. Gaining momentum, the whole device tumbled forward, picking up speed slowly. Creaking metal and shattering passenger cars drowned out the roar of fires as it windmilled forward and down the slope, right toward the wall. Banging again and again as each flat segment hit the ground, just round enough to become a massive wheel that quickly grew out of control, It careened into the fences and crushed guardposts that slavers had just leapt from with no regard for the height. I heard screams and accidental gunshots as it smashed through their posts, right toward the wall.

Like a giant, out of control boulder, it impacted on the wall. Covering my ears, the sound

still penetrated into my skull like someone had just dropped a bag of metal beside my head. The resounding 'boom' shook the ground below me and threw up so much dust and wreckage that I lost sight of the impact itself. Like some ethereal being's scream, I heard bending metal over the crashing of concrete upon the ground.

"Please... please, please, please..."

Holding my breath, I stared into the dust cloud as it slowly cleared.

Utter grey, as grey as the makeshift concrete of the wall.

And then a spear of orange.

I squinted, as the light beamed through the cloud and right into my eyes. Covering them, I tried to glance through to what was happening, and saw my every hope realised.

Under the impact of the wheel, the wall crumbled. Whole chunks began to fall, leaving an enormous, crooked gap higher than it was wide. The edges fell, widening it at the top, and sending a shine of bright orange light through it.

Bathed in that heat, I saw the source. Directly ahead of me, through that hole, I saw the setting sun.

I was tired, but now I could see my goal.

"I can do this..." I growled, turning reluctantly away from the sun, and seeing the tall structure of the pegasus skyport's control tower down the streets. With its height, and the fires to pick up speed, I could glide through that hole. I knew I could.

"I can do this!"

Screaming aloud in determination and pain, I pushed myself onwards.

"I CAN DO THIS!"

Kicking my legs furiously, I fell over the top of the chain fence surrounding the skyport landing strips. The impact on my side knocked the wind out of me, but the gunshots following me were a reminder to not stop. Coughing, I struggled, crawled and eventually got back to sprinting for the tower.

Across the fields, slavers came rushing toward me from the right. Yelling out, they took aim and within seconds I was dancing and diving away from their own fire down a slope at the edge of the runway.

"I can see what you're planning, Number Seven."

The PA system echoed again, he'd started talking again the moment I'd neared the skyport and gotten spotted. The fear clung to my heart as I crawled along the bottom of the ditch, with slavers approaching on either side.

Then, I heard the coughing bang of some sort of launcher. I ducked out of habit, before I saw the streaking missile pass instead over me and impact on the side of the control tower. A huge chunk of the structure exploded outward, collapsing to the ground, and I saw the whole thing sway.

The terror in my heart came out as a raspy, choked scream.

"Don't!"

"You're only seeking to kill yourself by trying what you're thinking. How far will gliding take you? How far can you manage on the ground before you choke on your own blood? How are those lungs doing now?"

As if on cue, I stumbled and choked. The metallic tinge on my tongue worried me, but I

couldn't stop now. A second missile struck the tower, and I saw the whole thing distinctly start to tilt.

I sprinted for the base, coming out of the ditch and braving the fire from the slavers.

"I promise, Number Seven, I will keep you alive."

As if my fear needed anything worse to imagine. Memories of bloody whips, of burning metal collars and being beaten into the floor were still too fresh. Life under him, I'd rather

—
The thought struck me hard, making me stumble.

"I'd rather die..."

Feelings I'd tried to bury were coming back. The last time I'd thought that being atop an orphanage, and the pain that had caused my friends. The last time I'd been atop this tower ahead of me I'd thought the same thing.

"What good is killing yourself just to spite me, eh? You can lose your delusional thoughts of leaving home, or you can lose everything by doing this."

The scattered impact of a shotgun exploded the ground beside me, and I fell on my side. Scrambling on the ground, I almost saw the round that hit the ground and then ricochet right past me. Looking back, I could see the slavers advancing, firing ahead of me, around me. Shooting the ground.

They were herding me.

Behind them, I saw a the soldier with the missile launcher, two others loading him again.

"Stop right where you are, and I promise, you'll live."

I shivered, the tower right in front of me looked ready to fall any moment. Bricks were tumbling to the ground from it, and I could see the dust from little cracks forming along the base as the weight tilted. Steeling myself, I ran inside.

Inside was almost worse. The staircase had been shattered at the second floor, and furniture had fallen down the inside from buckled floors. The moment I stepped within, the third missile struck and blasted a hole from the outside inwards. Chunks of concrete and brickwork dropped and I dove to the side on the stairs to avoid it. Panicking, I simply kept running, it was all I knew now. I galloped up the stairs until I reached the broken gap, where I immediately resorted to my grapple-hook to wind myself up further.

A fourth missile struck below me, aiming at the base. Through the holes I could see the slavers backing off, dozens of them surrounding it on all sides. There was no way back.

"This is foolish, Number Seven! You'll do nothing but kill yourself to try this!"

I snarled back as I yanked out my hook and dropped onto the upper floors, then fired it again to the roof of the top floor and ran almost vertically up the wall with it, flapping my wings as I went, giving me lift to speed up. My centre of balance tilted, as I felt the entire tower begin to topple.

Slamming through the door to the balconies, I screamed as my centre of gravity went out from under me. Running upwards against the falling structure, weaving around the falling objects, I sprinted for the edge and leapt!

Leapt. Leapt into the air, into the sky. Leapt because I had no other option, no other instinct.

And as I leapt, I felt my wings unfurl, and catch the air.

I was going to defy him. I was going to live!

I was going to *fly*.

Fifty metres up, above the crashing remains of the control tower, I felt the sense of

weightlessness came over me as I dropped in the air. Wind rushed against my face and my wings as I strained and pulled back with my body, the forces flowing over me until I finally felt myself start to angle upwards again. Flying forward, I saw the skyport pass away from underneath me, replaced by the sight of houses and parks whipping by below me. The sense of freedom, of joy, surged through me. A confident grin came across my face, I'd done it! I'd gotten airborne, high enough to make it to the gap!

Below me, fires raged, and I threw my body to the side, feeling one wing raise and one fall as the forces of the air and my own flurried speed from that dive propel me almost sideways. I felt unsteady, wobbling back and forth, feeling like I might plummet any second. Only confidence, a knowledge that it was supposed to feel light kept me from panicking. The turn sent me racing over the fires of the skyport terminal, where the old slave market had once been. From below, I felt a surging lift of power and strength, as the warm air prickled my body.

Yelling to the heavens above, I spread both my wings fully and leaned back, as I felt it send me skywards. Surging directly upwards, I felt my balance invert as my head began to tilt back, and I found myself upside down, my tail to the clouds above.

The power of the fire, the strength of the rising currents, kept me rising slowly, higher and higher until I felt the coolness begin to settle in. I could see just past the wall, out into the city beyond it and the plains beyond that. As all of Fillydelphia spread out below me, I could see the horizon itself. For a few seconds, I felt at peace, utterly free of danger as it carried me.

Feeling my rise start to falter, I took a deep breath, and dared to tuck my wings in.

Angling downwards, pushing my head toward the ground and tucking in all my hooves, I dove at a sharp angle. If I wanted to do this, I needed speed. Too slow, and they'd shoot me out of the sky. It seemed high now, but I knew how fast my altitude could drop off on my shaky, small wings. My ears were filled with nothing but the roar of the wind, as I dropped down through skyship trails and pillars of smoke. Holding my breath, I punched holes in them on my rapid, curving descent back down. The red haze thickened, and I finally let out my wings again to try to catch myself.

Crying out, feeling my eyes water behind my goggles, the winds buffeted my stiff wings, making them bounce and knock back. Again and again I tried to keep them out straight, as I felt my flight path wobble and veer side to side. The rooftops started to come up to meet me as I tried to properly level out. My tail felt stretched behind me as my speed turned from vertical to horizontal.

"Come oooon!"

My left wing failed, and I pushed it back out again before I rolled right over. A crash at this speed *would* kill me.

Griffons were in the sky, but I raced past them, hearing only the briefest shout and seeing a momentary blip on my E.F.S. as I aimed for the gap in the wall. Between two huge factories, I could see the edge of it, but gradually I began to realise that I didn't have the height to make it there on this one rushing dive.

I'd half expected it, I didn't know enough about flight yet to predict these things, but there were options.

Clenching my teeth, I flung myself to the side to curve away from the factories. If I had to make another run at it, staying in the air from the fires, then I'd do it. Up here, soaring in the sky, I felt I could do anything.

"A bird struggling in its cage, Number Seven!"

The voice carried on the winds, coming from all over below me. Racing across the rooftops, I aimed for the next fire outside of the mill I'd often worked in. Feeling the lift under my wings, I gained altitude and flew upwards, trying to flap as best I could to get everything I could out of it. My wings felt stronger than they ever had, my heart more determined, my mind more settled and confident in the air.

The red dots returned on the E.F.S. display, as the griffons finally tried to head me off. They didn't have the speed I still retained from my dive, but they were smart and knew how to intercept ahead of my path.

I'd have to detour.

What started as a single flight in my mind turned into a chase. Veering away from them, I found myself passing over the raging furnaces that were the parasprite pits, before diving to get inside the cover of smoke from the wrecked Ministry of Image. Navigating by directions on the E.F.S. compass, I flew blind into the choking smog, holding my breath until it felt like my lungs would burst.

"Would your friends really want you to kill yourself in this attempt? Wouldn't it be best to stay alive? Surely they'd try to rescue you..."

He was desperate now, he'd say anything to make me stop, make me land. He was losing me, and he knew it!

Bursting from the smoke, away from the griffons, I felt myself faltering, before the hazy heat of the fires below kept me from falling too far. Twenty feet above the rooftops, I sped past streets and slave pens I'd known so well. I passed the Ministry of Arcane Science again, veering over old town on my long circular route to take another run at the gap in the wall.

"Perhaps I'll even try to find your mother and bring her here for you, eh? You don't know who to look for, I do."

I shook my head, diving again to have enough speed to hit the fires along the edge of the crater, before a shot of melancholy passed through me to whip above the wrecked roof of the Mall. Out and out, I passed over the Hearts and Hooves Hospital, the Ministry of Wartime Technology and finally headed back for a go at the wall again.

"No matter where you go, I'll be waiting, Number Seven."

The griffons were distant. The fires spread all the way to the gap.

"I'll be waiting."

I had a clear run.

Fighting to not let the excitement overwhelm me, to keep a calm head, I clenched my teeth and flew for all I was worth. Rolling in the air, actually spinning twice until I had the right angle, I hit fire after fire, lifting me up, picking up speed. The ground began to pass faster and faster. Factories, scrapyards and slave pens passed away beneath me, every single one the last time I'd see it, every metre forward a metre I'd never have to walk again! All this way, this whole journey, all for this last run!

My muscles screaming in pain, my wings buckling, I forced them all to stay how they had to be. Over the skyport again, but taking another route, over more fires, keeping my altitude this time.

From below, I could see slavers pointing upwards. Bullets whipped around on all sides of me. One big cannon sent its tracer rounds through the air ahead of me, and I had to dive and roll to get under them. Every street below filled with slavers warned to look for me firing upwards. I flew past them, too fast for them to hit.

Rocketing between the two factories, I began to pull upwards, I could see the gap getting close, getting larger, wider, easier to reach! I was on track, I was—

The impact from below slammed into the root of my right wing.

Feeling everything slow down, I felt like I'd stopped in mid-air, as the pain exploded through me. My eyes widened, as my body twisted, and my wings folded back from the agonising impact. Yet I didn't scream. Tumbling end over end, my speed died on the spot.

As I fell, I could clearly see the gap in the wall, the sunset through it. Mouth open, my hoof stretched toward it, as though I could somehow reach it.

"No..."

And below, the ground raced up to meet me.

I was alone on the ground.

I was still in Fillydelphia.

My body was in pain, but my heart was in agony.

Above me, the gap in the factory roof where I'd impacted and shattered the thin metal shone a beam of red light down upon me. I lay on a hard floor, amongst the abandoned forge. My grapple hook was still attached to something above me, the last reaction to save my life I'd had.

But now I lay still, eyes wet, not knowing what to think or feel, other than the heartbreak. My four legs all felt numb and rigid. My back felt twisted. I was seeing double vision. It took everything I had to finally roll over, and felt my eyesight swim with the effort. Coughing, hacking up blood onto the rust coloured ground, I collapsed on my front. I could feel blood dripping from my head and my right side. My wing lay limp, the last time I'd tried to move it only sending a lance of white-hot pain through me. The bullet wasn't in me, but it had left a long tear in my body near the wing. Hissing and whining, I regarded the exposed flesh with horror, before putting my head to the ground. I wanted to wail and cry like I'd never done before. I could still see the gap in my mind. So close.

So. Close.

Then I heard the first stomp.

If I hadn't been surrounded by the blistering heat of the forge that set my skin tingling and my head to dizziness, I'd have felt my blood run cold, but the shivering of fear I now felt was just as bad.

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Careful and methodical.

Then through the hazy heat and smoke, I saw his thick form come sauntering toward me. His eyes full of malice and single minded intent, his mouth grinning wickedly and carrying the same rifle I'd seen take Protégé's life. He pulled the bolt on it, ejecting the empty round I just knew had been the one.

"I told you I'd be waiting, Number Seven."

Dread, panic, fear. They all collided in my mind. I tried to crawl away from him, not even knowing where I was going. Gripping the metal legs of a raised gantry, I tugged myself toward the steam of the molten steel vats. The moment I stretched and moved, my side erupted into a fire of pain and made me clench up with a squeal. Kicking my hind legs instead, I tried to push myself away on my good side, spluttering and gasping at the red hot heat from the vats and the pain by my side.

Shackles simply walked calmly behind me. He followed me, sticking to my pace no matter how far I pulled myself. As I turned around a vat and pushed through more pain barriers than I knew I had, he simply wandered behind me. Tying with me and dragging it out.

“In truth, I saved your life, slave.”

Gritting my teeth, I screamed and dropped down a small set of stairs into the forge itself, surrounded by sparking leaks of liquid metal on the floor and furnaces stoked from the basement.

“There’s enough slavers with instructions to kill on sight near the fracture in the wall you made already to simply shoot you down. Did you really think it was possible to escape now that I’m in control? No slave escapes me... you could say it’s my special talent, eh?”

That sick laugh echoed between the vats. The steam kept him a blurry, demonic visage that followed me no matter where I went, never outside of leg’s reach.

Then finally he leaned down and grabbed me. Gasping in pain, I felt myself picked up and carried back to the front of the factory. His stench overpowered even the smoke of the forge, the slimy, sweaty feel of his coat making my skin crawl. When he finally dropped me beside the workbenches near the entrance, I struggled to get all four hooves down before collapsing onto my belly, wings splayed either side.

“I... I don’t care... I’d rather die.” I spluttered, trying to pull my bag forward to get at the one healing potion I knew was left in it.

Shackles kicked the bag toward me, waiting as I greedily plucked the cork out and tried to drink as much of it as my dry throat could without coughing it all back up.

“And that’s precisely why I won’t ever let you.”

Something about the way he said that struck a horrid chord within me, as I felt the magic of the potion slowly reknit my side. There was a sense of timelessness to it.

The reality of that radioactive collar became clearer, and I fought to not throw up the very potion that was helping me.

“There’s something quite appropriate, Number Seven.” Shackles leaned forward and grabbed me by the fleece, lifting me from the ground to stare him face to face. “That you fall in the very factory you began this life in.”

I gasped, a shot of pain going through my head as he knocked my skull with a hoof.

“Don’t remember, eh? Thought you could forget? Thought you two could escape me like that!?”

His hoof cracked across my face hard, dropping me to the ground. Dizzied, I looked up and saw the factory laid before me. The burning roof was dropping into the vats in chunks, or crashing down at the far end, but the fires and hot vents gave it an eerie, ghostly shape to the benches, conveyor lines and cranes above vats of molten metal.

“This... this is...”

I could see them. Shapes of ponies at their workbenches, hunched low over them like ghosts. Memories in my own head that I felt I’d forgotten, but they were still there. They always were. Dark shapes that fell and stumbled. The crackle of the fires like whips on flesh, the moan of bending girders one of misery. The shapes faded and blew when the winds rushed through the factory, stoking the fires to ever greater heights.

“Like a good homing bird, hmm?” Shackles leaned down, and I felt the hoof on my back press me to the ground as his mouth drew uncomfortably close to my ear. “The whole time, you’ve never stopped returning to me. Every attempt brought you closer. You always ended

up back where you started, again and again, didn't you?"

Eyes wide, I started to remember. I remembered being here, I remembered being trapped in Fillydelphia for the very first time, so long ago.

"Oh you'll whine, you'll complain, 'why don't I ever get anywhere?' About how it 'never moves along' for you. It's all because of this, Number Seven. It's been a long time, but I think you're finally starting to realise that from the very start, you knew it'd end like this."

He grabbed my head, making me holler from the pressure, dragging me through the ash and embers to stare eye to eye.

"This is the story of the slave who dared to dream."

His grin spread.

"But the thing about dreaming is if you made it then you wouldn't be dreaming of it, would you?"

I felt my body shiver deeply, his eyes piercing into me, his voice getting into my head itself. The burning city around us felt so very dreamlike, the smell of the smoke making me dizzy.

"You might have gotten further than all the others, you might have insulted me, denied me what I wanted in Ministry Station, and gotten so many others away from me... but you won't, and I think you know it."

I clenched my eyes shut and tried to squirm away, but instead I found myself bodily slammed into the ground. My head knocked against the concrete and I curled up. I felt surrounded by recurring memories of this place, where it had all started for me since I'd been brought to this city.

"This is where it started..." I rasped, pulling myself up to my knees.

"Yes, Number Seven. Now you get it." I felt his hoof stroke my back, all the way to the base of the spine. He dug his hoof below my saddle's straps, and dragged me along beside him.

"And where it will start again." He grinned, pleased to have his hooves on me. I struggled and kicked, but he slapped me into the ground roughly, like I was just some small nuisance. Clutching my chest, I slid along the ground as he trotted.

"But first, we need to see about returning you to how you once were. Till you can relearn your place and everything can finally go back to normal, Number Seven."

Scrambling on the ground, I was dragged through the scorching mists of the forge, as I saw that unmistakable shape begin to appear through it.

"Starting with those wings that I did not *permit* you to have."

It was an anvil.

All sense of pride drained from me. I spun on his grip and strained to go *anywhere* but to that thing. I could feel myself starting to hyperventilate, my wings flaring and whipping back and forth in panic.

"Ah, so you *do* remember, eh?"

Snarling down at me, Shackles threw me inside the side of the heavy anvil. My shoulder clanged against it, before I wailed as his hoof flattened my wing on to it. Tugging until I felt my wing-stem stretch, I shook my head and screamed, crying out for him not to! Out of the corner of my wet eyes, I could see him dragging up a hammer, placing it in his mouth to raise up.

I couldn't move! I couldn't get away! My wings!

The hammer descended, and I shrieked as I threw my entire body forward. The metal

clang of the hammer on the surface inches away made me scream in pain, despite him missing. Panting and whining, I realised he was toying with me, breaking my nerves before he broke my wings.

It rose again, and it came down. I clenched my eyes shut.

Those few seconds, when you know it's going to happen, but you can't stop it. Curling up, I consigned myself to the pain to follow, clenching my eyes shut.

The dull sound of metal on metal made me leap up and squeal, shaking my head violently, until I looked back and saw the hammer inches away. I could feel myself being frayed thin, gasping for air. Staring up at him, I felt myself fighting to urge to beg, to plead.

"Now there's the look in your eyes you should have." He whispered, before taking up the hammer once more.

Shaking almost uncontrollably, I pulled twice more, before realising I was never getting my wing out without cutting it off. As he felt me fall still, he lingered, staring at me, indulging with those insane beady eyes as I slumped down to wait for it.

Through the smog, I could again see those dark shapes, faded ghosts of slaves if I squinted and tried to recall where they had all been. I could see even myself, as I saw the workbench I'd once been chained to. I watched as I remembered how I'd been thrown to the side and beaten down for being afraid and not working hard enough. Every memory I imagined, I could see it.

But my heart stopped as I saw another shape grab onto me, and lifted me up to whisper into my ear.

This wasn't just where I had been caught by Fillydelphia.

It had also been where I first met her, a long forgotten memory to both of us.

Above me, Shackles stroked my mane with one hoof, before plunging down.

I didn't pull away.

Instead, I leapt up. I dove onto the anvil with my forelegs and threw my entire weight backwards to tip the entire thing upwards. Committed to his strike, Shackles' skull cracked against the hook like tip of the anvil. With a yell, he threw the hammer in the distance and stumbled back, letting go of me.

I spun and screamed, trying to use every bit of inspiration I'd taken from watching Brim do it a hundred times, to strike him directly in the eye with my hoof as hard as I could.

The massive slavemaster recoiled back, bellowing in rage and pain as I felt my hoof impact hard, the edge of it striking the bone around his eye. Reaching down, I grabbed the nearest bar of discarded metal I could in my mouth and swung it under his chin. The thin metal impacted on his throat, and that roar cut out with a splutter. Shackles staggered back, holding his face and throat, collapsing onto his side. Holding my weapon, I braced my hooves on the ground.

"I'm not afraid of you."

I was.

"You're never going to hurt me or anyone else again."

He was.

Trembling, I raised the metal up and brought it down hard on the back of his head. It impacted hard, driving him to the ground as I went for the gap between skull and neck, all the fury I'd felt downstairs, the worry I'd not see my friends again boiling up into this one moment.

"You're—"

“—your MASTER!”

His enormous hoof surged up and careened into my chest. The wind was knocked clean out of me, as my ribcage buckled and sunk back. I was sent flying, blasted ten feet away to land on a metal staircase.

Ahead of me, Chainlink Shackles rose to his hooves, with murder in his eyes.

“You have made a very dear mistake, Number Seven.”

My courage dissolved at the sight of his rage, but holding my chest, I backed away and ran up the stairs onto the gantries. He didn't approach slowly this time. The entire structure swung and rocked as his huge bulk surged up after me. I ran past the offices of the overseers, trying to suck in enough air in the stiflingly hot factory to get my lungs working properly again.

I knew this factory, my memories were there, buried deep, but I remembered that scalding vent of steam that always was down this catwalk to the right. Ducking behind the raised offices, I ran through it and tried to ignore the stinging heat. All I needed was to break line of sight with him, and this would let me do it.

The moment I was past it, I turned and fired my grappling hook right above me before he emerged to see me. Looping it around a crane, I pulled myself directly upwards to grasp onto the crane's arm above vats of glowing metal.

Below me, I saw him erupt through the steam, hissing from the pain.

He was looking around, he couldn't see me, but balancing awkwardly up here, I knew I'd not be able to stay forever.

Instead, I went on the attack! Leaping off, using my grapple's line like a swing, I sent my whole bodyweight crashing into the side of his head. The crushing impact set my ribs to flare up again, but I grabbed on to him and tugged with all I could, trying to push him off the gantry! Try to tip him into the vat, my own grapple-line would save me! I beat at his head, I tugged and ducked away from his grasping hooves.

“Worthless pegasus!” He bellowed at me, insult after demeaning insult. I yelled nothing but scared and angry cries back at him, beating on his ears and nose with my hoof over and over, but I couldn't get his weight to move. Slowly, I heard him turning to laughter, as he struggled back onto the gantry.

Instead, he turned and flung himself into the glassless framework windows of the raised office above the work floor. Together, we crashed through it, and I felt his bulk crush down atop me. I hugged my head, using my legs to protect it as he came to his hooves and rolled off of me. As he held his head, trying to clean the blood from his eyes after the wound from the anvil started to bleed, I took the chance to move. Desperately, I tried to crawl away to the window, to try and get back through it.

“They all get uppity near the end.” Shackles snarled, as I heard him turn to face me.

A lash of pain tore along my back. Screaming, I dropped to the ground on the outside of the window, clattering onto the gantry. The achingly familiar sting of a whip leaving a red score through my fleece. I heard him stomping toward the window again as I struggled and grasped the railing to get back up.

“They all think, ‘I'm the one!’”

The lash struck again, and I fell forward along the railing. The side of my head stuck through it, feeling the searing heat from below, but my back was in spasms. I could feel the tears in my fleece and the wounds opening and sucking as I struggled forward.

The rock of the walkways as Shackles climbed through the window and dropped down

behind me made me stumble, before the third strike had me howling in pain.

"Until they get reminded!"

I screamed again.

"And shown!"

Again!

"They're just like any other slave! They haven't escaped! They're still trapped!"

The whip landed again, and again, and again. Reduced to shrieking, rolling on my sides, I wailed and felt the horrid and demeaning pain of a lashing come back to haunt me.

Then briefly, he paused, before his hoof knocked me further down the gantry. I could see it was a dead end, the point where slaves would pour ingots into the vat below, but I had nowhere else to go. The most I could hope for was to glide. He strode over me as I crawled, cackling and jostling me from side to side, as I neared the edge.

His hoof crashed down on my back, and held me to the mesh floor, my head over the lip, with the metal edge digging into my throat. From below me, the searing metal in the vat forced me to shut my eyes, my face feeling like it was slowly starting to burn.

"You did more than the rest, I'll give you that. That'll be one warm memory for you to keep to yourself as you help me build a new city upon this ruin."

His weight bore forward, and I felt myself being ground below him, my chest and belly being flattened down, unable to even cry out. I felt my eyes water, my front hooves flailing uselessly at the ground.

"I can punish you, and hurt you as long as I need to, Number Seven. Everyone breaks sometime. Ponies a hundred times stronger than you have been brought to pleading before me. Heroes of the wasteland who had years of adventures and heroics before your time have knelt and whimpered for it to stop with me. You're nothing compared to them."

His voice was whimsical at the end, as he let up with his hoof and pushed me up until I was kneeling before him, facing away. I crawled and staggered down the gantry, until his hooves came to rest on my tired, exhausted body to hold me gently, but firmly still.

"How much has it hurt? All this rebelling? All this raging against me? And yet, you're still here, and it still hurts."

His hoof dragged down my back, along the fresh whip scars, making me cry out, tears streaming down my cheeks. I couldn't handle this. I didn't have the strength to fight him. One strike from him was worth a thousand of what I could do.

Then my old collar dropped beside me, its chain feeding back over to his clutches.

"Just put it back on, and I promise, it will all stop. One obedient pony, showing the rest how to survive. You came all this way, and I'm sure *everyone* is proud of you. You don't have anything else to prove."

It clicked open, as I stared at it, panting hard, before sniffing and bowing my head.

"That's it. That's it."

"I..." My voice was a low stutter, full of pain. "I... want to live..."

He lifted the collar, as I felt its warm metal against the back of my neck. His whole body was leaned over me, the bottom of his chest resting against my head like some sick idea of an embrace.

"And now you will."

He knocked the ring, sending it around to finally close.

Until my hoof blocked it from snapping shut at the front of my throat.

"But not with *you*."

With every bit of strength I could muster, I threw my hind leg back and delivered my hoof between his hind legs with vicious intent.

Shackles gasped and cried out, the cleanest, most satisfying cry of pain I'd ever heard from his mouth. His body slumped, dropping back in a hunched posture, eyes closed and one hoof reaching for me.

Instead, I grabbed the collar, and threw out my hoof. For once, I opened my mouth and the expected trigger flew right into it to bite down on immediately, as I threw the collar around the hook itself.

The grapple-hook fired directly upwards, passing by Shackles' head. It soared above him, as I sucked up the pain, pulled every ounce of inner strength I could, and launched to my hooves. I unloaded everything *Rarity's Grace* had into his underbelly, and he collapsed. Falling onto his back, I dove over his neck, slipping the cord around it.

As agile as any pegasus, I put my hooves on the railing beside us, and threw myself off the edge to catch the collar and hook as they descended again.

I dropped directly toward the molten metal, but this time my entire weight was behind the drop, and holding the cord and chain now wrapped around his neck. With a sharp tug on my body, I felt it pulled sharply down, as both of the loops noosed themselves around him. I heard the gurgling choke as his neck was crushed and constricted, trapped against the edge of the gantry. Crying from the burning heat so close below, I tugged, flapped with the strong fumes from below and bounced, making him struggle and spasm up above.

I screamed. I screamed at him to just finally give up. To let me go.

I didn't expect him to roll off the gantry.

With all the force of my fall, and the weight of the collar and chain, I'd pulled him clean off the gantry by his neck. Up above, his enormous body tumbled, and limply fell.

Panicking, I flared my wings in the rising heat, trying to get myself to fall *anywhere* but below, but his body struck me on the way down. I closed my eyes, tumbling end over end with him, flapping and trying to push off him.

Before finally, I felt myself slam into him as his body hit the edge of the vat, and toppled us both onto the concrete below. The cord on my grapple-gun snapped, and I was flung across a workbench, clattering to the floor behind it.

I felt like I'd blacked out for a few seconds, as the pain threatened to overwhelm me. I had to struggle to get enough breath in from the claustrophobic heat and smog, and the effort was making my head spin. Dizzily, I lay there, and glanced behind me.

Chainlink Shackles lay on the ground in a heap, a chain around his neck. Between him and I, my belongings were scattered from my tugged open saddlebag.

My legs didn't want to cooperate. I could see Unity's statuette lying some feet away, and my journal a little closer, but I couldn't stand up.

Chainlink Shackles could.

The moment I saw him stirring, saw him growling and rolling onto those thick hooves, I just panted and dropped my head to the floor again. How!? What did it take? *What did it take to finally escape this nightmare?*

He trembled, limped and stumbled. I could hear him choking and rasping. His side was scarred, burned deeply from the impact with the boiling vat. His bullet wounds dripped dark blood onto the floor. One of his legs looked twisted. His jaw seemed loose, and his words were slurry, more of a growl.

"Slave... belong..."

He began to advance, slipping and stumbling, but I could not stir anything into my body. His hoof crushed the grapple-gun, I hadn't even realised it had torn free from my saddle.

The pain shot through me like a whipcord, making me fall where I was. Immobile, I stared back at him approaching, feeling all my rising hope slowly draining. Around me, the fires closed in on the factory, sending dark shadows scattering and whipping between the workbenches. Like memories, like visible shades of slaves standing there, held into their work by the eternal chain.

"Number Seven..." He spluttered, until his eyes rested upon Unity's Statuette below.

"No!" My voice was tiny.

With a furious gesture, his hoof descended and crushed the only gift I had from her. He didn't move his gaze from me for one second. He stumbled forward and crushed the burning remnants of my tent. He trampled the packet of stolen food. He cracked my goggles.

"Never... leave..." His shadow began to reach me, lit from behind by the glow of the furnaces.

Slowly, he began to move toward my journal, sitting open on my finally completed picture. All of my friends, together, the only piece I had now that would ever show them all. In doing so, he came for me. Slowly, I stumbled and pulled my body toward it, hugging the journal to my chest, staring at the seemingly immortal slavemaster approaching.

Then he stopped, and I saw his head look around, furious.

"What are you all doing?"

Those same dark shapes of slaves I'd seen at the edge of my vision were now moving in on him. I'd thought them nothing but fragments of my imagination. Looking half dead, covered in burns and with lifeless eyes, they set their sights on the wounded Shackles. Like memories emerging from the fires and darkness, they grouped around me, and behind him.

"Begone, worms. Your master demands, you will obey!"

The dark shapes glanced only at him. They held tools. Hammers, saws, auto axes. They surrounded him, each of them weak, but they were many. Oh, so many. Lash scarred, with burns on their necks, they glared at him, like no others I'd seen outside of—

No, my mind had to be playing tricks, they weren't—

"GET BACK, SLAVES!" Shackles roared, slamming his hoof down.

In return, they began to advance, as I heard autoaxes begin to whine and spin.

"GET! BACK!"

They didn't listen.

They disobeyed.

Past me, those shadows poured toward him. I didn't hear any voices, I didn't hear any screams from them. They descended upon him like an unholy fury of desperate and vengeful spirits, warped in the heated haze of the factory. As they neared him, I saw Shackles lash out again and again, but they flowed past him like mist. The autoaxes roared and sung, before descending again and again. His roars and commands were utterly ignored, as he was driven down, buried beneath their wordless revenge.

Soon, I heard his roars stop, replaced only by the last sounds of the slaves tools striking the ground over and over.

Clutching my journal, I turned, beginning to try to pull myself up. My balance swung upside down and I staggered into a lathe, holding on to its metal tray to pull myself toward

what was left of my saddlebag. Limping, staggering onto it, I fell atop it.

Behind me, I heard one last, great angered roar. I saw only a single mark on Protégé's E.F.S, one red mark.

"NUMBER SEVEN!"

The pile of slaves was thrown apart, as what seemed unreal emerged from them. Carved up, bloodied and howling, he charged for me, even as they tore and slashed at him.

"YOU ARE MINE! MINE! YOU BELONG TO ME!"

Falling upon my saddlebag, I clenched my teeth around what I'd been searching for and spun around the moment he leapt.

Only this time, I had Protégé's revolver held tightly in my mouth and a hoof striking a button on my PipBuck. I felt time slow, as a blinking on my left hoof lit up in front of my eyes with the one charge of S.A.T.S. Sundial had left me. The aiming spell was settled squarely on his head.

"Not any more."

I pulled the trigger, and the numbing pain of the heavy recoil threw my head back. But guided by the targeting spell, the large round flew true.

Before me, Chainlink Shackles fell for the final time, crashing into the ground in a heap.

On his side, now marked by the exit wound of the round, the symbol of the unbroken chain was now broken.

As unexpectedly as they had appeared, I saw the slaves slowly pass away into the shadows and smoke. They dropped their tools and chains, finally leaving.

Leaving me alone to clutch my journal and rest.

It took me a long time to pull my battered body together enough to stagger out of the factory again. The fires now raged thoroughly inside it, collapsing the roof and making the gantries bend and break. Behind me, the way back was sealed with flames and pouring molten metal.

I tripped on my nearly lifeless hooves, crashing headlong into the scalding, inch deep gravel that passed for a road outside of the forge. Up above, the storm raged, searing the sky with blinding flashes and throwing rain that hissed in the heat of the burning city. Winds tore at me, throwing me from my hooves again and again as I sought to stand. This main road was a wind tunnel, carrying stinging droplets of the downpour with it.

Up ahead, five hundred metres distant, I could see the gap in the wall. A great spear of orange sunlight struck through it, cascading across me as I stood directly in front of it in the middle of the road.

On my left and right, the factories and the FunFarm were now ablaze. The fires spread and closed in, nipping at the road edges and draining the air from the area. I had nowhere left to go. No other path I could take.

Gritting my teeth, I took one step toward the gap. Then another. My back dripped with sweat, my hooves burned on the ashes, my heart stuttered. Both sharp and dull pains raced back and forward along my body. Every step felt like a fight. Every stumbling, slow pace forward took a full five seconds to make.

I hadn't gone ten metres before I collapsed again. Wheezing, I found little air to take in and my lungs tingling with smoke and inhaled heat. The fires were sucking the oxygen all

away. The gap ahead, that gateway to freedom, was mockingly distant. It kept tilting as my head fell over and over from tiredness seeping in.

‘Just a little farther,’ I told myself. ‘It’s only a little farther!’

I reached out, and drew myself back up.

“Just run, just keep running!” I coughed and spluttered the words, as I threw my weight forward. For the next few metres, I stumbled and fell along, veering to one side and then the other. Scalding rain lashed at my eyes, forcing me to squint. Air and ground, they both burned. They all sapped my strength, until I felt my legs twist, and my front ones gave out.

Fifty metres from where I’d started, I dropped again. I was wheezing hard.

I could taste smoke. I wanted to sleep. Just sleep so badly. I could just—

Just rest.

Just for a moment.

The crack in the wall wheeled over on its side as I dropped to my side. My body felt broken. I didn’t have enough left in me. I could barely walk. How could I fly? I couldn’t run to get by. My lungs were coughing up blood, I couldn’t take in enough air to exert myself.

And so I fell there, and curled into the growing ash. Slowly, I felt the pains begin to fade as I stopped moving. It felt good. It felt peaceful.

I’d freed them all. I’d gotten my friends out, made sure Shackles would never hurt anyone else and then gotten this close. That was pretty good.

That could be enough.

Enough to be happy with.

Enough to, in the end, feel proud of.

Enough—

No! I felt my body spasm, as I was shocked back into having my eyes open. The very act of trying to stay awake sent a rush of pain throughout me. My body rebelled, every signal it had telling me to stay down. I was done, it told me. I was too hurt. It’d hurt too much to move now!

Breathing in and out, panting hard, I slapped the ground with a hoof and *felt* that pain rush through me.

I’d *felt* pain before. I knew what it was like! But ahead, just ahead, I could see the end! The wall was broken, I only had to go through it! *The end was right there!* Coughing, I screamed as I pulled my broken body up. Stumbling, limping, I kept moving further, veering side to side in my dizziness and exhaustion.

I collapsed.

I got back up.

I collapsed.

I got back up.

Every time crying to the heavens through the gaps in the reforming clouds above. Every time shedding tears of pain. Every metre taking a new, harder force of will to move that extra bit further.

I fell once more, and I pushed up with my front hooves, but my lashed back sent white hot needles through me, and I dropped. Rolling, I felt my journal fall into my hooves, as I clutched on tight.

On its charcoal covered pages, I could see the smiling faces of my friends. Looking up, I could see the crack, the gap in the wall. Then my friends. The way out. My friends waiting. The way home.

A reminder. A reason. I knew what it felt like now. I had tasted freedom, just as he'd said!

I knew what I was fighting for and it'd be worth any pain. If this hurt more than I ever hurt in my life after it, then it'd be worth it. If this damaged my body to the point that I would be hurt outside forever. It'd be worth it!

Snapping my journal away, I drew myself up, my eyes fixed on that wall. Slavers stood ready on it, I could see they were armed. I shook, wanting to fall, but I spread my hooves and willed myself to stay upright, wings spread.

I could do this.

Behind me, I heard a small scraping of metal.

Briefly, I turned my head, before my mouth slowly hung open.

It was still there at the entrance to the FunFarm. That crazy cut out of Pinkie Pie I'd passed by so many times. It was pointed toward exactly where I was standing, with that raised foreleg creaking back and forth.

It was waving goodbye. Yet that wasn't all. My eyes widened, and the horrendous sounds faded for just one second, as I saw what surrounded it.

Three shapes in the smoke.

A young doctor.

An enormous, saluting machine.

And a small, black horned stallion, a peaceful smile upon his face.

Staring in disbelief, I nonetheless felt a measure of serenity fall upon my painfully thumping heart. Quickly, I smiled back.

Even as what I swore I'd seen disappeared and faded to the winds, to leave only the metal stand of the Ministry Mare alone, I felt one last effort left in me. A raise in my spirit. A willingness to endure the pain. To push into the storm.

One. Last. Time.

I turned back to the wall, and its waiting slavers. I let out my breath to ease my nerves, and closed my eyes.

And then I ran.

The effort was almost insurmountable, but I made my body do it. I pushed my hooves in front of one another, no matter how much it hurt. Spraying red hot ash from below me, drawing the smoke around me with my wings, I galloped for all I was worth toward that gap in the wall. Every few steps, I felt myself wavering. But every few steps, I would remember *something* that would give me the strength to carry on. The things I didn't have before, the memories of friendship, of love, of life.

I remembered impressing Brimstone with swearing at last. I'd felt proud. I'd felt strong. It let me pound my hooves into the ground, sprinting as fast as I could.

I remembered being comforted by Coral; sitting and knitting together with her in an orphanage. It let me feel at ease, as I let my wings arc out to either side of me and stretched them as far as they would go.

I remembered dancing with Glimmerlight atop a table for my birthday, laughing more than I ever had. I let the joy of reaching the end fill me inside; making me push harder than I ever had before. It made my wings begin to flap by my sides.

I remembered Protégé teaching me to read, the first time I'd really seen how much he cared. It gave me the hope to believe I could do something I'd never done before.

I remembered a promise. A promise that would make me push harder than ever before. That made my wings throw down again and again. The gale force winds surged along

behind me, as I leapt and fell again and again. Every time, I threw down my wings and tried to feel the winds, and every time I dropped back onto the ground. Gritting my teeth, I put my head down and galloped harder and harder toward the wall. I accelerated, enduring every injury and seeking just that one little bit more energy to dredge up from within my spirit! Fillydelphia wouldn't own me forever!

The storm winds threw me forward, and I leapt as high as I could. Screaming in pain, I flapped my stiff, sore wings like I never had before.

For a second, I stayed aloft.

I dropped back to the ground with a thud, and set my legs kicking viciously to get my speed up again. I would!

I tried again, and fell.

Again!

And again.

Like every failed attempt.

Every time I'd come up short.

Every time they'd told me to stop.

Until finally, finally, I caught the wind *just* right, and I felt myself jump, and then not come back down.

Three feet off the ground, I felt my heart almost stop in shock. Fighting the urge to freeze up, I gritted my teeth, bore the pain and kicked with everything I had. My wings flurried and strove to lift me, and I began to speed up. The vicious wind from behind me carried me. The ground passed by beneath me as I surged forward, gaining height steadily. The thrill, the sheer, unbelievable thrill of taking off under my own power sizzled through me, even as the heat of the flames and threw me side to side. Wheeling up and down from one side of the street to the other, I dove and rose again and again, before angling my wings forward and powering them back and forth to pick up speed.

Up ahead, the wall grew larger, and the slavers raised their weapons high. Bullets flew around me, and I rolled to the side. My wings whipped back, and my flight arced around to catch the fumes from a building fire. They sent me soaring up, arcing around the whipping red marks of tracer rounds.

Stopping myself from climbing too far, I tried to keep only going forward. Climbing would lose speed, I needed to go forward, only forward! Fires whipped up in my wake, as I skimmed the rooftops. I gritted my teeth, eyes only ever watching the world beyond the wall. My target.

I had to go faster! Always faster, if I were to make it! Diving again under their fire, I arced toward the wall and drove myself down toward the biggest fire I could see. It was a full ammunition dump that was crackling and erupting into the sky with the remains of the ferris wheel atop it. Feeling the wind roar in my ears, feeling it support my wings and drive me onwards, I dropped almost vertically toward that inferno. My entire face felt tight as I clenched up, trying to keep looking without any goggles. I pushed my forelegs out.

I left it as late as I dared, my heart singing with the feeling of almost being there.

Heedless of the pain it would cause, I dove *into* the tops of the flames.

And like I'd always done, even though I'd never realised it as much as I could have, I rose again atop the mighty eruptions coming from the detonating munitions. The shockwave and heat sent me skyrocketing upwards and onwards.

Faster than I ever thought a pegasus was capable of, trailing embers from the tips of my

wings, I *roared* out of the fire, picking up speed beyond anything I could have hoped for! With the smoke having obscured my approach, I buzzed the tops of their guard towers, climbing the whole way. My wings were blurring from the effort, as I streaked past their heads, screaming and yelling in sheer determination! The enormous structure of the wall began to loom forward. I saw all the debris and rebar within it like a net.

The gap neared, and I banked on my side to try and fit. Gunfire exploded from around me, filling the air.

But they were too late.

Surging through the air, I flew *through* the Fillydelphia wall, carving a path through the smoke that curled and drifted apart behind me.

The rush of joy, the unbelievable feeling washed over me, like I had never thought possible. Immediately, the enormity of the world outside opened up to either side of me.

Climbing higher into the sky, I arced upwards and threw my wings back over and over to go higher and higher. Driven by the rising heat, I kept going. I'd done it! I'd actually done it! Rooftops began to pass away beneath me, rolling quickly past as I raced out of the city itself, into the wasteland! The wall began growing smaller as I flew past skyships and low clouds. High up, the winds caught me, supporting me without need to flap any more. I glided and curved around in the air in any direction I wanted, but always up and further from Fillydelphia, every bit of distance a growing sense of relief and safety! My eyes were dry from the rushing winds and no goggles, my body hurt, but I didn't care.

On and on, past the clouds, past anything I ever thought I'd see, I broke through to the sky itself.

And there, for one incredible moment, I slowed down, and hung in the air. Spinning slowly, I saw no city. No fires. No red glare.

Just an open sky, and a sunset.

In that one tranquil moment with no sound, I felt all the pain fade away.

It didn't matter what happened now. I'd done it. From a foal born in chains, through rock farms and sales, through whips, anvils and a slave city, from Stables, secrets, war, blood, strife and tears over decades of trying, I'd come all the way at last. *All the way.*

Just for this one moment, to know I'd broken the cycle.

I spread my hooves, and felt myself hang on the wind, a smile upon my face.

Gradually, I began to drop, as I flipped over backwards and let myself be carried by gravity. I dove down toward the clouds, aiming to get as far from Fillydelphia as possible. The storms below would toss me around, the ground would be hard and I felt too tired to stay up forever. The layer of clouds below rose up and up, promising a return to a new hardship. A new journey, one I wasn't sure if I was ready to face. I had to fly as far as I could before I had to—

I came roaring out the air, aiming to break through and make a dash for it! At an angle, gritting my teeth, I prepared for the next difficult step to begin.

The clouds approached, tinged in soft orange from the sunset, and I clenched up to head into the storm.

I squeaked in shock as I impacted upon the clouds instead.

Shrill and yelping, I buried myself into the soft, pillow like substance of the cloud-layer. To my shock, I stopped amongst it. I flailed and tried to get my head up. Heart thumping, feeling like I was walking on air and about to fall as soon as reality remembered me, I staggered back and to the side before falling onto my backside. My legs hurt too much to

really move properly.

“What? *What!?*”

Looking around, I was surrounded by a new world. A quiet, gentle world of fluff, sky and sunset that stretched on as far as I could see. It lazily rose and fell, shifting side to side in its ponderous, wind carried motions, like being in a crib that was being rocked.

I'd heard rumours. I'd thought them foal's tales.

Now, before my disbelieving eyes, I saw that the stories of pegasi were true, and I broke into laughter. I lay back and chuckled, then roared to the skies with giggles and snorts.

Pegasi could walk on clouds! I could walk on clouds!

Rising up, tired but spurred by joy and possibilities, I tried to leap and bound from cloud to cloud, imagining myself sinking into the great wads and springing out of them like a trampoline. I could be alone in the darkening sky. Safe and happy.

Instead, as soon as I tried to move, my legs gave out, and I dropped onto the side of a cloud as my aching body reminded me of the horrors I'd been through.

“I'm out!” I cried out to the faint stars, as I clambered and galloped to the top of the biggest one I could see. “I escaped!”

Coughing, feeling light headed as the clean air surged through my lungs, I finally tried to relax my stiff wings

As I kept my eyes open, I could see the path ahead of me across the sky, formed from gentle white mountains. They would be my road, my route to find where I had to.

And looking at the way the clouds were lazily drifting on the winds, I knew just where to go first to let the entire wasteland know I'd gotten out.

My legs quivered and ached, and my wings gratefully fell by my sides as I ceased moving. The scars, the cuts, bruises and burns seared still, but I would live.

Letting my tired eyes finally close, I curled into the soft clouds and let myself go limp.

As the slave city of Fillydelphia burned, I was carried far away in the sky, sleeping for what felt like the first time in days, a smile upon my face.

I would live.

And for the first time, I would have my life.

Click.

“Good morning to all of my faithful listeners still willing to tune in! This is the Dee Jaaay! DJ Pon-Three, that is, haha! A lot of folks thought that I'd never be back on air, but here we are for yet another day of me still running the airwaves. Some of you may wish it weren't, and maybe you'll get your wish, but we'll get to that one in a minute.

Before the news today, I can only want to tell you of a story that just came to my ears over the past couple days. A tragic one, it hurt me to hear it all. One coming our way from Fillydelphia. Now everyone remember that train of slaves that managed to make it out that I told you about a few days ago? They told us about the war over there, and about what happened to those trapped in it. Only now I hear the story of one little slave starting to reach me.

A slave who, along with others, went back in to get all those foals we heard about out, and who never left with his friends after doing so, because one of them wouldn't have properly made it out if he hadn't. This all, despite being born a slave, and more

than probably any of them, having reason to want to get out.

Yet he went back. In the end, he gave his place to someone else.

What can I say, Equestria? What can I say? Quite the story.

Except...

Except that despite all that horror, all that tragedy, this one gets to end well! Because he's right here with me NOW! I got no idea how he managed to afford staying Tenpony for a few days to finally get in touch with me, but he made it happen! Say hello to the wasteland, Murky!"

"I—wha? Can they hear me now? OH! H-hi!"

"Isn't he just the bastion of strength and confidence you'd expect from a little escapee like him? My assistant's got him down in the interview room while she's up here helping me, quite the cutie, so she tells me. Looks can be deceiving, as we all know about 'small' heroes these days, which is why I've got him on here.

Wastelanders, what followed him is a story that I couldn't hope to tell you all about here, but I ask you all to keep it in mind. This little guy had nuthin'. Absolutely ziltch! Born a slave, worked a slave, thrown into the pits of Fillydelphia, and yet he fought, scratched and clawed his way to get out here, soaring out past that wall on once broken wings. If that isn't an inspiration, I don't know what is, and I wanted you to hear it in his own voice. Murky? Tell the lovely ponies what you've got to say."

"Um... well, I... I had it written here and... okay.

"I failed a lot, and there wasn't a moment I wasn't scared. But I've, uh, I've learned to know that... that's okay! I tried to escape a lot through my life, ever since I was a foal. But every time I tried, I fell down. I fell further, until I fell into the fires of that city, and I thought I'd never get out again.

"But I tried again, and I failed again.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is... sometimes you'll fail. Maybe you'll start something, and want it so very bad, and it'll just unravel in front of you. Or you'll get so far and then realise you didn't plan it right, and it just slowly ends up not working out. Sometimes you'll feel like it all *should* work without a hitch, but then it just... doesn't, for no reason other than bad luck. Other times you'll keep trying to improve, to be good enough to do it, but you never feel like it's coming.

"I lost count of the times I failed, and it hurt a lot. I fell down, I started thinking I couldn't. I never stopped being scared, and it won't ever stop being scary to fail.

"But if you just keep finding a reason to get back up and try it again, maybe from a different angle, or adjust how you think about it... maybe someday, you'll find some things that'll help you get there in the end. If you don't keep trying, you'll let whatever it is hanging over your head win, be it chains, your place in life or just feeling like you can't. It won't be easy, but failing... it's not the end.

"For me, it was friends. I couldn't have gotten this without them, couldn't have done the things I did without them believing I was capable of it."

"For a stallion who hadn't been taught to read or write until a few weeks ago, that was poetic, Murky."

"I... ah... hehe... thanks, I guess."

"Now listen up, all you out there. In these days of history changing, empires falling and wars in every town, it's easy for us to forget. When the scale goes up, we start to think about numbers rather than the people. And in this case, it was nothing more than just

one slave wanting to escape his masters. One slave who wanted to live. One slave who dared to dream.

And to his friends out there, if you're listening in, he wants you to know. He's coming to find you. And I believe he'll manage it, no matter how long it takes.

"Murky, you got anything left to add before we move on?"

"Just, um... I wanna say something."

"Let's hear it, little guy."

"I... I DID IT!"

"Pfft, hah! I bet that felt good. Isn't that a little pep-talk for our day in recovery? Now, in completely unrelated news, there have been a series of robberies in Tenpony lately, all coincidentally from the five most miserly and wealthy ponies in the tower..."

Click.

The gentle winds of Manehattan blew around my face, as I stared out into the morning sky. The rooftops were gleaming under the light of the open sky, as I felt proper sunlight, one of the few times I had. Only for once, I could stop and enjoy it. My new stitched fleece felt soft and warm around me, while my embroidered saddlebag carried more fancy food than I really knew the names of.

"Well you certainly cut a different figure after a few days in here."

I turned my head, and Homage smirked from the balcony door.

"Came to see you off. Sorry, got caught up helping the big guy."

"That's fine." I thinly smiled, still shivering a little at having shouted as loudly over the airwaves. Seeing her only reminded me of it. "And, heh... yeah. I really like the spa..."

"I'll bet! Of all the ponies who needed one, I figured you'd want it. Brighter green and more light blonde than I bet you even knew you were, huh?"

She trotted up beside me, glancing at the rising sun.

"You know, I've said goodbye to someone before from this same spot. I always think about it when I say goodbye. I wish you had more time here. There's so many questions I want to ask you about what really happened behind those walls. About the journey you went on. But hey, for times future, right? Or, you know, I wouldn't mind you crashing on a couch if you wanted to wait for your friends to come here instead."

I shook my head.

"I... I don't know if there's any 'Plan B' out there or not. Shackles was insane by the end, what if he has someone out here, someone who was told to come after me if I ever did get out?"

Homage frowned, resting a hoof on my cheek.

"Murky, you know the odds of that are ridiculous, you can't let fear of him stop you doing what you want out here."

Looking down, I took a long breath, and nodded.

"Well, there's another reason, I think. I'm, uh, gonna go back to the places I can remember. I wanna go to Friendship City and let Unity's parents know she's still alive; maybe check in on Bucklyn Cross's survivors too, for Glimmerlight. And... uh... maybe see if I can find my mom too, and free her..."

I had to pause, sniffing briefly, until I felt the DJ's assistant lean in and lightly hold me in

a warm hug.

"You never stop thinking about others, do you?"

As I stepped back, I raised an eyebrow, a little confused on what she meant by that. The light hearted unicorn sat down and twirled a hoof.

"Look, think about everything you've been through, huh? You were born in that life, you never had any of the stuff we do. But the entire way, every time the option came up to run or go back, you went back. To go into danger, and do the right thing to help them. Even when your freedom was offered to you, no strings attached, you went back to bring more out. *Twice*. You just kept giving up the very thing you wanted most so that others could have it too. Listen, I had to put up with Red Eye's crap radio here for almost as long as you did. He promised a lot of things that never came out of there; but if there ever was one true generous soul to emerge from that city... I'm looking at him."

I was stunned at what she said. I'd never thought of it that way. Her fancier Tenpony clothing whipped in the wind, as she watched me process all that, seemingly quite amused in the same way Glimmer often had been to watch my expressions as I worked things through in my head. Then she bit her lip and looked up, as though having an idea.

"Heeey, look. Idea. I'm gonna be leaving this tower soon, got a little journey of my own to go on. I know you're leaving right now, but what do you say... meet up in Junction R-Seven in a couple weeks time? Maybe even travel together a bit? I figure we could both use the company out there, and believe me, I have a lot of questions."

I hadn't expected that. Eyes widening, I found the idea one that I immediately liked. I'd made it this far by making friends, perhaps this could take me a little further.

"I'd love that."

She held out her hoof, and (feeling a little silly) I knocked my own against it.

"Deal made then, Murky. So, you got everything you need? Ready for the big push into the unknown? Go find your friends?"

I trotted on the spot, feeling the excitement build. Was I!

"Oh yeah! There's so much I wanna try! All the foods, and the drinks, and all the ponies to meet and the places I'll get to visit! Glimmer'll kill me if I don't have a few good stories before I find her! I just wish I coulda... well, coulda maybe met, 'her,' y'know... the Stable Dweller? Let her know how thankful I was for what she did at the very beginning. I'd heard sometimes she came here..."

Homage's face made a peculiar expression, before she looked to the sky and smiled.

"Oh don't worry, Murky. I'm sure she'll hear about it."

Okay then, whatever that meant.

But with one final hug and thank you to her for helping me out here, it was time to go.

"Thanks for all your help to get my message out."

"Nonsense. If there's one thing I'm glad to do after all the shady stuff that went down, it's put something positive out there. Now go on, you've got a long road ahead of you."

Grinning ear to ear, I mockingly saluted her with a wing and waved with a hoof. Still shaking my hoof, I leaned backwards, and leapt off the balcony itself.

"Go show that wasteland what it's been missing with you!" Homage waved and shouted from the balcony door, "Go enjoy it! Whatever you want! No chains now!"

"Thank you! Goodbye!" I screamed back, as I dove.

I felt the rush of the wind around me. The currents in the air flowing across my body. The choices, whichever one I wanted to catch. In the end, I made my decision, flared my

wings and soared down the streets of the enormous city. Smiling, full of delight, I spun around buildings and sought out the hot air to rise again and again, before finally flying out past the suburbs, away from the city, out into Equestria.

Finally, I was flying.

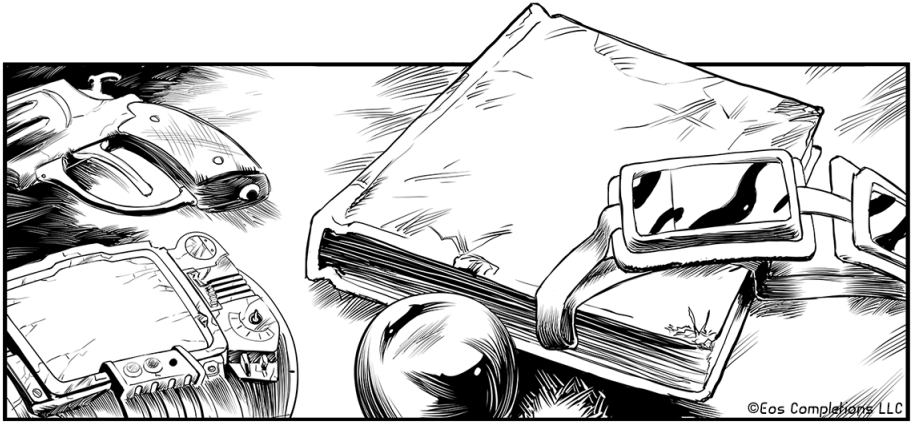
Flying high.

Flying happy.

Flying...

...*free*.

Epilogue



It had been a long journey.

One filled with discovery, wonder, and excitement just as much it was with trials.

And while there was much enjoyment, creating memories that I would treasure from the people I met and the places I saw, there was disappointment and pain along the way. Rumours led to pointless chases back and forth across the wasteland. There were times when the rains fell and I was stuck in whatever town or shelter I could find. I would just sit and hug my journal, wishing to finally be granted one more clue, or for someone I knew to be there with me, who could remind me that they weren't gone forever.

But then there were the times when I would chase the sun, when I would run across the mountaintops until I could glide down valleys and plains and realise I hadn't seen every place they could be yet. True to her word, *Homage* travelled with me for some of it, meeting up as she sought out a few ponies of her own, providing me with good company. I met some of her friends, and the times we had lifted my spirits enough that I could carry on.

Eventually, I even met *Doctor Weathervane*, *Sunny Days*, and *Blunderbuck* again; and just as my spirit was about to crack, they rejuvenated it. The slaves that had gotten out had spread to various places, but those three had stuck together, traveling between damaged settlements and helping to rebuild them after the war. *Sunny* even had a new pet dog called *Pepper*. I had helped them for a few days before moving on.

There were nights of merriment, and there were times of danger and fear. Yet as time wore on, and as the number of places they could be began to dwindle, I could feel those uplifting times losing their glow inside me.

Every settlement brought its own stories, but none of them were from the ponies I wanted. Some, after hearing my story, told me to remember that I had never really known where that portal led to. They could be anywhere. There was always the possibility that they

were just too far to reach. That in the end, I'd have to settle on my own.

The one thing I never did was the same thing I'd never done yet. I didn't give up hope.

Dropping off the side of the caravan onto the course track, I tossed a small bag of caps to the owner before waving goodbye to see them off.

Turning away, I saw the town now ahead of me. It was behind a forest, out near the hills approaching Equestria's border. The caravan owner had told me it had only sprung up this year. Entirely new. It didn't even have an official name yet.

Nestled in the valley below three tall peaks, the village itself looked quite secluded, despite being only a short walk from this caravan route and only a few days by wagon from larger settlements Manehattan or New Appleloosa in the Equestrian Heartlands. I could hear the rush of a waterfall somewhere nearby, likely hidden by the trees, but the river that came from it ran through the village itself, separating me from the houses via a small bridge. Oaken logs made up most of its buildings, all set in a partial circle around the clearing. I could see ponies running around within it and lines of tilled ground outside. A windmill lazily turned in the slow breeze, mounted on a wooden walkway that led up the side of the hill to a higher level.

Quietly, I trotted into the town itself, gazing around me to try and spot the sheriff. I normally went to them first to ask if they knew any—

My eyes caught a foal running across the middle of town. His two-tone blue mane bobbed wildly over his sandy brown coat. He was a little older, but I knew him.

Two ghoul fillies chased him, shrieking and laughing. They all stopped as soon as they saw me, letting the ball they'd been running after roll idly away. For a moment, my eyes met all of theirs as I felt my heart skip a beat at the recognition.

I turned on the spot, looking in every direction. In the fields, I immediately saw the enormous red shape of an earth pony standing up and squinting his single eye at me. From the front of what looked like an orphanage, a mare with two long braids in her mane began to rise from repairing a colt's jerkin with wonder on her face.

Could this be? Was I dreaming again?

It was—

An enormous shriek of utter joy from my left shattered the moment. With a thundering of hooves as my only warning, I was bowled over by a pink and white blur. Rolling over and over in the dirt, she drew me up and squeezed as tightly as she could, as though afraid I might just slip away again.

I grabbed my sister around the neck and did just the same. Already I could feel the tears running down my cheeks, this time, for the right reasons. Glimmerlight laughed and cried and told me again and again that she'd always known I'd find them. That she'd built a house for me already. That she'd never let anything make me feel alone again, so long as she was sheriff. I didn't know what else to do, other than to hold onto her.

Around us, the whole town dropped what they were doing and began to gallop over, many of them familiar as those who had escaped with us. Skidding into the dirt, Coral Eve threw her hooves around both Glimmer and myself, asking a thousand questions that I couldn't even begin to answer as I sobbed too hard to speak. Chirpy, Lilac, and Starshine galloped up behind her, screaming my name over and over as they bounced around and

hugged one another. From the other side, the enormous figure of Brimstone Blitz knelt down and rested a hoof on my shoulder. I smiled up at his big silly-looking grin as he tried to remain stoic, and failed horribly.

Eventually, I found myself looking up and over Glimmer's shoulder to the town itself. Amongst the buildings, I could see everything we'd need. A shop, houses for everyone, a small barn, a caravan stop, and a workshop; all of it on the bottom level or built up on the hillside. Standing beside the orphanage though, I saw something that felt like it mended a hole in my heart.

A small library, marked above the doors with a stylised circle formed from Celestia and Luna.

I clutched on to my friends and smiled as I looked upon it. Yet as I stared, the creaky door opened, and I saw a cream unicorn emerge carrying a small pile of worn books. She stopped suddenly, and from behind her wavy orange and red-tinted mane, her eyes blinked and stared over at us.

My embrace loosened as I stared back. My heart began to race as I saw her blink and stare without an immediate reaction. Was she just shocked to see me or...

Yet then, in one swift motion, Unity's face exploded into an enormous, ear-to-ear smile.

As I forced myself out from the others to catch her galloping embrace, I felt myself lost in the well of relief and happiness that led us both to hold on tight, and to and say nothing at all.

We were surrounded by those I cared about, and I could hear all of them talking at once about how we were going to celebrate the final end of our impossible escape. And in that one moment, I finally knew my reward for holding on all those years since I'd first been put in chains.

That after a lifetime of hardship and searching, of slavery and distant dreams, of horrors both past and present, of loss and heartbreak, I'd done it.

I had finally found my home.

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zemming

Head of the Fallout Equestria Print Project